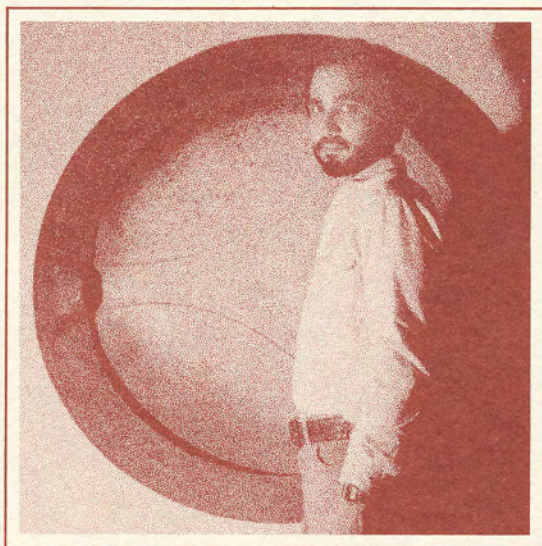
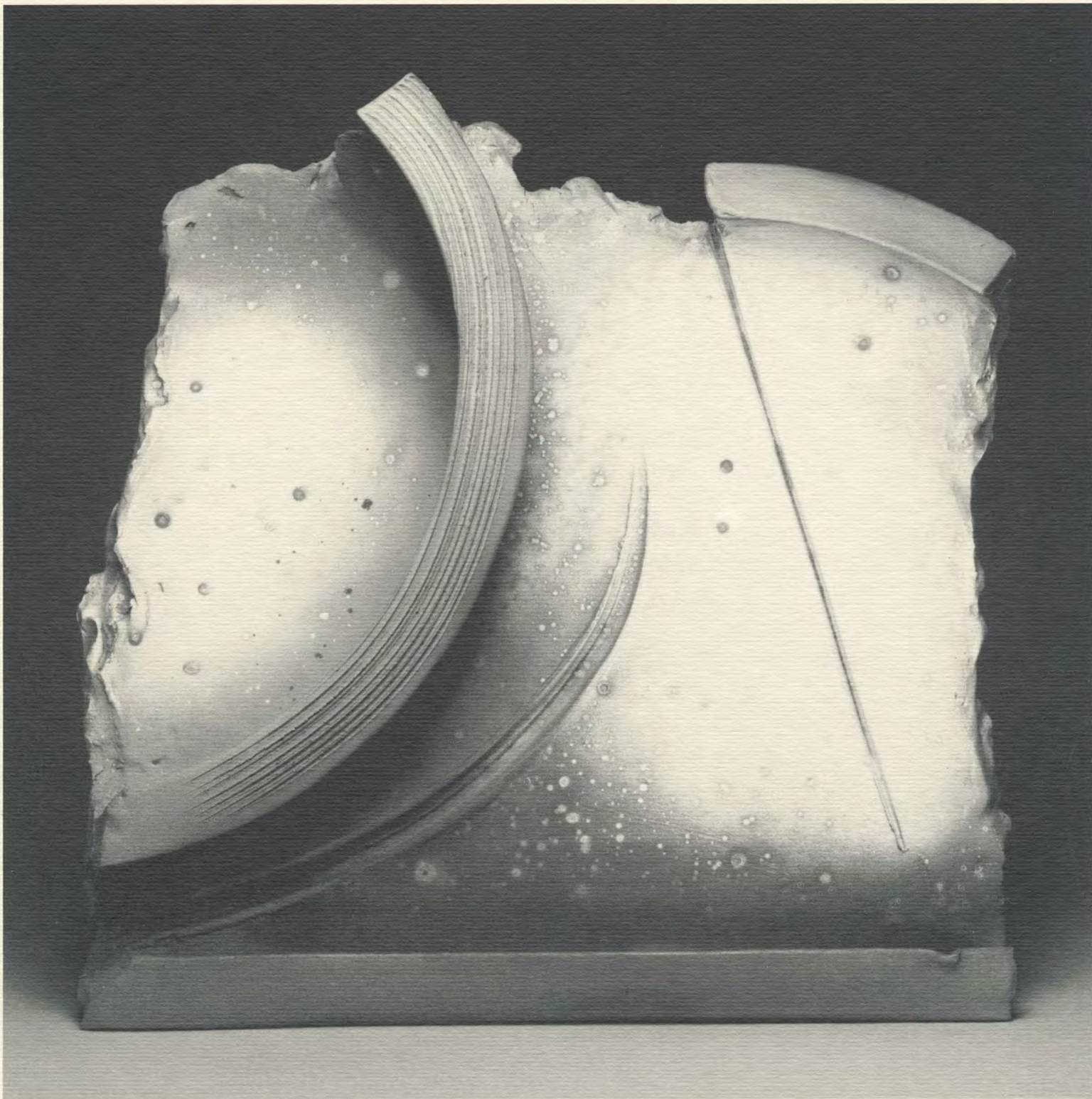


TETKOWSKI





Blue Swirl
(1983) by Neil Tetkowski, 18" (45 cm) diameter.
Photo: Jamey Stillings.



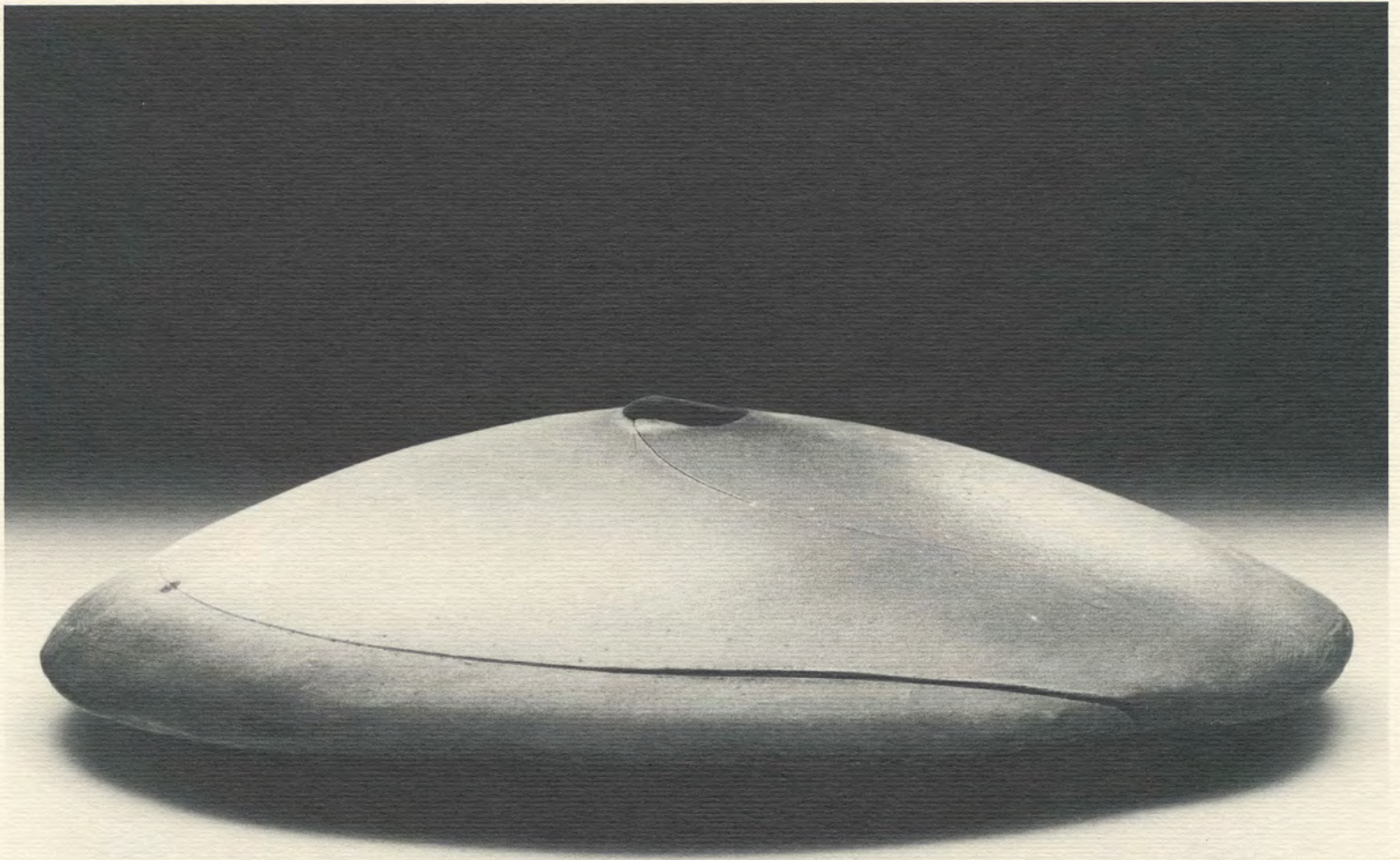
Wall Piece, Orange/White
(1984) by Neil Tetkowski, 28" (70 cm) wide at bottom.
Photo: Jamey Stillings.



Blue Disk
(1983) by Neil Tetkowski, 36" (90 cm) diameter.
Photo: Jamey Stillings.



Volcanic Trek
(1982) by Neil Tetkowski, 12" (30 cm) diameter.
Photo: Jamey Stillings.



Blue Vessel
(1983) by Neil Tetkowski, 12" (30 cm) diameter.
Photo: Jamey Stillings.



Orange Swirl
(1983) by Neil Tetkowski, 38" (95 cm) diameter.
Photo: Jamey Stillings.



Earth Disk
(1983) by Neil Tetkowski, 38" (95 cm) diameter.
Photo: Jamey Stillings.

TETKOWSKI

Neil Tetkowski

by Michael McTwigan

Neil Tetkowski
Ceramic Artist

It would be wrong to label Neil Tetkowski a Minimalist—there's too much hedonism, too much pleasure in clay's sensuality, for that term to stick. But one admires his attempt to do so much with so little. Colors are few: dark brown, terra cotta, orange, tan, blue, and white; the forms principally two: the large, wall-hanging platter or disk, and the hill form with a small central opening; the surfaces of these bear only one or two, sometimes three, gestural cuts or marks. What he has learned from the Minimalists is this: with a limited vocabulary, one can say as much as the artist who throws a palette of paint in the public's face.

It might seem odd to begin talking of Tetkowski's sensual clayworks in Minimalist terms, for the viewer's first impression more readily recalls the energetic gestures of the potters at Otis during the 1950s. But unlike Peter Voulkos, Tetkowski is not mudslinging. "I'm not interested in shocking the world," he says, and though he admires the energy of a Voulkos or a de Kooning, "a lot of the work is just plain ugly." And that's not his aim.

On the one hand, Tetkowski's work is all about process: the spinning potter's wheel, the responsiveness of raw clay, the spontaneity of the artist's mark. This is Tetkowski the expressionist. On the other hand, his gestural cuts and swipes display the deliberate intelligence, the just-so placement, of the designer. Though lively, energetic, none of these marks fell, willy-nilly, to the surface.

Like many artists drawn to ceramics, 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, too, when he decided to live the good life of the self-sufficient potter at the age of seventeen: "I imagined living in some beautiful rural setting making pottery in a solar-heated studio," he recalls. What seduced the teenage Tetkowski 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, a dozen years later, but not the naive and humble aims of the teenage potter. "I don't like the idea of being a culturally displaced potter making medieval ware for a twentieth-century audience," he says now, "and I'm not interested in being the Unknown Craftsman." And so he uses the tools, materials, and techniques of pottery, but not to make vessels. As the artist says himself, he doesn't want his work to resemble known forms, such as a teapot, a plate, or a wine ewer. The large scale of his wall-mounted platters denies such mistaken resemblances. "A four-foot platter carries a different message than an eighteen-inch platter," he explains. "People respond differently. A piece this large confronts you; it demands a response."

Tetkowski's link to formalism and to minimalism may be seen in his attention to color, line, and surface. But more importantly, these works have rhythm. Perhaps that's what throws us, literally, off the track. For while these serene forms are quietly entrancing—and their bull's eye symmetry hypnotically reinforces the effect, like an eye chart for mystics—we're always sent skidding off course just as we're getting used to the meditative frame of circularity. It may be a wrinkle in the rim, or a sinuous incision of the artist's finger, or a knife trail that sweeps elliptically like a comet across the surface.

But that's not all. Tetkowski paints with light, rather than color. His limited palette, though luscious to be sure, serves primarily to model the surface with depth-defining light and shadow. The gradations from dark brown to white not only lend drama to the work, but make these bas-reliefs quite three-dimensional. For such shallow works—usually not more than three inches deep—they convey a great sense of space. As Tetkowski says, the white centers dematerialize the platters. "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, perhaps, where the artist lived as a boy.

What comes to my mind, while gazing into the broad expanse of Tetkowski's "landscapes," is the subtle hue and texture of the American Southwest. Here we have the red of clay, the brown and tan of earth, the white of sand. "What influences me, finally, is the world out there," says Tetkowski. "These colors are very common in nature, and in that way my work corresponds to the world. Geometry is rare in nature and it is rare in my work. There are no right angles here."

As the earth is round, so are the rimmed horizons of these valleys and plains. Their wheel-thrown circularity not only frames our view, but places us at sufficient distance to see the earth's curvature for ourselves—as if our vantage point were that of the eagle. The centrifugal force of their making, which Tetkowski often emphasizes with coinciding arcs of finger stroke or knife cut, also links his earthen disks to our spinning planet.

If the large platters offer a vista—whether of known or imagined landscapes or the trancelike infinitude of meditation—Tetkowski's gently curving hill sculptures are more narrative. Resembling truncated cones with open mouths, those forms that rise to a buttelike prominence suggest volcanoes. If at one time they spewed volcanic ash upon the surrounding hillside, now their craters sit quietly at rest.

The other characteristic hill form is a low-rising mound with a small aperture at its center. Again, one might be moved to speak of its earthly counterpart in nature, but more potent associations come to mind: the adobe homes of the Southwest Indians, which are entered through a hole in the roof; the graves of the Mound Builders; the mud shrines of Afghanistan; a woman's breast and vagina. Hill, home, breast, vagina, shrine, grave—a litany of equivalences to which, in their generous curve, we return metaphorically again and again.

Unlike Richard DeVore's serene analogues of earth and body, which appear to spring fully formed from the artist's brow and show no evidence of their making, Tetkowski's surfaces look wet and fresh and soft, as if they have just come off the potter's wheel. Tetkowski uses terra sigillata—a fine slurry of clay sprayed onto the surface—to retain "the lively character and detail of the freshly formed clay...even a fingerprint is preserved." The mark of finger, knife, or comb "indicates the passage of time," he adds, "like footprints in the snow." These raw, terra sigillata forms are forever caught in the moment of their making, in the eternal present.

Yet, they also escape time, in the way a photograph is timeless: at each viewing, the moment captured by the photographer is reenacted. These earthbound forms are likewise forever spinning yet always still. Tetkowski's vistas are not ancient sites so much as they are the forms and colors and surfaces that have been, and always will be, with us, like the shifting sands of the desert, forever changing, forever the same.

Michael McTwigan is an art critic living in New York and the founding editor of American Ceramics magazine. In 1981, he was awarded an Art Critics Fellowship by the National Endowment for the Arts.

TETKOWSKI

Neil Tetkowski: A Biography

Neil Tetkowski
Ceramic Artist

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Neil Tetkowski is a ceramic artist who lives and maintains his studio in Buffalo, New York, where he is an assistant professor at the State University College at Buffalo.

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 culturally displaced craftsman making medieval ware for a twentieth-century audience. 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 the 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; in 1983 he received an Individual Artist Fellowship from the Ohio Arts Council.

During that 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—a vessel, a pot. This led to the three- and four-foot disks the artist is now best known for.

Tetkowski is an elected member of the International Academy of Ceramics and has participated in over fifty group exhibitions throughout the United States and abroad. He has had solo exhibitions at Objects Gallery in Chicago, DBR Gallery in Cleveland, and at Elements Gallery in New York. In 1984, he was a resident artist at Artpark in Lewiston, New York, and in 1985, Tetkowski will have a major one-person exhibition at Akasaka Green Gallery in Tokyo, Japan.

Cover

Neil Tetkowski in his studio.

Great Earthen Disk

(1983) by Neil Tetkowski, 48" (120 cm) diameter.

Photo: Sheila Waters.