



# Zemer Peled

## Harsh Terrain

*Article by  
Brandon Reintjes*



Previous page: *Large Peony and Peeping Tom (Detail)*. 2014.

Porcelain shards, clay and metal. 72 x 46 x 30 in.

Above: *Pair by the Sea (Detail)*. 2014. Porcelain shards and fired clay. 11 x 19 x 23 in.

Facing page, top left: *I am Walking in a Forest of Shards*. 2012.

Ceramic shards, clay and metal. Variable dimensions. Installation at Henry Moore Gallery – Royal College of Art, London, UK.

Photo courtesy of Sylvain Deleu.

Facing page, top right: *Large Peony and Peeping Tom*. 2014.

Porcelain shards, clay and metal. 72 x 46 x 30 in. Installation at 108 Contemporary Gallery, Tulsa, Oklahoma, US.

Photo courtesy of Steven Michael.

GROWING UP ON A KIBBUTZ IN NORTHERN ISRAEL, ZEMER Peled has a decidedly ambiguous response to the land. Her approach is that it is beautiful, but potentially dangerous. Her current large-scale sculptures should be read as responses to the beauty and indifference – even casual brutality – of the natural world. It is not an accident that she describes her work as “nostalgic for and reminiscent of shattered, dense landscapes”. To her, the topography is not black and white, but complexly indeterminate, full of opposing qualities, mutable. Kibbutzim – those rural communities dedicated to mutual aid, joint property ownership, equality and social justice – are renowned for transforming desert landscapes into bountiful agricultural cornucopias through dedication and hard work, even while encroaching on disputed territory. The land holds both the fertile promise of a garden and the barren reality of desert. The psychology of Peled’s work (rife with contention between the whole and broken form, finished and unfinished, dangerous and safe, creative and destructive, fired and unfired, broken and mended) acknowledges this history. As an artist, she is comfortable with dual meanings.

Yet, Peled’s ceramic sculptures look disarmingly benign and approachable. They strike the viewer as curious – like Seussical topiaries, a magnetic blossom of iron filings, a lone Joshua Tree (yucca

brevifolia) or a child’s home science experiment. Amaze your friends by growing a magic crystal tree with household ingredients. She baits the viewer with beauty, inviting floral metaphors that conjure peonies, chrysanthemums and sunflowers. It would be easy to place Peled alongside other contemporary ceramists who incorporate floral imagery, such as Matt Wedel’s flower trees, Susan Beiner’s slipcast installations or Kim Dickey’s *mille-fleur* murals. Despite their immediate beauty, Peled’s works are about horror and aggression. Her sculptures are composed of thousands of razor sharp spines that mass into organic forms. “Sometimes, I look down and see that I am bleeding” she says, “and I like that shards can do that, they are dangerous.”

Peled was almost nine years old when she helped her mother demolish a wall in their home with a maul, attracted to and amazed by the power of the destructive process. Even this act can be interpreted dually as creative – a family expanding their home – or destructive. Peled’s fascination with this dual interpretation informs her current process in which she uses a hammer to sculpt using ceramics in different states – unfired clay, fired clay and shards. Peled’s shards are created for the specific purposes of the sculpture. They do not, in fact, refer to some elusive whole that was once intact, but is now broken. Instead, Peled sees shard-making as a generative act. She continues to make fragile ceramic work with a hammer metaphorically in hand, or at least lying in close proximity. Peled says “Only after breaking do I discover new shapes.”

Peled creates an array of shards in three distinct ways: One is to roll out thin, banded slabs of clay using a process reminiscent of *millefiori*, a technique borrowed from glass forming. These she cuts while wet into long, thin feathers. Once fired, she will take these delicate points and snap them to length with her fingers. A second method is to create undulating sheets that are bisqued and glazed a solid colour or sometimes left unglazed. When they come out of the



kiln, she agilely takes a hammer and strategically shatters the slabs. She meticulously sorts the range of usable shapes, from long, knife-like pieces down to fine coloured dust using screens and sieves designed for gold mining. Her final method is to extrude long pieces of clay that look like noodles or ribbons with torn, fluted edges. These create a variety of complex forms: square tubes with cylindrical interiors that form jagged channels or right angles when smashed. But shard production is just part of the story.

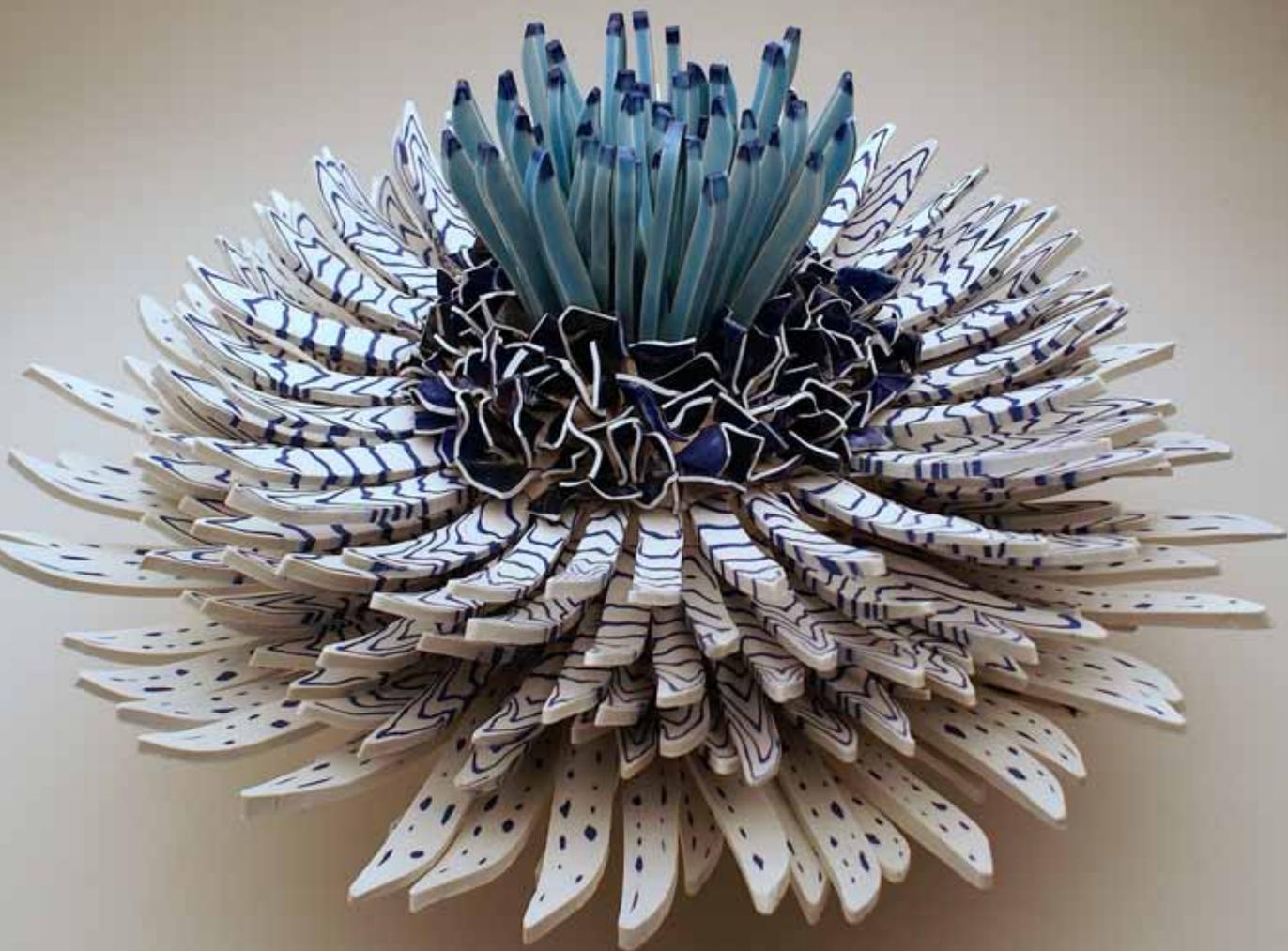
To create her sculptures, Peled first handbuilds a core to which thousands of fragments are attached. The undulating nooks and tunnels create dramatic moments where her shards take centre stage. Peled thinks of these raw forms as the 'flesh' pierced by her shards. Increasingly, Peled has incorporated hand-built areas that are not covered with shard fragments, but exist on their own terms. These crenulations and ridges accentuate the form, highlighting concentrations of shards. By itself, the form looks naked, vulnerable, like the trunk of a tree with all of its limbs removed or a bleached coral stripped of its vibrant explosion of polyps and anemones. Coral is an apt analogy, because Peled's core forms approximate hyperbolic space – a geometrical solution to maximise surface area within a limited volume. They are not, however, mathematically inspired, but arrived at intuitively, reminiscent of Eva Hild's topological sculptures, which, like Peled's work, are studies of contrasts. Peled's wormholes and crenulations reflect an inner and outer space, a presence and absence. They imitate underwater life forms such as corals, sponges and nudibranchs. If this sounds exotic, it is not. Hyperbolic space is found in common settings as well, such as cactuses, succulents, fungi or seed pods, even leafy greens such as lettuce and kale. Eventually, the shards follow and accentuate these central forms in a concentric, radial composition that creates a spiralling optical effect, a transcendental mandala-like vision that leads the viewer down the

rabbit hole. The broken edge of the shard creates a short staccato, a visual falter that holds the eye.

The problem (and beauty) of Peled's sculptures is that they should not work, but do, and are amazing. They should be too fragile. Impossible to ship. Impossible to exhibit. They should crumble under their own weight. Shards should fall out. They should topple, or fall off the wall and destroy themselves. Their precariousness only makes the fact of their existence so much more impressive.

One source for these strange forms is blue-and-white Igezara-ware chargers from the Meiji Period decorated with stylised chrysanthemums and budding trees, arranged precisely. She first turned to the history of Japanese ceramics in 2013 when she was invited to represent Israel at Tokyo Designers Week – the country's largest event for art, culture, architecture and design. Currently, she is looking at Kakiemon and Imari import ware from the late 1600s and the resulting soft- and hard-paste porcelain European imitations by Burgley House (1688), Hampton Court (1696) and Meissen (1730). Specifically, Peled is expanding her palette from charcoal greys and reductive blue-and-white shards to include the range of Kakiemon gold lustres, coral reds, chrome greens and cobalt blues. Using the contrast of textures and patterns, Peled is emulating Imari's characteristic divided space. Though influenced by this history, the final sculptures often bear only a distant resemblance to Peled's source material. She is not borrowing from art history so much as creating a history. Instead of a delicate flower, the sculpture is monstrous and dangerous. Look, Peled is saying, don't believe with your eyes, listen to what the skin says, this will cut and prick you.

*Tikkun olam* is a Hebrew phrase meaning to 'mend or heal the world' and is a kabbalistic concept that dually implies rupture and repair. According to tradition, God concentrated part of Himself into vessels of light to create the world. When these vessels shattered, the shards became the generative





spark of light trapped within all of creation – destruction as a creative force. *Tikkun olam* also refers to humanity's shared responsibility to positively transform the (broken) world, or *mitzvot*, to create a model society of Jewish state influencing the nations of the world. Likewise, Peled's sculptures accept shattering as implicit and use it as a creative force. By embedding the broken ceramic into raw clay, she is re-grounding them, re-fabricating them, making a new whole. Through her sculptures she envisions something never before seen. Much like medieval illuminated manuscripts were illustrated by monks who depicted fierce lions or dragons despite never having encountered these fabled beasts. Zemer Peled's sculptures are the imagined lion's mane, the lapping dragon's scales of contemporary ceramics.

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Facing page, top: **Single Bloom**. 2014. Porcelain shards and fired clay. 35 x 60 x 60 in.

Facing page, below: **Blue and White Porcelain Shards Flower No. 3**. 2014. Porcelain shards and fired clay. 3 x 8 x 8 in.

Above: **Arrangement of shards in Peled's studio at the Archie Bray Foundation for the Ceramic Arts**. Helena, Montana, US.

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