

Neil, Cheers and good luck. You think Amaury will sell me one of your pieces? Liane Grunberg

OPLE

NEIL TETKOWSKI:

## Testing Japan's ancient kilns

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STAFF WRITER

Neil Tetkowski has cultivated a new twist on performance art: clay acrobatics.

Here in Japan on a working tour of three ancient kiln sites, the American ceramist flexed his muscles and let loose with impromptu footwork as he tamed a bullish mass of clay.

When word got around the Bizen, Tokoname and Shigaraki kiln sites, even the townspeople came to watch.

Back in Tokyo, Tetkowski's ceramic platters and broken-disk sculptures are catching attention another way.

Five are slated for a fall exhibition at Tokyo's Suntory Museum. Another show, featuring the 49 pieces Tetkowski made in Japan, is planned for fall at Amaury Saint Gilles' gallery in Tokyo's Oimachi.

"He's a mannerist. He's bits and pieces," said Saint Gilles, who organized Tetkowski's most recent show at the Gallery Ueda, and arranged the visits to the famous kiln sites.

Tetkowski is an original for Japan. His ceramic sculptures, emitting light and shadow from earth-toned glazes, so astonishingly peaceful, would fit well in a tatami-mat setting.

Yet unlike Japanese potters, Tetkowski tortures his raw clay, gashing and tearing at smooth surfaces, embedding gears, chain, even cables.

In the 10 years since his graduate school days at the University of Illinois, Tetkowski has moved from sensual, bulbous vessels to enormous wall platters, and, more recently, back to three-dimensional works. The ceramics are bigger, the clay works have turned elliptical. He's now taking oversized clay disks, cutting them up into arcs, adding deep grooves and

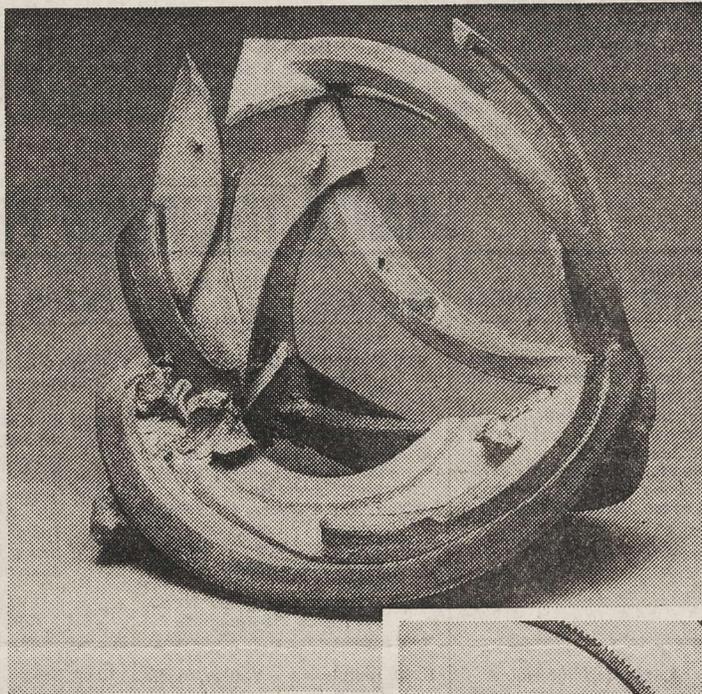
reassembling the pieces into a continuous whole.

"There's an aesthetic relationship between what I do and Japan. The forms are different than what they're accustomed to. But I think the Japanese people have an intuitive sensibility to clay," Tetkowski said.

"Someone here who is not

home is Buffalo, N.Y., a bleak, polar metropolis at the edge of Lake Erie that fell into a depression when the steel industry collapsed. What's more, it's his continuous source of inspiration.

"I feel sort of like an observer . . . born in Buffalo, then I left for 10 years and came back," Tetkowski said.



NEIL TETKOWSKI (right) and his work, *Kinetic Fragments* (1988). GALLERY UEDA PHOTOS

an expert has the ability to relate to certain aspects of my art more than an American. I think it's because they've grown up with the tea ceremony, ikebana and food displayed elegantly on ceramic ware."

Tall, with black wavy hair, granny glasses — despite his sparkling white-pocketed shirt and baggy black pants a la Gentleman's Quarterly — his frequent hearty guffaws are not what you'd expect of a city sophisticate.

For the 32-year-old potter,

"There's a certain sort of frustration in my observations, living in a place that has seen better days. Every-

where are signs of empty steel mills and unemployed people. Then I started to get fascinated by this colossal mess, the miles and miles of steel mills, right on the edge of this beautiful lake, not functioning."

"American Iron and Steel," a series of clay disks spiked with rusting tools has been exhibited across America and more recently in Japan, as part of a solo show at the prestigious Gallery Ueda at Ginza.

No doubt about it. He's smart, he's attractive and he's aggressive. Tetkowski, isn't about to let anyone stand in the way of his success. Most American ceramists are resigned to churning out dinnerware sets to keep their kilns running. The kind of plates Tetkowski makes take two muscular men to lift.

Since his last trip to Tokyo in 1985 for an exhibition at the Akasaka Green Gallery, the artist's work has trebled in price, helped along by the the Smithsonian Institute's recent acceptance of a massive, 1135-kg disk that radiates amber light at its center.

He has given up a teaching post in the Art Department at the University of Buffalo, converted a brickmaking factory into a studio and installed a kiln so big that the works are moved in carts on railroad tracks.

To make voluminous, striking ceramics, Tetkowski has, in a sense, sold his soul to the kiln.

Before his Tokyo show, an important commission that came out of the kiln cracked. Tetkowski raced against the clock to remake the huge clay panels. The second time around, they came out just right. All the more reason for Tetkowski's despair when he dropped the pieces in the process of packing.

If at first it's hard to feel sympathy for the potter whose platters in Tokyo recently sold in the ¥500-million range, consider the multimillion yen vessels of the late Shoji Hamada. Tetkowski throws in a song and dance.

