

# The Terracotta Project



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## *Neil Tetkowski describes the world that brought him back to Tuscany*

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*Above: View of the City of Siena, Italy with the historic tower of the Palazzo Pubblico, city hall.*

*Below: Tetkowski in Siena in 1963 and in 2011.*



THE MEDIEVAL TOWN OF SIENA, THAT ONCE battled Florence hundreds of years ago, is also where I began elementary school in the early 1960s. I have always looked back on those formative years in Italy as innocent and tender times. Both of my parents were adventurous art academics with a love for travel and a strong belief in the benefits of cultural exchange. So in 1961 they followed their dream and started what is now, 50 years later, the oldest study-abroad program at the State University of New York. With my family, I went along for the ride. Without any effort on my part, I got to go to school in Italy and tour the museums and cultural landmarks of Europe multiple times before I was even 10 years old.

As a child, I had the benefit of living two different lifestyles, with two schools, two sets of friends and two different wardrobes. On the European side, it was shorts, knee socks and the slow paced lifestyle of provincial Siena, Tuscany. When I went to school in Siena, I looked like the boy in the movie *Cinema Paradiso*, complete with the big white collar and blue ribbon. In shocking contrast back in The States, I experienced modern commercial America, in suburban Grand Island, New York. Back and forth we travelled, making the voyage three times on an



*Above: Terracotta Museum of Petroio exhibition. 2010.  
Below: Tetkowski working in the Cresti Factory in Petroio.*

old-fashioned ocean liner and even flying the Atlantic once on a propeller aeroplane. Over the years and in spite of the fact that I returned to Italy many times, these two worlds always remained separate. As a child, my European adventures were private and hard to share. But as I got older, I wanted to connect that early chapter of my life with the present. In graduate school I was pressed to defend my constant use of clay as my preferred medium. The team of five advisors finally let go of the issue when I told them I had grown up in a terracotta city constructed of red bricks and roof tile. I also said that the burnt sienna colours of the Tuscan landscape were deeply impressed in my mind. Finally they left me alone to work.

A few years ago, my charmed past dovetailed with the present when I met Fabio Mazzieri, the well known painter and former director of the Istituto d'arte Duccio di Boninsegna, the art school in Siena. He insisted that the next time I return, I must stay long enough to make artwork in Italy. He said he would organise, and make arrangements. I did not give it a serious thought again until I received, by surprise, a fascinating invitation from the Foundation of the Sienese Museum System and the municipality of Trequanda. For three weeks in 2009 I was to be a guest at the ditta Cresti terracotta factory and would stay at the fabulous Palazzo Brandano Hotel in the tiny hilltop village of Petroio.





Above: Tetkowsky working on *The Battle of the Elephants*.  
Right: *Deconstructed Vessel 1*. 2009.



Petroio is located about an hour and a half from Florence and Siena, far away from big commercial interests and tourist attractions. Life is still quite simple in this part of Tuscany where the landscape is postcard beautiful and the people are not so hurried. Besides producing terracotta, the area is known for some of the best olives in the world, Pecorino cheeses and famous red wines such as Brunello. Like most Italians, folks in Petroio place a high value on the quality of life. They like to spend time together, they love to eat well and enjoy *la bella vita*. In Petroio they speak a pure Italian, with a Tuscan inflection nearly identical to what I learned as a child in Siena.

Imagine being invited to make sculpture with unlimited materials, wonderful people, surrounded by Tuscany; rolling hills, herds of sheep, fields of sunflowers, rows of cypress trees and old farm houses with red tiled roofs. I was the only artist that had ever been invited to work at the Cresti factory. Luciano Cresti, the owner was friendly, generous and enthusiastic about our experiment. There was no program, agenda or expectation other than to be freely creative. I had access to clay, kilns, forklifts or whatever I wanted. When I needed help, I had help. Emilio 'Mimmi' Benocci the highly skilled artisan helped me out when needed. Otherwise they left me alone to concentrate on my work.

In Petroio, they have been making tiles, bricks and large ceramic vessels for hundreds of years using the local red clay. Nothing is added to the clay except water and grog. This amazing natural material is perfect for making enormous ceramic works. At the factory, most of their production is hand pressed in complex moulds or mechanically formed with a jolly setup. The largest flowerpots at the factory are ram pressed with over 1000 pounds (500 kg) of hard plastic clay. They measure 43 inches (110 cm) in diameter and are used as planters for garden olive trees. While I was there, I never once saw their production work crack while it was drying.

As I began working in the studio, disassembling and re-structuring the elements of their forms was a natural direction for me. I deconstructed the traditional vessels, cut them up and built new sculptures with the fragmented sections. After a few days of experimentation I became more comfortable and more confident and wanted to work larger. I took one of their huge vessels that was leather hard and sliced it into pieces. The cut sections of the rim looked like elephant tusks. Over a period of a



few days the sculpture took shape. The workers particularly liked this one and referred to it as *La Battaglia degli Elefanti*. So in this way, the workers had some influence and *The Battle of the Elephants* became the title. After the residency, all of my sculptures were fired while I was back in New York City. I returned to Italy in 2010 for my exhibition at the Museum of Terracotta (Museo della Terracotta) in Petroio. The antique brick architecture of the museum enhanced the presentation of the terracotta artwork.

I did not know it then but back in Siena, Fabio Mazzieri was planning another exhibition. To reach a broader audience, he felt that the sculpture from Petroio should be shown in Siena where there could be significantly more visibility. The most prestigious venue would be the expansive galleries within the Palazzo Pubblico or city hall. This landmark building is one of the most highly regarded examples of pre-Renaissance Italian architecture and is the focal point of Siena. Construction of this mostly terracotta building began in 1297 and its original purpose was to house the newly evolving public form of government. At that time, monarchies were on the way out and representative councils were being established. Inside the Palazzo Pubblico are the famous frescos by Ambrogio Lorenzetti (1290–1348) with allegorical depictions of good and bad government, illustrating the effects that such regimes would have on the people in the town of Siena and the people of the surrounding countryside. For many, the Palazzo Pubblico with its fabulous Gothic arches and majestic tower is the icon of Siena. There at the central piazza, twice each year, 50,000 people gather as the Palio horse race takes place with Medieval fanfare and pageantry. Costumes, flags, drums and local folks with extraordinary civic spirit take over. I felt both enthusiastic and honoured to be offered an opportunity to show in the Palazzo Pubblico.

The exhibition would be called *Siena – New York: A Journey of Four Artists*. My work would be shown with fellow artists Piergiorgio Balocchi, Alessandro Grazi and Fabio Mazzieri, 15 July through 20 August, 2011. I knew the gallery space well. Unlike a typical American gallery or museum with white walls, this space is entirely made of red brick, with splendid arches crafted 800 years ago. From my experience in Petroio, I knew the raw terracotta surfaces of my artwork would be well suited for the space. Still on display at the museum in Petroio, my sculptures were already in Italy and available for the Siena show.



Top left: *Deconstructed Vessel 2*. 2009. Top right: *Deconstructed Vessel 2 (Detail)*. 2009. Above: *Deconstructed Vessel 3*. 2009.



*Installation view at the Palazzo Pubblico galleries.*

FOOTNOTES

1. *Ceramics Monthly*, Neil Tetkowsky: *American Iron and Steel*, by Charles Carlson Jr., September 1987.
2. *Ceramics: Art & Perception*, "Clay, Steel, Confrontation and Concern" by Manya Fabiniak, No. 14, 1993.
3. *Ceramics Technical*, "The Common Ground World Project" by Linda Kuehne, No. 16, 2003.
4. *Ceramics Monthly*, "Generations in Time", Up Front, March 2005.

Additionally, however, they requested two-dimensional pieces.

I decided to send new works on paper from my *Oil and Water Series*. The painted burnt sienna colours would complement the fired earth of the gallery architecture and my terracotta sculptures. I worked with a simple physical principle demonstrating how India ink and motor oil resist each other, like a BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. This is not an entirely new idea for me. Since the mid 1980s, going back to the *American Iron and Steel Series*,<sup>1</sup> and *Ground War*,<sup>2</sup> my work has often had a direct relation to politics and the environment.

A decade ago, at the United Nations building in New York, I created a blend of earth materials from 188 nations involving people from every country of the world to build a large global mandala sculpture. The *Common Ground World Project* was officially endorsed at the UN as an environmental project through the Commission on Sustainable Development.<sup>3</sup>

I learned that taking on global issues is seductive but can be overwhelming for an individual artist. At the UN, the importance of art is always measured against the needs of refugees, the need for nuclear disarmament and the needs of so many war torn nations. It is not hard to appreciate that in times of crisis, whenever there is an urgent problem, culture usually takes a back seat.

Nevertheless, I have always been a traveller and highly motivated to let my art cross cultural boundaries and connect people. In Japan in 2002, I collaborated with 100 people with consecutive ages 1-100 to create a public work I titled *Generations in Time*.<sup>4</sup> The project was a celebration of the sister city program of my home town of Buffalo, New York and Kanazawa, Japan. This work is a tangible expression of



communities connecting in a peaceful manner. A spiral of clay hand-prints beginning with a one-year-old baby progresses to 98, 99 and, finally, the 100 year-old. Whatever your ethnic or racial background may be, the work represents a universal time clock of life and expresses our human interconnections.

My fascination with diverse cultures is clearly a family instinct that easily traces back to my earliest experiences. For me, looking back is dreamlike. So much has changed but so much remains the same. Being immersed into a new language at age five was a privilege but it was also a shock that resulted in unique opportunities 50 years later. Working at the Cresti terracotta factory and doing the recent exhibition at the Palazzo Pubblico in Siena became an extraordinary opportunity to bring together people from both of those worlds. With Italian soil I made the artwork and the sense of connection was overwhelming.

A few days before the show at the Palazzo Pubblico opened, I took the train from Siena to meet Mimmi, my friend and assistant from the terracotta factory in Petroio. He had outfitted me for a bicycle ride we had planned since Christmas. Without delay we went speeding down the first hill out of Petroio, past a grove of olive trees. Then, struggling to keep up with Mimmi on the uphill, I chased him again on the next downhill as the enchanted countryside flew by. This was the pattern for 50 kilometres, from Petroio to San Quirico d'Orcia up the mountain to Pienza and back. After a quick stop at the factory to check the drying of some big pots, we filled our water bottles at the public fountain in Petroio and headed to Mimmi's home. His wife had prepared a wonderful meal of hand rolled *pici* pasta, the speciality of the region. It was a perfect day. What could be better than Tuscany, friends, bicycles and clay?

*Deconstructed Vessel 2. 2009. With Oil and Water Series. 2011.*

Neil Tetkowsky lives in Manhattan and is the Director of University Galleries at Kean University in Union, New Jersey. He holds degrees from Alfred University and from Illinois State University. He has been a professor at Denison University in Ohio, the State University College at Buffalo and at Parsons School of Design in New York City. Tetkowsky is an elected member of the International Academy of Ceramics and his works are in 45 museum collections. ([www.tetkowsky.com](http://www.tetkowsky.com))