

Neil Tetkowski: American Iron and Steel

by Charles Carlson Jr.



The light slanted in at an angle and illuminated the scene; objects glowed and basked in the brilliance of the late afternoon sun. It was a renaissance light, the kind that shines on *piazzas*, *palazzi* and *duomi*. It was the kind of light that illuminated the fertile fields of Van Gogh's imagination at Arles.

Neil Tetkowski stood on a 4-foot bat in the center of a dirt courtyard. Tall grass waved gently in front of the surrounding red wooden buildings. An assistant dropped 25-pound lumps of clay on the bat as Neil wedged 300 pounds

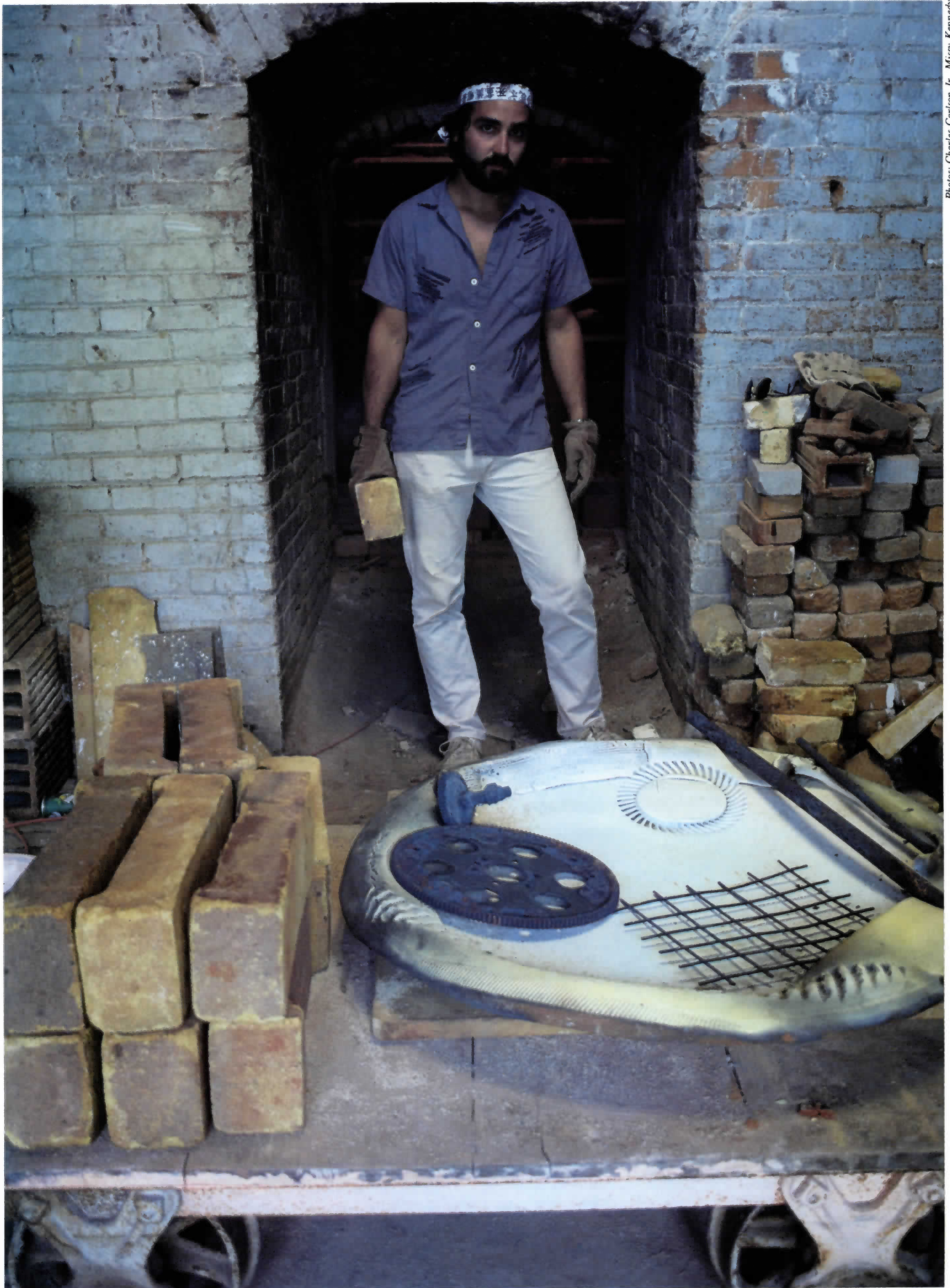
of plastic clay with his feet. Wearing a Japanese Buddhist headband, he looked like a devotee of the martial arts, kicking with the ball of his foot, toes curled back "for better power and to prevent injury." Neil already had a severely sprained wrist from previously wrestling with 300 pounds of spinning clay.

"The first time I tried throwing anything this big," he recalled, "the wheel was turning at full speed when the bat suddenly came loose, flew off; 300 pounds of clay grazed the top of my thigh and smashed against the studio wall. I missed being seriously injured by inches. I wasn't

about to give up trying but I stopped to redesign my wheel."

Tetkowski's studio is an old brick factory in upstate New York. The complex consists of six or seven buildings which house everything from a pit where the workers once mined their own clay, to the kiln building sheltering eight gigantic, sprung-arch, walk-in kilns. The entire compound is interconnected by tracks that run through tunnels. Carts, which at one time were used to move pallets of bricks along the rails, now move Neil's large-scale ceramic work.

A century's worth of discarded in-



Neil Tetkowsky at the door of a room-size kiln (partially walled off to reduce the chamber to 1200 cubic feet), one of eight walk-

in kilns near his studio in an old brick factory—now Boston Valley Terracotta in Boston, New York.

dustrial memorabilia, the remnants of a once bustling technology, hide in the corners of dark tunnels and open buildings. Old gears covered with dust are stacked along the walls. A two-story tall clay mixer, with flywheels larger than a man, stands in silent tribute to a bygone era. Rusting tractors sit parked in outdoor stalls.

This environment has had a salutary influence on Tetkowski's work. The sense of decay, latent power inherent in the heavy gear forms, and fascination with their design coupled with influences from recent visits to Japan have led to "The American Iron and Steel Series."

The freshness and vitality that come from viewing the world through differ-



ent cultural perspectives and so seeing your own culture in a new light are important to the development of Tetkowski's work. In the past several years, he has traveled extensively through the United States, Europe and Mexico, as well as Japan. "One of the things that really influences me is travel. It has to do with observation of what's around me. Just go down to Mexico and open your eyes. Go to the Pyramids; see the Aztec ruins. Those are supercharged, high quality art objects. So they were made by a culture rather than an individual. It doesn't matter. They still have the power that I draw from.

"I really love primitive art. If I'm in Mexico City, I have to go to the ar-



"Industrial Symposium," 28 inches in diameter, thrown earthenware, with iron cogwheel and chain.

Above Remnants of technology are used to shape as well as become a part of the work.



Above "Transfigured Dinnerware,"
 thrown earthenware, with terra sigillata
 and imbedded shards of hotel china,
 29 inches in diameter, lightly salted at
 approximately Cone 04.

Right "Gears of Fortune," 34 inches in
 diameter, lightly salted earthenware, wheel
 thrown, sprayed with terra sigillata,
 impressed with assorted gears.





"Industrial Galaxy," 36 inches in diameter, lightly salted earthenware, with railroad spikes, springs and a gear wheel, from the "American Iron and Steel Series" by Neil Tetkowski.

chaeology museum. That place is unbelievable. There's something naive, unpretentious, something timeless, mystical, spiritual, something rich about the materials—they're very human. Yet something is in that work that I don't have enough of in my world. I try to put that into my own art."

Fascination with primitive art has given Neil a sense of how art can be an archaeological record of a culture. All art is to some degree a record of the ideas, customs, and skills of a particular era. Long after a people have disappeared their art lives on for future generations. The feeling of art speaking across the centuries is a very real one to Neil and he uses it in his own work.

"There's a certain freshness that I draw from, directness and crudeness—I like the raw quality of the clay—the ripping, the tearing. The cracks don't bother me. I wish it wouldn't bother other people. Take, for example, one of the best classical pianists, say Vladimir Horowitz, playing a Beethoven sonata that he's played a million times; he misses a note but he's so good it doesn't matter. The artistic impact is so strong that you can still listen and it doesn't detract."

Aspects of Tetkowski's work are drawn from music and drama. During his adolescence, he trained to become a pianist, and music is still one of his passions. Indeed, his habit of working on a series with one central motif and having each piece be a variation on that theme is in the musical tradition of improvisation. He is also deeply interested in the emotion and passion of the theater.

Watching Tetkowski work is like watching an actor prepare for a performance. He builds himself up to a highly charged physical and emotional level until he is fully focused and ready to create.

Adding influences from architecture to those of music, his philosophy is the antithesis of Louis Sullivan, the father of modern architecture. To twist Sullivan's famous quote, Neil's credo could be "Form follows feeling."

"The art work that interests me—I want to feel it. I don't want to look at it and say 'that's good work.' I want to be knocked over because I felt something. The work that I'm attracted to isn't oriented to traditional pots; it's work that's passionate and gutsy—something that really turns my insides when I look at art whether it's clay or metal or anything."

Neil first began throwing large forms five years ago in an effort to increase the scale of his work and thus change the orientation of people's perceptions. His earlier (smaller) pieces were often referred to as "platters" and "plates," an obvious reference to the utensils they resembled. In an attempt to get the viewer to see the work as art, rather than something one eats from, then throws in the sink, Neil decided to push the wheel and himself toward their limits. Working on 300-pound disks requires an internal conviction and concentration along with external physical strength.

Artists have long known the importance of scale. Michelangelo knew that to make "David" truly great, it would need to be of monumental size. Picasso

knew that to create an epic record of the horrors of war, "Guernica" would need to be of epic proportions. The abstract expressionists knew that as they reached the apogee of their search for a new language in painting, they were ready for a grand scale that reflected the self-assurance of Delacroix, Rubens and other monumental painters. Neil's increase in work scale was both an attempt to change the perceptions of his viewers, and an increasing realization that his own maturity as an artist enabled bigger, bolder forms, attempts at new statements and greater challenges in his work. The important point to realize is that Tetkowski is following a tradition rooted more in aesthetic sensibility than craft sensibility, although his work is certainly a synthesis of both.

In emphasizing aesthetic impact, Tetkowski has angered many in the ceramics world. Some of this anger can be explained by people's misunderstanding of what they believe to be his cavalier attitude toward others working with clay. He has repeatedly voiced his reluctance to be viewed as a potter and many people see this as a condemnation of their work. But Neil is not trying to dissociate himself from those others who work with clay. He is instead trying to encourage galleries, museums, and collectors to see the fine arts aspect of ceramics. Neil is equally angry with the art world for its reluctance to accept ceramic work as anything but "minor art."

"You can make something of really high quality in clay but then you have a hell of a time getting it recognized.

Whereas if you made it out of paint or some other material, something traditional, then you would be more likely to be accepted just by virtue of the material. It pisses me off that clay has this second-class citizenship. I refuse to accept that ceramics is inherently less than fine art. It's important for people to perceive the fine arts end of ceramics. In Japan, I don't have this problem. In Japan, a teabowl is just as important as a painting. The biggest authorities in the Western art world have consistently and conveniently been oblivious to the quality work done in ceramics. I'll fight it until our work is accepted."

Another origin of people's ire is their belief that somehow Neil is being imitative of the work of the abstract expressionist potters of the fifties, especially Peter Voulkos. In fact, Neil's connection to Voulkos is a strong one. During his student years, he was constantly aware of Voulkos's work. Voulkos's experimentation and playfulness with the medium made it possible for many young artists like Tetkowski to explore new and different forms. One critic has even called Tetkowski "The heir to Voulkos." But such a mantle is difficult to shoulder for an artist struggling to establish his own identity. Trying to link Neil with Voulkos obscures some of Neil's own achievements and the differences between two distinct artists. Whereas much of Voulkos's work is derived from abstract expressionism and the Japanese vessels of the six ancient kilns, Neil's work is derived from more diverse classical influences. Where Voulkos tends to shy away

from any extensive use of color, Neil uses color as a powerful element.

"My approach has been to take as many influences as possible. The one from Voulkos is direct. He's a historic person—in terms of timing and invention, he did something at a certain time which you have to open your eyes to. I'd be crazy if I didn't, and I was very turned on by it. Why not pick up on the good and add to it? Hell, Voulkos is 63- or 64-years-old and I'm 30. I don't feel that I have to have achieved everything that he's achieved. I don't want to feel that at 30 I'm being compared to him at 63. I'm influenced by him. What's wrong with an influence? I'm tired of that. When you look at me at age 63 and then compare me to Voulkos at 63, you'll still say that I was influenced, but you'll see two mature artists whose life and times overlapped."

Tetkowski's newest work, while still retaining certain previous characteristics (scale, circular form), has changed dramatically. Where the earlier work was more serene, painterly and understated, his "American Iron and Steel Series" is bold and sculptural. Evidence of these changes is most apparent in the introduction of found objects, and in his more forceful physical attacks on the circular form—the gear imprints, steel cables smashed through the rim, even altering the symmetry of the circle.

The drive from Neil's home in Buffalo to his studio takes him past several shuttered steel plants along the shores of Lake Erie. Weeds now grow through cracks in the empty lots where 30,000

workers once parked their cars. Where the cacophonous sound of clanking gears and rumbling trains once filled the air, an eerie silence now pervades. Just as American artists of the early 20th century were fascinated by the rise of industry, the factory, and heavy machinery, Neil is fascinated by the demise of this technology.

"I want these new pieces to make a statement that we're changing, that it's a different era. It's a way of documenting the whole thing. The steel plant in Lackawanna is a monument to hell. This is a contemporary way to express that. I'm in an environment that has passed its prime. I've always hated heavy industry. That's part of the reason I became an artist—I was against mass production, against assembly lines."

His latest work is a synthesis of the painterly two-dimensional treatment of the surface and the sculptural three dimensionality of form. Delicate color treatment clashes dramatically with the rusting actuality of an old spring embedded in the surface. The evocation of nature images pits itself against the stark reality of the manmade. One perceives the dichotomy between the new technological age, and the old rusting gears and run-down steel plants.

Push and shove, give and take, have always been the essence of Neil's work. This unsettled quality has made it difficult for art critics to label Neil, from a semantic point of view; but it gives the work a tension, a freshness, an energy which enables one to see something new each time.



"Found Objects of Transportation," 23 inches in diameter, wheel-thrown earthenware with Volkswagen parts, sprayed with terra sigillata, fired in a 1200-cubic-foot kiln to approximately Cone 04, by Neil Tetkowski. The artist resides in Buffalo, 25 miles from his studio in Boston, New York.