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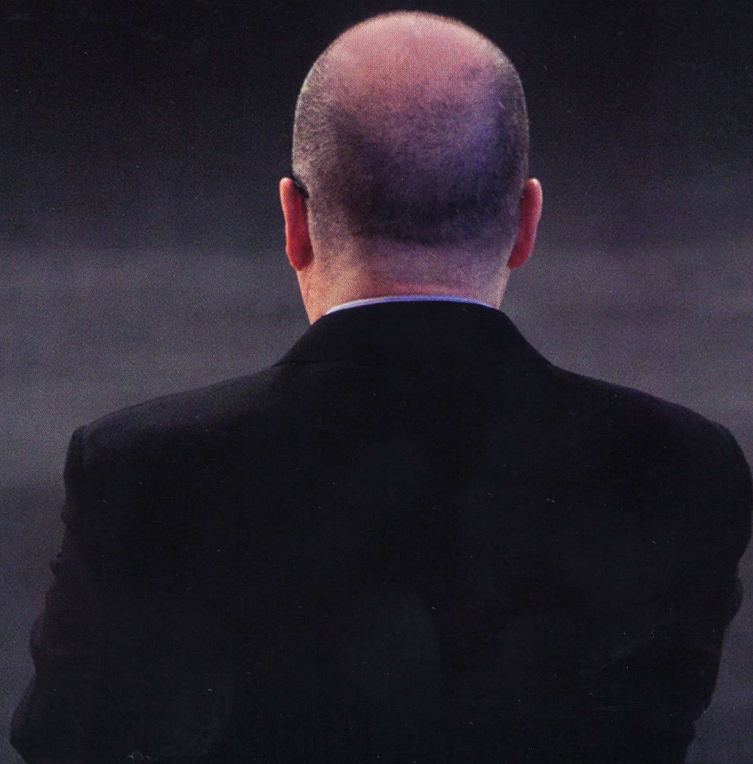
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Neil Tetkowski, *Terra Rig* (foreground), 2012, ceramic, 24 x 14 x 22" height, and installation view

Extinguishing and Elevating Matter

Neil Tetkowski's "Earth Fragments" at HPGRP Gallery in New York

by Dominique Nahas

In *Earth Fragments*, Neil Tetkowski's recent exhibition of ceramic work at HPGRP Gallery, it is fascinating to see how many different worlds Tetkowski can conjure up from his bits and pieces. His combinatorial gestural forms and nuanced glazing and chromatic effects are parts within a multi-leveled polyphonic visual and haptic language that describes a range of emotions, correspondences and relations. They take us somewhere else other than earth, yet they always ground us in the primordial medium of which he is master. *Construct with Earthen Wings* #13, for example, suggests the major story that weaves itself through each work in different ways: that of transubstantiation and renewal. These twin themata have been at the core of Tetkowski's intentionality for many years

and it continues to permeate *Earth Fragments*. A cosmic nimbus of creation, for instance, is inferred in *Constructed Spiral* #16, while *Spouted Construct* #8 suggests the outgrowth of seminal energy. In the open lattice-like works such as *Standing Construct* #3 and *Standing Construct* #4, Tetkowski retells his major story, that of destruction, chaos, regeneration and renewal, yet each small alteration has major implications as it concerns the ramifications of the stability (doubtful) of his grand narrative (incredulity). *Earth Fragments* as a totality is sensually complex. Each work within the context of the ensemble is its own universe, telling its own complete and autonomous story as it relates simultaneously to the works that surround it while becoming part of a bigger interrelated whole.

Earth Fragments carries the viewer inwards and upwards through catalytic metaphoric journeys of fall and extraction followed by ascension and expansion. And yet what comes with this exhibition, along with all of its high-mindedness is something equally manifestly and magnificently base. I don't sense an idealist or transcendent conception of art, or a unilateral doctrine of art as a pure and perfect form being put forward here by Tetkowski. Instead of tragic affirmation, I sense a comic acknowledgement that the work takes into account; a type of insinuation that after the fall from the divine comes the pratfall. A cyclic narrative of rise and fall, and rise again permeates this exhibition, yet there is a comic wisdom that pervades this narrative of endless return. Attending this narrative, as evidenced in the punning title of the exhibition, is a recognition that to be human means that the self has no uncorrupted and complete core. Instead, being human is an experience of division, of splitting;



Neil Tetkowski, Erupted Ribbon, 2012, ceramic, 23 x 15 x 5"

we are fated to be embedded in materiality as it is the only thing we know utterly. The artist's improvisational nimbleness and sensory acuteness in the handling of his medium has never been more evident. After all, is this not merely clay that has been used, fired, sliced, quartered splayed, rolled, squinched, slivered, squeezed into forms and shapes (crosses, flowers, fat, sperm, bones, bile, livers and so on) and subsequently fired at high temperatures that allow a hardening to take place and for the chromatic glazes to crystallize and fuse onto their crevassed surfaces? And yet, along with and through the brute intractability of this media comes poetry, a lightness of being that infuses the work through Tetkowski's knowingness. His supersensibility makes clay something other than its thing-ness and here-ness without denying the primordial order (the that-ness) of earth and soil. Tetkowski is a protean creator. He invests his earthen medium with multitasking legerdemain. Aesthetic slight of hand of the quality that exists in *Earth Fragments* requires a fanatical attention to detail; this detailing leads to minute relational adjustments of practice and process spread out over time. This creates a superfine, seamless

perfection of moves that results in illusionism. One of the tasks of the true magician is to create distraction patter, tricking the audience into observing and thinking about one type of narrative as a cover for the manipulation of materials taking place to create the illusion that natural laws have been denied, displaced, replaced or undermined. Visionary rusing of a high order is at play in *Earth Fragments*. Wonderment develops in the mind of the viewer because of and through this high-stakes game. What is afoot in this game is the acceptance and exultation of risk. This risk of double meaning comes into play through Tetkowski's obvious cultivation of his inner vulnerabilities. It shows in the handling of his materials, and through his thematic concerns, which are transposed into significant content.

Paul Valery, in his essay *On the Pre-eminent Dignity of the Arts of Fire*, remarks that the artist working with clay and fire as his chosen materials involves a higher degree of risk-taking than in any of the other arts. No matter how good the ceramic artist is in

knowing his process, Valery continues, he "can never abolish Chance." A double emphasis, an uncanny equilibrium, must be maintained for the ceramic artist: that of an equal assertion of the physicality of the medium, and simultaneously, a radical denying of the thing-ness of the material through an insertion imaginative presencing. If this is done right (and Tetowski really gets it right) the result is a startling experience for the viewer. The forms exist as animated and de-corporealized; yet they are simultaneously, de-animated and riddled with acknowledgement of imperfection and decay. They come alive and teem with energy and vitality while remaining, seemingly, utterly mute and immobile on another plane of existence outside of the world of symbol and idea. *Earth Fragments* sustains an aura where the inorganic becomes organic and reverses itself, each manifestation blooming and shattering under the black sun of incompleteness and the mattering of matter. Ultimately, Neil Tetkowski's new ceramic forms in *Earth Fragments* are the undeniable stuff of poetry.



Left: Neil Tetkowski, Atoll, 2012, ceramic, 14 X 22 X 6"



Right: Sprouted Confluence, 2012, ceramic, 23 x 14 x 3