

Neil Tetkowski's *Urban Ikebana*



Article by David Revere McFadden

NATURE IS A PROFOUNDLY HUMAN CONCEPT, CONSTRUCTED from a complex series of spiritual, intellectual, emotional and physical relationships. In nature, we feel part of something larger than ourselves, but we are also aware of our separateness. In nature, bridges and boundaries become virtually indistinguishable.

Ikebana – the ancient art of Japanese flower arrangement – addresses a special relationship with nature. It is an art that depends on exacting visual and spiritual discipline. It is an art learnt through years of study. Through *ikebana* we perceive and examine our relationship to nature and art. *Ikebana* is both boundary and bridge. *Ikebana* master, Akihiro Kasuya, partner and collaborator with Neil Tetkowski in *Urban Ikebana*, intends his art to create in the viewer the same feelings people enjoy when hearing a piece of great music. The physical and sensual experience of sound in music nourishes the soul. Likewise, the experience of *ikebana* can become a gateway to an amplified experience of nature, art and ourselves.

For artist Neil Tetkowski, clay is a metaphor for the earth. His art consists of transforming raw material into another state, imbuing it with a sense of soul and identity. What emerges from the kiln are objects the artist calls “diary notations of actions or events”. It is this pervasive and powerful sense of ‘process’ that engages the viewer of these energetic and muscular works. In traditional *ikebana*, a similar emphasis on process prevails. Selection and placement of individual elements – leaves, branches or flowers – transform them from nature into art.

Urban Ikebana is a unique collaborative project that brings together three artists: Kasuya, Tetkowski and performance artist, Julia Mandle. It was organised by Takako Michii, who has a long record of coordinating cultural and artistic projects between the US and Japan. Kasuya is head of the Ichiyo School of *Ikebana*, founded 60 years ago by his family. He began his own studies in *ikebana* at age six, and made his debut exhibition in Tokyo at the age of 17. Kasuya has been a leading exponent of modern *ikebana*, responding to



Urban Ikebana. Installation, Cast Iron Gallery, New York. 1000 kg unfired porcelain, glass, water, vinyl. 2.5 m/diam.



Unfired red clay, cobble stones, tools. 2.5 m.

the contemporary world through provocative installations using a broad and often surprising range of materials. While traditional flowers, branches and leaves may be used in his ikebana, the artist also embraces found objects, steel, paper and plastic. The heritage of ikebana grows from ancient Shinto beliefs. Originally, ikebana arrangements of plant materials were offered to Shinto gods, a gesture of obeisance that linked the spiritual world to the physical. By the 7th century, ikebana had moved into domestic interiors as a refined art form. The power of ikebana to express profound spiritual values remained; ikebana was a metaphor for the universe. Ikebana speaks to our enduring fascination with the fleeting and temporary

beauty of nature, and to our aesthetic and spiritual response to this fragile beauty. According to Kasuya, ikebana is about the relationship between nature and art, but is also about an expanded definition of nature that embraces all human actions and creations, including technology. The modern art of ikebana is a journey into a modern concept of nature.

A similar journey of exploration of nature has been taken by Tetkowski over the past two decades. A student at Alfred University and Illinois State University, Tetkowski first exhibited his ceramics in 1978. Since then he has exhibited extensively in the US and abroad. In the 1990s, he began a landmark series of performance events using clay to express and record a personal choreography of art in action. The artist's work has evolved over the years from vessel forms to sculpture. The artist's energy, movement and gestures are recorded as 'footprints' in massive organic disks and wall-hung forms. Embedded in these lush naturalistic forms are fragments of industrial urban culture: iron spikes, screws and hooks.

In *Urban Ikebana*, three artists join forces, merging materials, movement and meaning to create a tangible but temporary diary of process. Tetkowski says, "We are interested in building on the traditional context of both ikebana and pottery, respectively. We see humanity and the environment as a single system." This project serves to redefine nature by expanding its definition to include the urban environment. In *Urban Ikebana*, a large unfired clay circle dominates the space. In this circle is the dancer, as well as found objects, carefully selected and arranged. The dancer is transformed by the artist, her body literally and figuratively clothed with raw clay. In the gallery, above the three 2 m clay mandalas are suspended ikebana arrangements combining natural and man-made objects.

The motif of the unbroken circle, of continuity in action, pervades the installation. Cycles of creation and destruction are suggested. In Kasuya's ikebana arrangements, organic and synthetic materials, elements from nature or manufactured artifacts, found on city streets, are combined in a fleeting construction that will change over time. The viewer becomes a part of this work in progress; we recognise ourselves in the act of creation. Fundamental to ikebana is the concept of spontaneity, achieved with the rigorous discipline of form. Form learnt through repeated and dedicated practice ultimately becomes invisible in the work. At the same time, the viewer is invited to become a part of the process. By juxtaposing nature and our urban environment, we are asked to consider our own role and responsibility in sustaining the complex environment of which we are a part. *Urban Ikebana* celebrates both the art of nature and the nature of art.

David Revere McFadden is Chief Curator at the American Craft Museum, New York. This article is an extract of his catalogue essay for the installation held at the Cast-Iron Gallery, New York. Caption title page: *Unfired red clay, vinyl, water. 2.5 m/diam.*