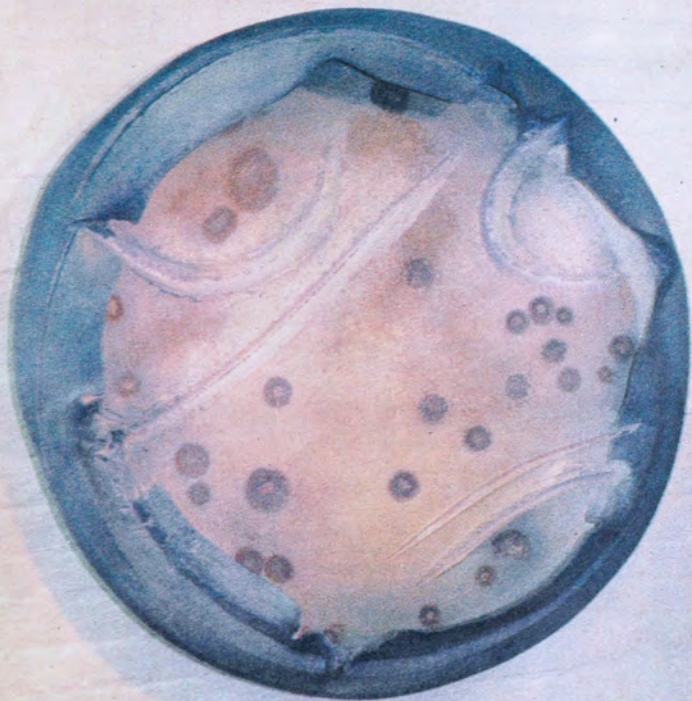


BUFFALO

MAGAZINE OF THE BUFFALO NEWS

OCTOBER 23, 1988



'A Different Kind of Beauty'

Sculptor Neil Tetkowski

A Different Kind of Beauty

When Neil Tetkowski sculpts his huge and evocative clay pieces, the act is part creation, part performance. And music, turned up loud, is his guide.

BY ANTHONY CARDINALE

On the Japanese island of Honshu, in a centuries-old kiln town called Tokoname, an American ceramic artist was throwing a large clay disk on a potter's wheel one day in June, playing at full volume the wild Grace Jones tape he had brought with him from Buffalo. Japanese townspeople were stopping and looking through the open window at Neil Tetkowski, who was deep in concentration over his work, oblivious to the crowd that was spilling into the studio.

Throwing clay is a serious, solitary occupation in Japan. So this kind of extroverted exhibition at the potter's wheel must have struck them as a curious public performance by an American who wasn't bound by their customs. Certainly none of them had ever seen a Japanese potter turn out a 30-inch platter weighing 75 pounds; and that was small by Tetkowski's standards.

As a reviewer wrote in the Japan Times: "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. ... Tetkowski throws in a song and dance."

When Neil Tetkowski throws a large piece on his wheel, he becomes a whirling dervish caught up in concentration and muscular exertion.

He always does it to music.

In his workshop on Ashland Avenue near Bryant Street, tucked in behind the Just Pasta restaurant, Tetkowski has built a kiln big enough to bake the 3-foot disks that have become his trademark in the ceramics world and sell for \$3,000 to \$4,000. A short set of railroad tracks guides steel wheels to open and seal the door of the kiln, where his clay creations are tested in fire for two days.

His favorite "throwing music" is by Talking Heads. After slipping a compact disc into the CD player in his adjoining apartment and gallery, Tetkowski kicks off his shoes in the shop and drops a 25-pound glob of red Ohio clay onto a round wooden pallet on the floor.

Hold tight, we're in for nasty weather, the Talking Heads sing over the shop's speaker system as Tetkowski begins to kick up a storm, flattening the clay with his bare feet. There has got to be a way / burning down the house.



MUSIC MAN:

Tetkowski selects an accompaniment to the day's work. His tastes run to the classics, but when he's making sculpture, he wants dance music — "something that has a certain very raw energy to it," he says.

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ART AND ARTISTS: In his cluttered West Side studio, Tetkowski poses with a ceramic piece in the foreground and his assistant, David Paris, in the background. Paris, a painter, is a former student of Tetkowski's at Buffalo State College.



DUE PROCESS: *No effete aesthete, Tetkowski is a study in hard work as he creates one of his huge ceramic pieces. First, he pounds the clay out with his feet, above left; then he shapes the 125-pound disk on the potter's wheel with his hands, above right. To mark the piece, he uses some offbeat tools — including a railroad spike, right. On the opposite page, the process continues as the sculptor painstakingly spray paints the piece to add color and texture, top. He then sprinkles it with rock salt and soda ash, center, which will form spots during firing. Finally, bottom, after days of firing, Tetkowski and Paris remove the finished pieces from the kiln.*



Tetkowski is getting a whirligig workout. His hands press as one, his fingers clawing and shaping the center of the rotating clay.

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He slaps a second chunk of clay on top of the first and flattens it, too, like one pizza on top of another. Then the third, fourth and fifth chunks of clay hit the pie, until he has 125 pounds on the wheel, destined to be shaped into something unique and consigned to the flames of the kiln at 1,750 degrees Fahrenheit.

Shakedown dreams walking in broad daylight/365 degrees/burning down the house.

"It's like jogging, really," Tetkowski says as he jogs in place over the clay, pounding it out. Bending over, he trims off the ragged edge with a putty knife, plunging this excess on top and kneading it into the mass of clay with his feet.

The Heads are singing "Making Flippy Floppy" when Tetkowski begins tapering the edge of the clay mound with his feet. *Nothing can come between us./Bring me a doctor/I have a hole in my head.* Tetkowski kicks out a hollow center in the clay and builds up the rim. Now it's time for him and his assistant, David Paris, to lift the pallet off the floor and center it on the potter's wheel. *It's always show time here at the edge of the stage.*

Now the shop is filled with energy. Tetkowski is getting a whirligig workout. After a quick sip of water, he presses the foot pedal, making the wheel spin. One on top of the other, his hands press as one, his fingers clawing and shaping the center of the rotating clay. He stops the wheel and shapes the edge with the heels of his hands. Now he slaps it in rhythm with the music.

"Good," he tells Paris. The

clay that Paris prepared is just moist enough, just firm enough.

Beautiful/beautiful, sing the Talking Heads. Climbing up the wall.

Soon Tetkowski pricks the disk for thickness, making sure he is leaving at least an inch of clay in the thin center. This huge creation is going to have to hang on a wall for the rest of its life without cracking.

Home is where I want to be/pick me up and turn me 'round, the Heads sing as Tetkowski spins the dizzy, giddy clay, shaping it by instinct and improvisation. Make it up as we go along/feet on the ground/head in the sky/It's OK, I know nothing's wrong... nothing.

Tetkowski whistles and hums as his flat palm wipes the wet floor of the disk and smoothes the wobble out of the lip of the disk, which has begun to resemble a flat car tire off its rim. The outermost edge of the saucer, where the tire tread would be, is bulging beyond the edge of the revolving potter's wheel.

"I will alter the form now," Tetkowski says. The music has quieted. It has taken him only half an hour to shape the disk. Now for the moment of truth. He lays out his tools on the bench. Among them:

- A rotary saw blade.
- A foot-long saw blade with wider teeth.
- A bent, rusty railroad spike.
- A toy propeller.

"Each will make a different kind of mark," Tetkowski says. "They may look crude, but they're like old friends to me. I know what they're going to do."

He bends the foot-long blade into an arc and lets it slice into the rotating disk. It cuts deeply and sticks, stalling

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the wheel. He pulls it out and examines the cut. It has left a ribbon of fluttery chocolate cake frosting dangling in beautiful loops, and Tetkowski leaves it alone, frozen in motion.

The wheel is revolving again as he hums to the music and decides what to do next. This is the fun part. His putty knife presses down part of the lip and almost seals it tight to the inside of the disk, like a flat tire.

"I'm trying to visualize this on a wall," he says. The disk is still now. He's deciding which end is up. He raises the railroad spike and — after a brief, dramatic moment of gathering his artistic wits — slashes a crescent from top to bottom with a single stroke, nipping the lip as well.

Now he and Paris lug the pallet off the wheel and onto the floor, where Tetkowski can see the work in perspective. Sometimes he has climbed up on a ladder to look down at his work.

With the wood propeller in hand, he ponders the piece, then slashes it with a longer crescent at an angle to the first one. Then, taking the spike again, he swipes a smaller crescent at the upper right.

Tetkowski steps back.

"I like it," he declares.

By the time Neil Tetkowski was 9 years old, he had toured Europe four times with his parents. He had seen the cathedrals of Paris, the Louvre, Venice and Milan, the Vatican, England, Scandinavia. . . . His father, Clem Tetkowski, is a retired college professor of design, and his mother, Lee Tetkowski, is a high school art teacher.

Tetkowski, 32, was born in Buffalo and graduated from Grand Island High School. He spent the first and third grades in Siena, Italy, where his father ran a study-abroad program for Buffalo State College. When Neil was 15, he took up the piano. He also played the guitar and trombone.

At Alfred University, the freshman musician was a mystery to his art instructors. One day they ganged up on him and demanded to know

just how much time he was spending at the piano. He told them four hours a day. They were incredulous.

"They said: 'What? You've got to decide if you're going to be a musician or an artist,'" Tetkowski recalls with a chuckle. "I knew what the answer was. I knew I was not talented in music to the point where I felt that it was important to discover what that talent could do. The desire wasn't anywhere as strong as with the art. The art . . . there was no end to the discovery process."

Some critics identify Tetkowski as an abstract expressionist, but he deflects the

The potter gives birth to a work.

The lines aren't straight, but that's all right.

There's life in this because of the way this thing was produced.

— Neil Tetkowski

question and says he feels that the hidden influence on his art has been music, starting with the progressive jazz of Pat Metheny. He credits this with his sense of improvisation, the developing of an idea. Next comes Bob Marley's reggae music, which he feels has motivated the concept and development of the Tetkowski disks.

Though reticent about the meaning of his work, Tetkowski speaks of the creative process in such terms as "raw energy," "human passion" and "guts."

The man with the lifetime exposure to Europe now is discovering the Far East. Since earning his master of fine arts degree at Illinois State University in 1980, Tetkowski has fashioned a singular type of sculpture without abandoning the tools and raw materials of the potter's craft. His work has been reviewed worldwide by art

critics writing in Japanese and Chinese, as well as in Spanish, French and German. One of his disks is in the Smithsonian Institution and another is in Tokyo's Museum of Modern Art.

In the Orient he has found a milieu where he stands out and is appreciated, and where he can develop a distinctive style. Asians have a different approach to the arts. Most Americans would repress their natural urge to touch the work of a ceramic artist. But in Japan, touching is part of the culture.

In his gallery, Tetkowski picks up a Japanese serving dish made of traditional Bizen clay and caresses it in his hands. It's a sunken platter mounted on a round pedestal. The platter has a crooked ridge that betrays the hands that formed it.

"To the Japanese this work is, like, it's born," he tries to explain. "The potter gives birth to it. The lines aren't straight, but that's all right. There's life in this because of the way this thing was produced. You're supposed to touch it and use it and feel it and taste it and watch it change."

Tetkowski points out the rough spots in the clay — the burrs of feldspar.

"We may see it as crude and irregular," he says. "The Japanese love that. Look at the orange blush — a combination of fire and potash flying around in the kiln gives you that brown. It's a different kind of beauty. It is what it is. It's not the Corvette aesthetic done on a drawing board."

Can such a people relate to this American's giant disks?

Grinning, he recalls how the owner of a Japanese gallery studied Tetkowski's show and then turned to him and said something emphatic in Japanese. The translator turned to Tetkowski and rendered it, "How dare you!"

Taken aback at first, Tetkowski soon realized that he meant, "How daring!"

After Tetkowski and Paris separate the wet clay disk from the wood base by laboriously drawing a wire across the underside of the disk, they clean up and sit down in the gallery, where lunch has been delivered from the restaurant next door.

Tetkowski is still coming

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down from his high at the wheel. Surrounded by his wall hangings, he has time to mull over the past 45 minutes at his wheel. He says he resisted the temptation to play it all safe while in front of a live audience today. Just like in Japan.

"In my kind of work, if you do what's safe, you lose that kind of gesture," he says. "There has to be a certain sense of risk-taking in this kind of artwork for it to have the life that it needs. Like, think of a jazz musician that improvises. When you're starting to spontaneously get into it, that's when you've got that quintessential, non-descriptive thing that happens."

Pushing the limits and discovering new possibilities on the wheel — that's where it's at for Tetkowski.

"There's that time when you're under suspended animation and you don't know if you have it or you might lose it," he confides. "On the other hand, when everything is go-

ing well and I see that an idea is working, I start to get bored with it. I'd have to assume, in virtually any walk of life, that people who stop taking risks are going to get bored eventually."

Tetkowski says he used several tools today in order to create different kinds of lines. He also was paying attention to how thick the disk was, even pricking it like a pizza in an oven.

"I've ruined pieces," he confesses.

He's going to ruin one again before the week is out, but neither he nor Paris knows that yet. Paris, 23, was once Tetkowski's student at Buffalo State College and has been working for him for four years. The arrangement gives Paris a living and artistic stimulation for his own painting career. Tetkowski readily acknowledges Paris' influence on his ceramic work.

What do his ceramic sculptures mean?

Tetkowski says his work has to speak for itself. But he's frank about the musical influence. Although his musical roots are Brahms, Mozart, Stravinsky, Tchaikovsky, that's not what he pipes in when he's on the wheel.

"I listen to some pretty

rowdy dance music that borders on new wave, punk," he says. "It's not a favorite, but it's something I listen to because it has a certain very raw energy to it."

What response does he get from viewers of his disks?

"I think they respond to the energy, they respond to the abstract imagery," he says. "There's not one right way to look at my work, just as there's not one right way to listen to a piece of music. You're going to respond to it subjectively. It may set you in a mood, or you might choose to reflect on something that you relate to, like music somehow, in a personal way. The image is typically almost galactic, like galaxies, or seascapes, or oceans and water, like the Niagara River, very abstract."

No doubt he's referring to how the rim of a finished Tetkowski wall platter serves as the frame through which the viewer can gaze not only at the flat center of the piece, but *through* the center into a veritable cosmos of space and imagery. You can look at it two-dimensionally to see it as a painting, or three-dimensionally into infinity.

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Metal, Clay and Economics

Neil Tetkowski created his famous "American Iron and Steel" exhibition by pressing metal "found objects" into the soft clay of his emerging disks.

When the exhibition was shown last December in SoHo, Manhattan's art district, it caught the attention of the New York Times, which observed: "Old rusted tools are embedded in the pieces before firing. Chains lie in curves that are echoed by complementary slashes in the clay surfaces. In some, a gear rolled across the center or rim of a disk left deep indentations. Occasionally Mr. Tetkowski's linear motifs have the sophistication of Japanese calligraphy."

Inspired by visits to the idle steel mills of Lackawanna, Tetkowski's exhibition suggests the demise of the Industrial Revolution — and a traumatic turning point in local history.

"With the 'Iron and Steel' pieces," Tetkowski says, "there's that orientation toward old industry — maybe a violation of our environment, maybe a looking forward to putting the pieces back together again and moving on to a renewed industry or renewed economy or renewed Buffalo."

The exhibition was shown at the Franklin Parrasch Gallery in Washington early this year, and one of the pieces, "Myopic Sunset," was hung at the Burchfield Art Center in the Craft Art Western New York show this fall. ■

— ANTHONY CARDINALE



"IRON AND STEEL": A taste of metal.

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Tetkowski is obviously still feeling the momentum of his work today at the wheel. He can't wait to spray the piece and put it into the kiln. He can't wait to see how the tones turn out after 36 hours of firing and 48 hours of cooling.

After the red clay has fully dried and hardened, Tetkowski takes it into his "dirt room," blows it off with an air hose, and spray paints it with a variety of ceramic materials to give it color and texture. This is a more critical process than throwing the clay, because once a color has been applied, it cannot be removed. It can be modified by blending with other colors, but if this isn't all done in one swoop the second coat will flake off the first coat in the kiln.

Paris mixes the materials that Tetkowski has been using for the past decade. Just as Tetkowski has developed his own clay mixture, to withstand the mass of these platters, he has also come up with ceramic paints that cannot be bought commercially. He uses a technique originated by the Greeks about 500 B.C. Before it's over, six buckets of very refined clay, called terra sigillata, are deflocculated — boiled down to about one bucket of finished stain, ready to be sprayed onto the clay and fused to the piece by the heat of the kiln.

Tetkowski puts on a face mask and spray paints white ceramic pigment around the edge of the disk, then paints blue, then pink over the blue. The walls of the ventilated dirt room are defaced with stray colors from projects past. After a few minutes a blend of colors begins to emerge, a rainbow of ice cream all melted and mixed. It looks like an amorphous muddle.

But that doesn't bother Tetkowski.

"There's an element of surprise when you open the kiln," he explains. "My art is not left up to chance — but the final colors are being influenced the whole time that the kiln is on. In effect, the coloration continues as I'm determining what kind of fire is in the kiln — is it going to be a yellow reducing flame

that is fuel-rich and gives a darker color? Or is it to be a blue, fuel-lean flame, an oxidizing flame, which is clean and gives lighter tones?"

A barrel of rock salt stands next to the kiln. To create sunbursts and a spotty surface, he will sprinkle little pieces of salt and soda ash, which will explode in the kiln, leaving a constellation of stars on the cosmos.

A few days later, the kiln has cooled and Tetkowski and Paris are rolling open the door to see what has transpired this time. For the strenuous drudgery of unloading six layers of heavy pottery, supported by six ceramic

There's an element of surprise when you open the kiln. The final colors are being influenced the whole time that the kiln is on.

— Neil Tetkowski

ic slab shelves weighing 100 pounds each, they have selected the slave-liberating reggae music of Bob Marley to pipe into the shop.

My hand was made strong by the hand of the Almighty / we flowered in this generation triumphantly. / Won't you help to send these songs of freedom? / 'cause all I ever have — / redemption songs; / redemption songs.

Near the top of the heap in the kiln is the 38-inch platter that Tetkowski threw that day and was particularly pleased with. It is finished. It has a dominant tone of buff or light orange, with galaxies of blue and green sprinkled throughout the piece.

"That makes me feel good," he says. "That will command attention in any room."

But before he can really admire it, he and Paris have

taken out another large disk and discovered that it has a fine hairline crack.

"That's the worst kind, because it's structural," Tetkowski says as he examines it. "I'm annoyed about that. We're probably going to break that up so we don't have to look at it and get depressed about it."

How did it happen?

"It was heated too quickly in the beginning," Tetkowski says. "As we get used to this new kiln, we'll do it so that nothing will crack. If we'd had a slower firing schedule, and kept it another 12 hours in the kiln..."

Other kinds of cracks are not damaging and in fact add to the artistry, Tetkowski says. "Clay is a material that pulls, it stretches," he reasons. "You know, the paint on the 'Mona Lisa' is cracked."

But the surprise of the day is a disk Tetkowski had sprayed with orange tones. It has come out of the kiln a rich brown. Tetkowski tells Paris that this is an interesting discovery and he's going to start using this tone more often.

The blue disk also looks spectacular.

"I'm pretty happy with this one," Tetkowski says. "I'd really like to live with it for a while."

Its rim has glazed and non-glazed surfaces and different layers of brilliant cobalt blue. Inside the disk are iridescent yellows and pinks, causing the eye to look into a universe speckled with stars from exploded salt and ash... perhaps the universe into which Bob Marley gazed.

Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery / none but ourselves can free our mind. / Have no fear for atomic energy. / 'cause none of them can stop the time.

Japan will continue to be a mecca for Neil Tetkowski as he develops his art.

"In Japan, their culture does not make a distinction between art and craft," he says. "To them, even functional craft objects are regarded as fine art. A painter, a potter, a weaver, a kite maker can all be artists of repute."

The Japanese don't consider ceramic art as esoteric as most Americans do. Japanese use beautiful ceramics for their meals, their tea ceremony and their flower arranging.

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"Like, those people don't get upset when they see a little crack. They don't see it as a flaw, they see it as life in the piece," he muses. "The crudeness, the roughness, they look at that as beauty in nature. They have words in their vocabulary we don't even have a translation for."

While he tosses and turns at night over whether to computerize his kiln or buy an electronic Yamaha Clavanova piano, Tetkowski the musician/ceramist looks ahead to pushing the limits of his creativity still further.

Lately he has been cutting up his clay disks into arcs and reassembling them into free-standing sculptures. He did a few of these for his Japanese show in June, and received positive responses. Though in his own mind he was already creating sculpture with his wall disks, now he will definitely be in the company of sculptors and may even discard clay.

"I'm very interested in

what I don't know yet," Tetkowski says. "I don't know what I'll be doing five or 10 years from now. I know I'll be an artist. I'd like to get bigger maybe in some other medium. I'm going to do some sculptures that are big, free-standing things that fill up the kiln. That'll be fun. Open forms. And more bronzes. Maybe not clay; maybe an outdoor monument, something environmental."

His Japanese show is the October cover story of the quarterly journal *American Ceramics*. Noting that Tetkowski has chosen the disk for his central motif, Editor Michael McTwiggan observes: "A circle draws us in, like a bull's-eye; its perfect symmetry is entrancing, even hypnotic. . . . And like eternity, a circle has no beginning and no end. These qualities may explain its power as a religious symbol."

But to Tetkowski, the circle has to be completed before he can be truly fulfilled as an artist. He doesn't think success will spoil his work. But losing touch with his potential audience can be disastrous.

In a society consumed by so many other expressions of art, especially film and video, Tetkowski's work really does border on the esoteric, and he knows it.

"If your ego is overfed and out of control, you lose sight of what you're about in the first place," he says. "OK, so you've had this experience where you're creative, and you're focused and it's energizing and it's satisfying you. But then there's a point where you've satisfied you, you, you, you. What about the public?"

"There's an emptiness there if you can't relate it to other people. And I can tell you about untold numbers of artists who were very creative but were unable to keep growing because they couldn't find an audience to relate their work to. If I can present my work to people . . . it kind of fulfills the creative cycle."

But then again — suppose he were stranded on a desert island, with a wheel and kiln and plenty of clay and no hope of ever meeting another human being again. Would he still do this?

"I'd still do it." He laughs in disbelief. "I'd still do it." ■