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NEIL TETKOWSKI

Like many artists in this New York City survey, Neil Tetkowski feels a bit uncomfortable with the standard definitions and identifications. I talked to him in his Chelsea studio when he had just returned from his residency in the Japanese city of Kanazawa. There he had completed an eight-foot clay mandala imprinted with a spiral of one hundred hand prints representing one hundred citizens of that town, from age one to age one hundred. He was still jet-lagging a bit and it was hard to tell if he was sporting a new beard or was affecting the unshaven look.

Tetkowski was born and raised in Buffalo, New York, and the Kanazawa project, five years in the making, is part of the celebration of Kanazawa's forty-year sister-city relationship with Buffalo.

Tetkowski certainly is known for working in clay. I was first introduced to his work by his muscular disks that not only shouted out clay! earth! but had all the earmarks of visible process that to my mind mark one of the three or four major traditions of worldwide ceramics. He cannot deny that clay is his media of choice. But there is much more to his art.

Currently, Tetkowski's business card says "Project Artist." I could also call him Community Artist. Tetkowski likes to involve people in his work, hence the one hundred handprints in Kanazawa, but he also likes to work worldwide. We might call him a Global Artist.

People across the world have sent him clay and sand for his now public ceramic pieces. I was once assigned to bring back some clay from Fiji. But, alas, I had not made arrangements ahead of time and I was there in the rainy season. Boats going upriver to the famous clay village were simply not available. Tetkowski must have found another way to get the clay, for I noticed that Fiji is on his official list of participants. With various endorsements from the United Nations he has been able to garner samples from 188 countries. Which three countries that he contacted had no clay or sand to contribute? The Maldives in the Indian Ocean, and the Marshall Islands and Kiribati, coral reefs in the Pacific.

Tetkowski has combined all the clay and sand to make one body. He has also created an elegant display of bottles containing examples of these samples, to be exhibited at the San Angelo Museum in Texas in the spring.

Tetkowski's work is about the transnational, transcultural aspects of clay. He also feels very strongly that clay connects us to the earth and thus

has an ecological, environmental aspect. Surely we always knew this, at least instinctively, but Tetkowski—and this may be his greatest strength—unveils these dimensions in a very direct way.

So why in 1993 did he move from Buffalo to New York City? He is still fond of Buffalo and counts on many supporters there. New York is basically cut off from the earth he loves and, as more than one artist has remarked, it is probably one of the most difficult places to work in clay. By the time he complied with all the necessary rules and regulations, a chimney he needed to build for his kiln cost him "an arm and a leg."

"I was always fascinated by New York and its mix of humanity. Although I will always be indebted to the support of my friends in Buffalo, I had hit an impasse," he confessed. "I needed new stimulation."

The downside is that the artist density can be intimidating. According to Tetkowski, in Buffalo being an artist gives you status. In New York there are so many artists that meeting one seems ordinary. However, when you travel outside New York being an artist, particularly an artist from New York, gives you back whatever status you may have lost.

Would Tetkowski ever leave New York?

"You can't leave here once you're here," he answers. "It's addictive."

Aside from the fact that his wife Olga is a total New Yorker, Tetkowski likes and needs the internationalism of the city. Could he have made his contacts with people in 188 countries without being based in New York? I doubt it, as does he.

"Besides, whenever I come back from a trip," he announces. "I'm glad to be back."

Finally, where was he on 9/11?

He was at home when Olga called him from work about ten minutes to nine, telling him to turn the radio on. He saw the towers from 11th Avenue and, "hypnotized" went back home and grabbed his bicycle and camera to speed down to the Canal Street pier for a better view. There were no policemen yet. A homeless man with the plug from a transistor radio stuck in his ear began raving that the Pentagon had also been struck. But no one believed him.

Then, as Tetkowski remembers it, there was a wave of people escaping northward, howling and falling down as they ran. Now there were policemen and firemen everywhere. He photographed the second tower imploding and then pedaled back up town as fast as he could.