





*Smoldering Blue (1988), 20 1/2" x 3", terra sigillata. Photo: Bruce Mayer.*



Neil Tetkowski is a ceramic artist who lives and maintains his studio in Buffalo, New York. Born in 1955, Tetkowski's introduction to art began at an early age, as his father was a college professor of design and his mother a high school teacher of art. As a young boy, he and his family lived in Siena, Italy, where he attended Italian public schools. The medieval and Renaissance environment of Tuscany, with its ancient architecture and varied landscape, made a lasting impression on him.

Tetkowski became seriously involved with art and music in the tenth grade. At the age of seventeen, he had already decided to be a potter and planned to live in a rural setting. But additional travel in the United States, Mexico, and Europe broadened his teenage goals. Subsequent study at Alfred University challenged his notions of craft and fine art.

By the time he received his BFA degree in 1977, Tetkowski was no longer interested in becoming a craftsman. Instead, he sought to express his own personal vision of modern culture, using the two- and three-dimensional space of the vessel as his medium.

A year in Atlanta, Georgia, working in the interior design field led to his decision to pursue formal study at Illinois State University, where he earned his MFA degree in 1980. From 1980 to 1983, he held the position of assistant professor at Denison University in central Ohio and, in 1983, Tetkowski received an Individual Artist Fellowship from the Ohio Arts Council. In 1984, he was a resident artist at Artpark in Lewiston, New York. From Ohio he returned to Buffalo, where he was assistant professor at the State University of New York, College at Buffalo, until 1987. He received a Fellowship from the New York Foundation for the Arts in 1986. During this time, the scale of his work became a significant concern for Tetkowski. He wanted to fill the viewer's entire field of vision with an object, so that the viewer was forced to confront it on its own terms and to grapple with the aesthetic issues Tetkowski was exploring, rather than respond to the work as a definable object, such as a vessel. This led to the three- and four-foot disks the artist is best known for.

Tetkowski has been the subject of solo exhibits at Mogul Gallery, Washington,

D. C.; Dolgenos, Bergen and Newman Gallery, New York; Akasaka Green Gallery, Tokyo; Nina Freudenheim Gallery, Buffalo; and Objects Gallery, Chicago. This summer, he was also featured in a solo show at Gallery Ueda, Tokyo, in cooperation with the American Embassy there.

A circle draws us in, like a bull's eye; its perfect symmetry is entrancing, even hypnotic. Structurally, the sphere is the strongest form one can build that contains the greatest area with the least material. The egg, or Buckminster Fuller's geodesic dome, are elegant examples. The wheel, of course, ranks with fire in its importance to humankind's success as a species. And like eternity, a circle has no beginning and no end. These qualities may explain its power as a religious symbol.

For Neil Tetkowski, the circle is equally compelling. He has been exploring its dimensions for several years, in large disks of clay that hang on the wall. Tetkowski uses the tools, materials, and techniques of pottery, but not to make vessels. The large scale of his disks denies such mistaken identities. "A four-foot platter carries a different message than an eighteen-inch one," he explains. "A piece this large confronts you; it demands a response." Like many artists drawn to clay, Tetkowski wants the viewer to have an intimate relationship to his work. Traditionally, such intimacy comes from the familiarity and small scale of pottery forms. Perhaps these were Tetkowski's motivations when, at seventeen, he decided to live the good life of the self-sufficient potter. "I imagined living in some beautiful rural setting making pottery in a solar-heated studio," he recalls. What seduced the teenager to work in clay was its immediacy, its oozing plasticity, and the hands-in-the-mud process of throwing vessels on the wheel.

The love for the material and process of claywork is still with him, nearly sixteen years later. But Tetkowski has no intention of being "a culturally displaced potter, making medieval ware for a twentieth-century audience," he says. "And I'm not interested in being the Unknown Craftsman."

Nor is he interested in following the career paths of his contemporaries. "In my studio, I don't have any paintings or postcards or

images of other art," he says. "I do have a lot of magazines around though, and, to tell you the truth, *Interview* magazine probably has the strongest pull. Those images are really powerful. When a work cycle is over and I can take a break, then I'll go to the museums or galleries. But in our time of history, when so many different art styles coexist, it's hard to know who you're traveling with."

Viewing Tetkowski's large disks, our first response is to the raw, sensuous clay itself, to the spinning potter's wheel that is their source, to the spontaneous act of their making. Heir to the expressionist tradition, Tetkowski is engaged in a dialogue with his medium. The art object is, in a sense, only the physical evidence of the creative act. Yet the gestural cuts and swipes of that act display the deliberate intelligence, the just-so placement, of the artist. None of these energetic marks fell, willy-nilly, to the surface.

While these forms are mesmerizing in their symmetry, just as we're getting used to the meditative frame of circularity, our eye is sent skidding off course. It may be a wrinkle in the rim, a sinuous incision of the artist's finger, a knife trail that sweeps elliptically like a comet across the surface, or, in his recent *American Iron and Steel* series, the embedded remains of iron spikes, gears, or chains.

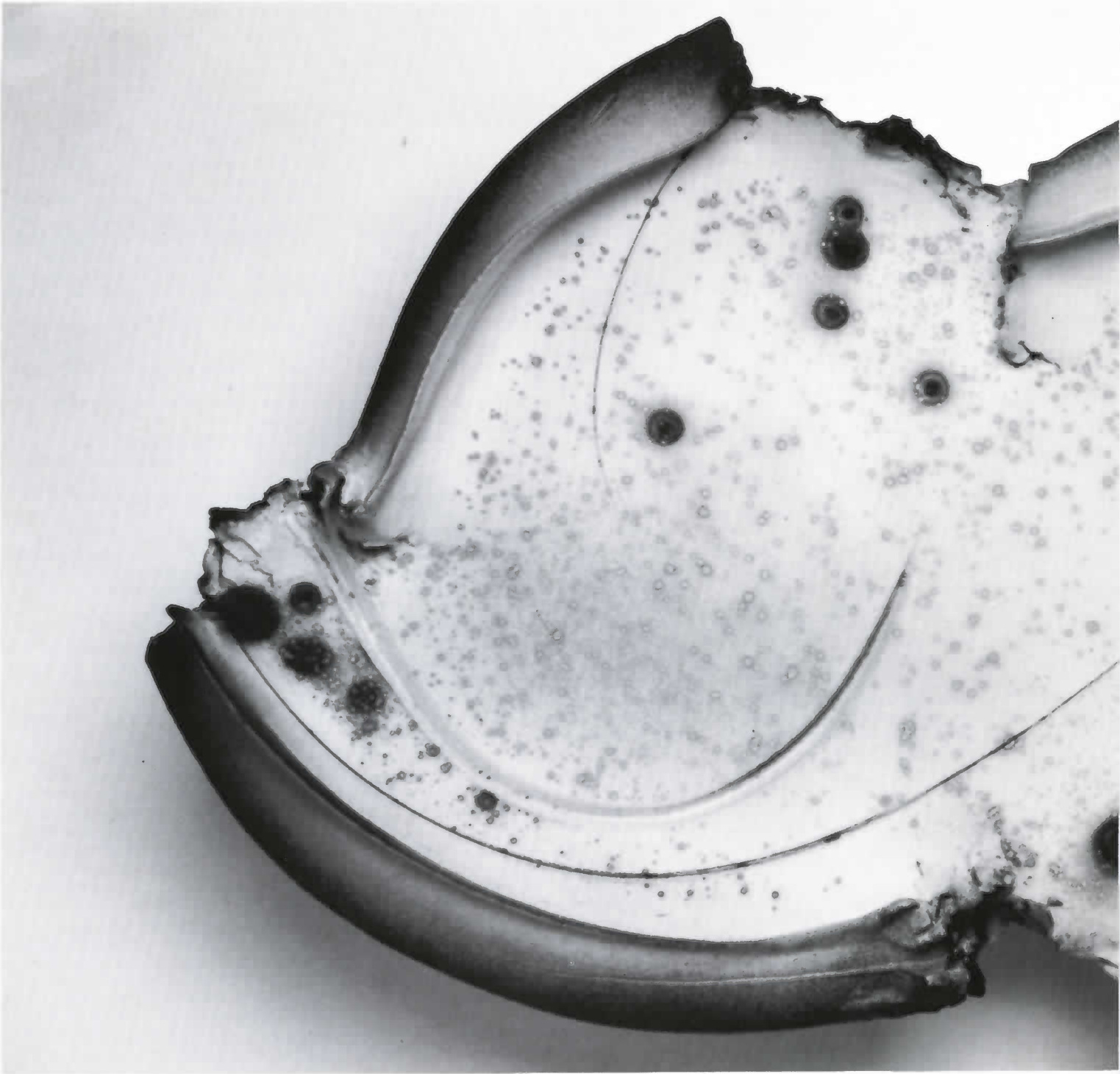
I asked Tetkowski if the act of drawing was central to his method, since line is such a strong force in the work. But he resisted the idea of a given technique or medium as primary.

"It's more like a piece of music—the way music can elicit a particular feeling," he replied. "Take someone like Paul McCartney, who started out as a bass player, but really began to compose on the piano. His piano playing was crude, but he made it work for him. My technique in drawing on clay involves much more than line; there's salt or soda ash, my spray bottle, a paint brush. And of course the kiln has a lot to do with it."

Although Tetkowski's palette has intensified and grown more sophisticated in recent years, he paints with light, rather than color. The gradations from charcoal, dark blue, or orange to white not only lend drama to the work, but make these bas-reliefs quite three-dimensional. For such shallow works—usually no more than five inches deep—they convey a great sense of

# Neil Tetkowski

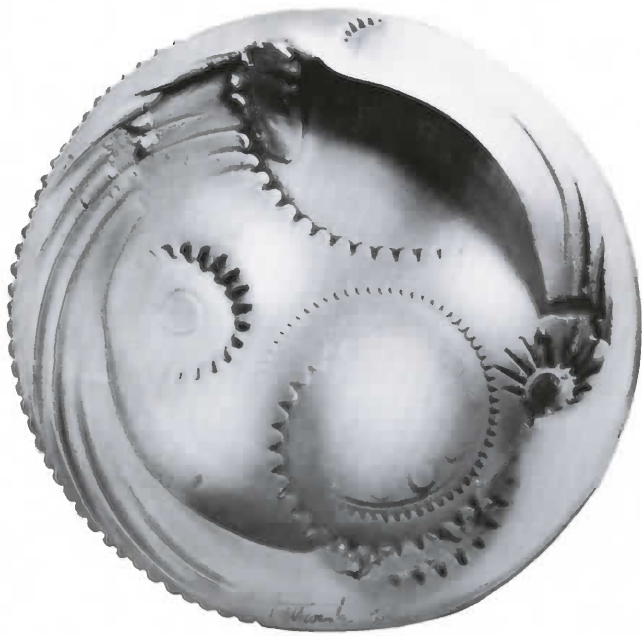
Michael McTwigan



Severed Vista (1988), 16" x 31" x 2 1/2",  
*terra sigillata*. Photo: Bruce Mayer.

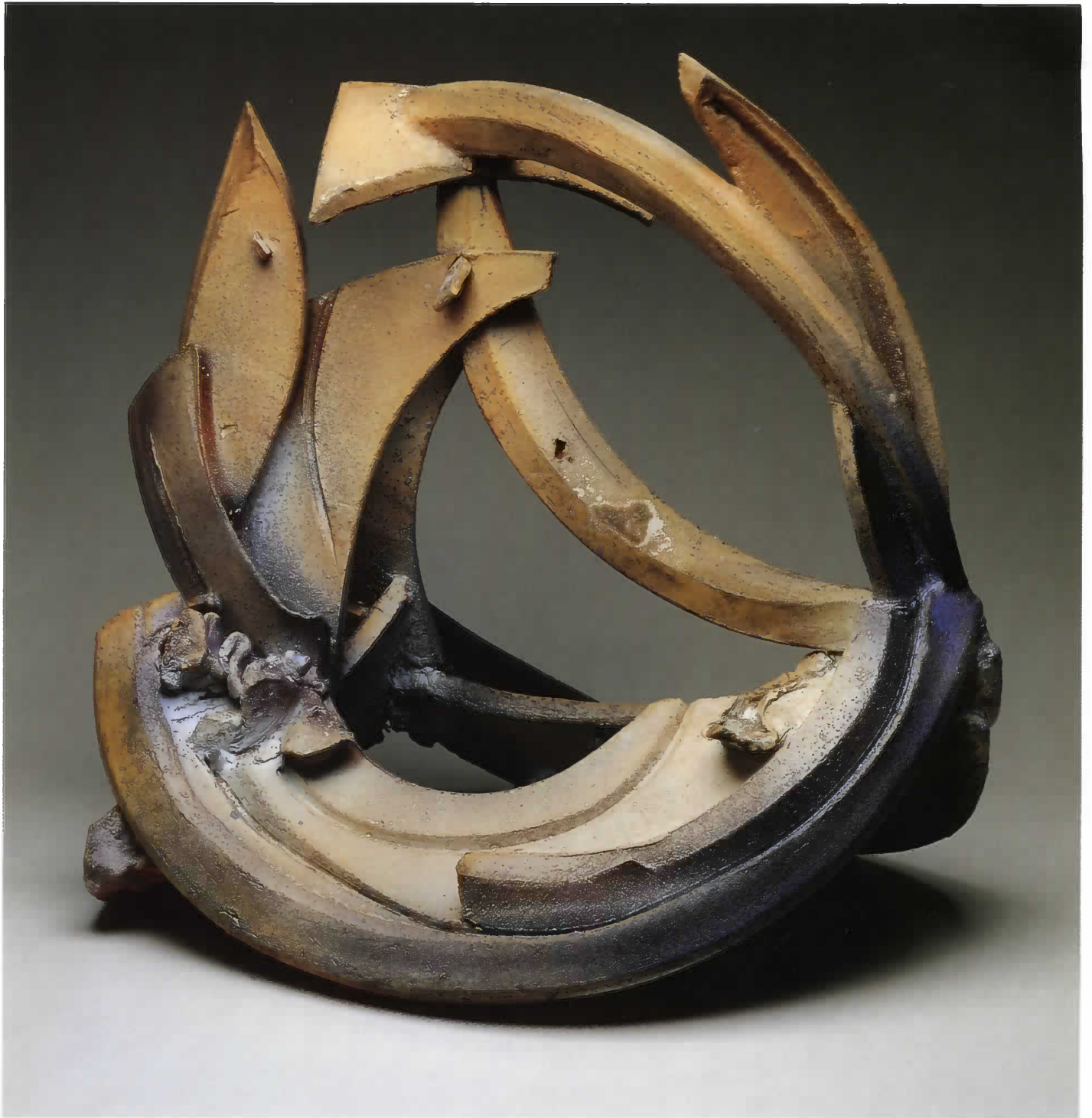






Gears of Fortune (1986), diameter 34",  
terra sigillata. Photo: Bruce Mayer.

Buy American (1986), diameter 25", terra  
sigillata, iron, steel. Photo: Bruce Mayer.



*Kinetic Fragments (1988), 19½" x 19" x 16", terra sigillata. Photo: Bruce Mayer.*



*Silver Cross (1988), 30" x 19½" x 3½", terra sigillata. Photo: Bruce Mayer.*



space. As Tetkowski says, the white centers dematerialize the disks. "They become infinite vistas—like windows you can look through to infinity—and the rims are their frames."

It is while in pursuit of the vanishing point or the horizon of this illusionary space that we forget entirely about genre, medium, scale. These parameters fall away, become insignificant, as we begin to roam the surface, making our way across an expanse of scorched earth . . . a desert perhaps. Tetkowski's own memories may be of another landscape—the Tuscan hills of Siena, Italy, where he lived as a boy while his father, professor of design, headed up a Study Abroad program. "My parents took me to churches and museums throughout Europe," Tetkowski recalls. "My father designed our home, which was filled with modern furniture by Eames and Bertioia . . . I guess what influences me, finally, is the world out there."

In the last few years, it is the landscape of his own upstate New York that has made the deepest impression on him. It is a landscape not only of lakes and rolling hills and trees, but of abandoned steel mills and rusting tractors. "Water . . . the water is always there," says Tetkowski. "Lake Ontario and the Niagara River . . . There's something very powerful and soothing about the lakes and the river. There's a *force* there, that maybe you see in those elliptical cuts and swirls."

Right next to the lakes are the steel mills. "On the one side is the beautiful lake," he says, "on the other side there's this polluted community. In many places, the natural resources have been violated." Like the archaeological ruins of Egypt or Mexico, America's landscape is dotted with the detritus of its past glory. American industry's era of Iron and Steel is past. Bearing such titles as *Buy American*, *Gears of Fortune*, and *Iced American Dream*, Tetkowski's bittersweet homage to this era is edged with irony.

Yet there is nothing ugly in these works. His sensuous disks reveal all the beauty to be found in industrial gears, chains, and cables, railroad spikes, nuts and bolts, a pair of pliers. We are seduced by the voluptuous clay surfaces, the warm colors, the decorative imprint of industrial artifacts. As the abandoned factories and mills themselves now stand silent, however, Tetkowski's disks are eerily

motionless. Like the figures on Keats's Grecian urn, Tetkowski's disks are forever in motion, forever still.

While many young artists working in clay have taken great liberties with pottery form, few have dared to discard it entirely. Tetkowski has. Indeed, his most recent works appear to have been composed from the discard heap. The free-standing forms most closely resemble sea-going, rather than clay, vessels: bent disks form the hull, the rims of other disks comprise the mast, spars, rigging, and sails.

When he confined himself to whole disk forms, the boundaries of his creativity were clearly circumscribed. In these most recent compositions, however, Tetkowski starts literally with nothing, with the space his forms will occupy. The artist has left the shallow dimensionality of drawing and bas-relief to enter the realm of sculpture.

The challenges are greater, as are the chances for failure. Will the artist be able to think in the round, after years spent working on a single plane that can only be viewed frontally? Certainly others have done so before him, and these first efforts are promising. Our eye's freedom to see through and around them is refreshing, after the density of his massive disks.

The new wall-hanging compositions are also constructed from the disk forms. Their arrangement strikes me as more fortuitous, less controlled. "They had the order of the disk," Tetkowski explains, "but I cut them up and they lost that order. Then I gave them a new order. Within the parameters of the disks, I felt somewhat inhibited.

With these new pieces, there's a real freedom—the freedom of the unexpected." Having no centrifugal principle, no center, the viewer has no easy clues to follow.

This, too, is a great challenge, and a risk. Upon learning of Heisenberg's uncertainty principle and of Einstein's theory of relativity, our grandparents' generation was suddenly thrust into a world where accepted doctrines could no longer be trusted, a world more perplexing than their imaginations would allow them to conceive. The "freedom of the unexpected" may be too much freedom for most people. Entering Tetkowski's studio, we must put aside our preconceptions, as our elders had to relinquish theirs upon entering the modern world.