

Neil Tetkowski

Statements for Eternity

A Review by Heidi McKenzie

Tetkowski's discs, circles, spirals and cones may evoke geologic transformations of the planet, mirror our ephemeral natures and shared histories, or open mandalic portals to inner and cosmic consciousness." ~ from "Rethinking Mythos: A Mid-Career Retrospective of Neil Tetkowski" by the curator, Christian Bernard Singer.

IMMEDIATELY upon entering the main gallery space at the Canadian Clay and Glass Gallery in Waterloo, the seven impossibly large, thrown, wall-mounted altered discs fashioned by the hand of American ceramics artist, Neil Tetkowski, signal a conviction of character evocative of the great Abstract Expressionists. One cannot help but conjure the greats – Jackson Pollock or Willem de Kooning. Tetkowski makes art in an effort to provoke society to change, or to move us out of complacency about our place within the world and our hand in shaping its destiny. In some ways the nails, spikes, cell phones and computer fragments that riddle many of the iconic-sized pieces personify the sculptures, shifting them into the realm of the corporeal. *Rethinking Mythos: A Mid-Career Retrospective* of Tetkowski's work at the Canadian Clay and Glass Gallery in 2015 was a journey through the living archive of nearly four decades of one man's artistic development. Atypically, the entire gallery was devoted to one living and prolific American artist. This was a multi-media exhibition.

It ranged from large scrolls of tapestry-like murals painted on the rocks of the Grand River, to photographic media and mixed-media installation. There were several themes that ran like tributaries throughout the gallery spaces: environment, industrialisation, humankind as a species and its relationship to the world that it inhabits and shapes; the circle/discus and, more explicitly, the mandala. For Tetkowski the mandalas function as "portals for the imagination", where the viewers are afforded a momentary glimpse into the void or the vastness of the universe. Yet, Tetkowski chooses to limit the scope of our imaginations insofar as his abstraction is not absolute. The term abstract representation may seem inherently contradictory, but it is a term that I came across researching the work of the late Canadian/Caribbean artist Denyse Thomasos, who may be credited with its coining.

Thomasos painted wall-size murals with a similar fluidity and grandeur of gesture, yet the impulse for the image had a tangible representation at its core. Similarly, Tetkowski illustrates his impulses.



Moreover, he often indulges his viewers through nomenclature. The most recent work (the work from approximately 2012 to the present) reaches me most deeply. In these works, Tetkowski literally deconstructs the discus, slicing, dicing, rearranging and piecing abstracted fragments into clusters that seem to make meaning with the profundity of their intention. *Dhow Drifter*, 2012 is like a jigsaw puzzle pulled apart and placed together in the spectre of a ship. *Earthen Wings*, fashioned from terracotta, could be angelic or bird-like, either way, it soars – an abstract representation of movement in flight.

The porcelain pieces' simply named contours evoke anthropomorphic likenesses. There is one ceramic work unlike any others in the exhibition that foreshadows these three dimensional works in two-dimensions: the wall piece, *Iced Undertow* is comprises fragments of a large porcelain plate or discus with a simple line incised in each fragment, mounted on the wall in somewhat of a swirl, with one horizontal 'undertow' at its base. I found myself wondering if Tetkowski had been inspired by Betty Woodman's balustrades, as the two artists seem equally at ease



Facing page: *Earthen Wings*. 2012. Ceramic. 22 x 22 x 3 in.
Photo by Bruce M White.

Below, floor projection. *September 11, 2001*. Digital photography.

Above: *Manhattan*. 1993. Ceramic. 55 x 17 x 2.5 in.

Left: Neil Tetkowski's Signature.





with fragments, gesture, illustration and scale. Moving from conjecture, there is a definitive allusion to the late great Peter Voulkos that manifests in much of Tetkowski's work. Undeniably so in his *Smokestack Mandala* series, where he again pushes environmental advocacy as an impetus to the art.

I was surprised to experience a ceramics artist's retrospective as a fully integrated multi-media exhibition. But at the same time, the photography, narrative writing, media projections and mural-like installation work felt integral to the whole in so far as they took on a natural cohesion of purpose. Seeing the children in Cuba as photographed, in abstracted and fragmented form, afforded us, the viewers yet another lens into the imagination and intention of the artist.





The accompanying piece *Breaking Bread, Cuban/American*, (2006) quite literally represents the artist's angst in response to his visceral experience of the American embargo against Cuba that he lived as an artist in residence in Santiago de Cuba. The bread is marbled with clays from both countries.

The resonance of the installation was underscored by the monolithic architecture of its physical setting – within the corner glass turret-like anti-chamber of the gallery. Other photography was centred on historic game changers such as September 11, 2001 or documentation of his large-scale banner project – that captures the ebb and flow of the shared Canada / US waterway, Niagara Gorge Project. Metaphor underscores the literal, as the ripple effects of these tributaries incite within each viewer varying levels of responsibility in refocusing humankind's relationship to each other and the planet it inhabits.

Always the visionary, Tetkowski ambitiously set out to exploit the potential to physically illustrate universal symbolism on the occasion of the millennium. *The World Mandala Monument* and *Installation 188* were orchestrated, facilitated and realised through the efforts of coordinating participation from all 188 of the United Nations. Mammoth in scope and scale, the works are steeped in symbolism – the inherent power and possibility of the blending of political ideology. Handprints of a centenarian and a newborn provide the fulcrum at the core of the mandala with clay from every nation. The *Mandala's* counterpart installation displays the diversity of the earth, labelled clinically in glass jars, as if in a global macro/micro laboratory. Aesthetically I felt the *World Mandala* fell short and, though brilliant in conception, was less successful in its realisation. Its counterpart, *Installation 188*, held a subtle curiosity that drew viewers of all ages into the magic of Tetkowski's world unity vision.

I loved the rawness in Neil Tetkowski's ceramic work. I found myself gazing at the work with complicit

Facing page: *Early Works*. 1982. Dimensions vary.
Facing page, inset: Neil Tetkowski.

Top: left to right: *Writing Tablet*. 1997. Ceramic, computer parts, metal. 50 x 34 x 5 in. *Liquid Cavern*. 1996. 49 x 27 x 7 in.

Duomo. 1996. 49 x 27 x 5 in. *Red Stalag*. 1996. 50 x 24 x 5 in. *Cable and Chain, American Iron and Steel Series*. 1986. Ceramic, metal. 39 x 36 x 5 in. *Hour Glass*. 2001. 46 x 29 x 6 in.

Eight Hands. 1999. Ceramic, metal. 46 x 36 x 5 in. Above, left to right back wall: *Constructed Spiral*. 2012. 5 x 19 in/d.

Surging Conflux. 17 x 28 x 4 in. *Blue T Construct*. 17 x 26 x 4 in. *Earthen Wings*. 22 x 22 x 3 in. All 2012.

Above, left to right front plinths: *White Contour I*. 2014. 33 x 17 x 13 in. *Terra Rig*. 2012. 25 x 15 x 13 in. *White Contour II*. 2014. 31 x 18 x 11 in.

All works are ceramic, unless noted.

Below: *Cuban School Children*. Photos. Front left: *Breaking Bread*. 2006. Right: *Talon*. 1992. Glass, metal. 48 x 26 x 8 in.



inter-subjectivity. It changed me, and the dialogue between me and the art when I revisit the exhibition images continues to elicit new feelings within that inspire me to want to make a difference with my own art practice. The artist's ability to knock me off my centre is a testament to the art's enduring power.

Heidi McKenzie is a Toronto-based ceramics sculptural artist and freelance arts journalist.

All photos by Karl Griffiths-Fulton unless noted.