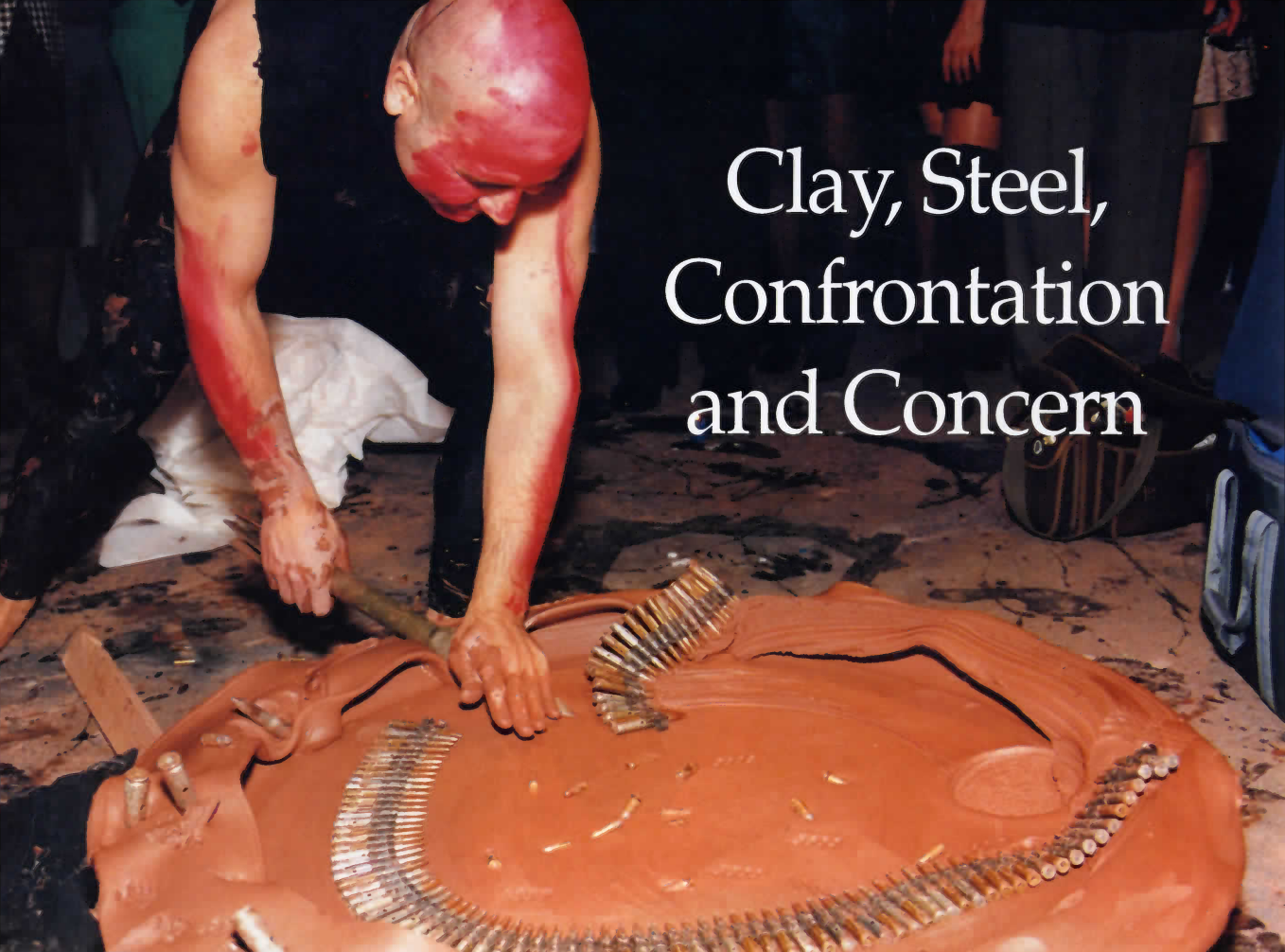


Clay, Steel, Confrontation and Concern



Article by Manya Fabiniak

DURING THE PAST 10 YEARS, AMERICAN CERAMIC artist, Neil Tetkowsky, has expressed his creative energies within the confines of large disc forms measuring up to one metre in diameter. Thematically, his work reflects a fascination with the way people save information for future generations and how our lifestyle today will affect the world of tomorrow. His *American Iron and Steel Series* of 1986 first showed Tetkowsky's response to the industrial revolution's effect on modern life. Each ceramic disc contained iron and steel objects such as cogs, chains and spikes. Ghost images of machinery imprints added a mystical dimension to the works. His new *Railroad Mandala Series* features found objects from the railroad industry.

Drawing upon similar sources for inspiration, Tetkowsky created a new series for his 1992 one-man show in Tokyo at the Akasaka Green Gallery. One work from this exhibition was purchased by the Museum of Modern Art in Tokyo. For Tetkowsky: "the mandala is a human creation of regeneration, healing and reconciliation, a visual construction for contemplation that may lead to a heightened state of

awareness." In this series he has fused the concepts of the mandala into the forms of a disc, vessel, and a smoke-stack bottle. Each object within the series shares a common identity by containing small artifacts of steel that had been left to decay along the tracks through the ghostly remains of a huge and once highly productive steel mill. The mill is located near Tetkowsky's home city of Buffalo, New York, on the shore of Lake Erie.

The clay discs in this new series are approximately 55 cm in diameter. Each bears some form of incision that has been made by a combination of nails, spikes, gears, cables or metal tools. The most dramatic presence in a majority of the discs is the placement of railroad spikes into the surface to divide the form into quadrants that extend beyond the perimeter. At times they merely rest upon the sensual ripple of the edge, anchoring the swirling flow of energy that pulses out beyond the work. Or they penetrate the wide lip of the disc, forcing the clay to ooze and bulge, its surface voluptuous and almost moist, an illusion held frozen by firing. A square is also marked within the disc, creating a marriage between the circle's eternal flow of



L'dor V'dor. 1992-93. 93 cm/diam.

line and the pure geometry of the block, the elemental form that builds our cities. Coins have been embedded into the surface, sometimes in a thick cluster in the centre of the disc. Most often, the centre of each mandala contains a deep imprint of a gear, its sharp, curved edge sending out a pulse that moves laterally across the disc. Yet the energy of its imprint also serves to keep the eye centred and contained within the work as well. Tools or huge bolts sometimes replace the spikes as quadrants, but in each case the steel has formed a black surface that is pitted and layered.

The rather low lying vessels seem to hover, their edges arrested in flight. The lip is either pulled to a centre and left flush with the surface, or it is raised to resemble a volcano. A blackened void appears within. As with most of the discs, the surface is incised with the lines of a square, and the pieces seem to quiver from the repetitive waves that flow along the edge. A sense of violence overshadows these works as Tetkowski has pierced through the surface with long narrow nails or pins to again emphasise the quadrants. As the nails enter in and out of the clay, the swelling and stretching of the material resembles the qualities of soft skin. The smokestack vessels reflect the same plastic use of clay; both the stack and the

cube that supports it are cut, scraped, pinched and pierced with old nails, bolts and other such objects.

The sculptural quality of these stacks represents a three-dimensional mandala as they rise into space, defiant of the wounds they must permanently endure. Tetkowski sees these mandalas as icons that represent the steel and railroad industry in northeastern United States. Early in this century, Buffalo was second only to Chicago as a centre for railroad transportation, a successful outgrowth of the industrial revolution. Hand in hand with the movement of trains was the potent era of the steel industry. The height of this era happened to produce the steel for the planes and ships that were built to fight Japan. For this reason, the artist created these works during the 50th anniversary week of Pearl Harbor.

The issue of war has been a previous artistic concern for Tetkowski. On February 23, 1991, he created a performance that culminated in a bronze disc entitled *Ground War*. The work incorporated symbols of the three cultures involved in the conflict in the Gulf war. A crucifix, the star of David, and the Arabic words for ground war were incised into the work's surface, as well as the placement of rounds of ammunition. In creating a work before an audience,



Railroad Mandala Series #8. 1991. 50 cm/diam. Photo: Bruce Mayer

Tetkowsky ultimately hoped to push the dynamics of throwing a clay object to the point where the viewer's level of awareness could be deepened to show how we relate to war. He hoped to challenge the expectations of his audience and by so doing extend the parameters of their thinking. For Tetkowsky, the performance was staged "as a means to express my emotional involvement regarding the ever ongoing crisis, all the crises of humanity... man shooting man... The injustice that human beings do to each other is not over. Yesterday it was Kuwait, today it is Bosnia-Herzegovina and 40 other wars that are not front page news."

In 1993, Tetkowsky conducted a studio event where several members of the local Jewish community directly participated in making a symbolic Judaic piece. The artist was commissioned to create a work that portrayed the theme of *L'ador V'dor* – generation to generation. He chose to involve a holocaust survivor and her five year old nephew. Tetkowsky has intended such performances to be approached in terms of "who we are as human beings and how we value life, and other cultures... how we carry ourselves and project ourselves to the world. These works are about projection." Yet Tetkowsky does not wish his work to be linked only

to the issue of war. His concern is for the environment. The success of industrialism also produced the side effects of slums, chemical pollution in the Great Lakes, and acid rain over lakes and forests. He is responding in despair when he asks: "How can we hurt ourselves so badly... how can we violate our land and resources."

He feels that the planetary consequences of growth must be faced by all nations. Man's conscious activities must be seen in the light of a larger ecological fabric and on more responsible planes which form the evolving matrix of the planet earth. In the hands of the artist, the coins, spikes, and other steel objects used in the series are transmuted from that which is base to that which is transcendent. Originally discarded, corroded with dirt and rust, they now enter the world of symmetry and order. After being fired in the kiln, the steel surface at times takes on a velvety black texture that is mysterious and sensual. The fire of the kiln reconciles its decay and offers it new life. The steel spikes also hold a spiritual meaning, especially when the mandalas are hung so that the spikes form a cross. One thinks of the Crucifixion, of Christ impaled, of love violated by fear and ignorance. Tetkowsky uses Christian symbolism in his *Ground War* piece by inserting a broken crucifix into the surface. He states:



Vessel. Mandala Series #2. 1991. 36 cm/diam. Photo: Bruce Mayer



Vessel Mandala. Series #1. 1991. 40 cm/diam. Photo: Bruce Mayer

“The broken Christ figure doesn’t mean that God doesn’t exist but that God may as well not exist if people are destroying each other”. Tetkowsky had been creating mandalas for some years but the centres of these discs were left unmarked. Instead, delicate glazes of rose, pale yellows, violet and midnight blues created a gauzy, transcendent light that often suggested distant star vistas of deep space. In creating this effect, he gives up what he calls total calculation, to be “a part of the magic that is bigger than we are”.

In this new series, he continues to create surfaces that suggest constellations but he now firmly identifies

the centre. The energetic slashes formed by the spikes become thought lines that focus on the centre of life. In the treatment of surface, and through a form of design, we are pushed out into the cosmos to look down from a distance, from the point of view of God, to see the greater picture. For Tetkowsky, the mandala in quadrants suggests tremendous order just as the constellation of Pisces suggests cosmic order.

“The mandala was developed for only one purpose – that in contemplation we might go within and discover a greater understanding, knowing about that which is life. Moral enlightenment is a basic



Smokestack. Mandala Series #1. 1991. 33 cm/h. Photo: Bruce Mayer

responsibility of life. Art serves its supreme function when it leads a collective unit into a new realm of consciousness. In the quiet of the gallery, regardless of the differences of language and belief among viewers, the artist urges introspection." Tetkowski's art and the issues that it represents – the global problems, industrial growth, pollution, man's inhumanity towards man, the universal need for peace among nations as well as within the heart – these all escape the infringement of political barriers. Art comes from one nation to another clean, inviolate to desecration,

safe to lead the senses, through contemplation, to a state beyond the senses. The mandalas transcend their forms and raise the materials to the realm of the spiritual. The artist's intention is purposeful and clear. He wishes to confront his viewers, allowing them to achieve just such an experience and to involve all in the transcendent process.

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