

The Work Of Cary Esser



The Songbird and the Architecture

ARTIST CARY ESSER IS AN AVID READER. HER INTELLECTUAL imagination is open to an investigation of myriad subjects. Regular trips to the Public Library are part of the rhythm of her life. Her favourite genre is literature, to which she brings an intensity of focus that mimics her attention to her visual work. Many authors state that when they build a novel, the thematic complexity; the iterations and reiterations of meaning come in fragments. Often, it is not until the novel is complete that the writer perceives the full scope of its thematic structure. Esser is an artist who works much in the way of the novelist. She immerses herself in invented worlds and creates networks of visual invention that function as individual units (much like chapters) but that, in aggregate, reveal a soulful and communicative whole.

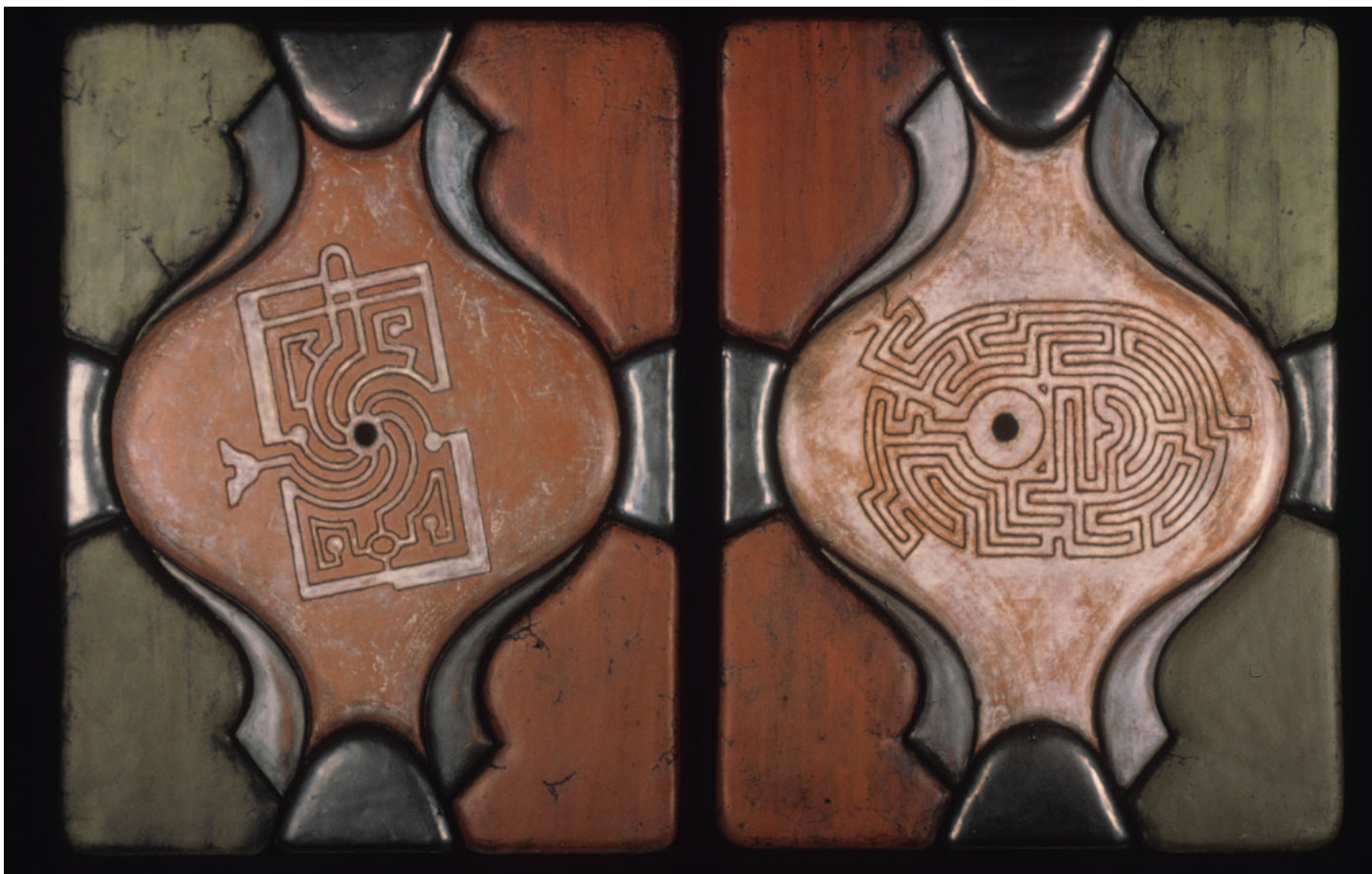
She grew up playing outdoors in the pastures and creeks that surrounded her childhood home. The landscape of North Carolina imprinted itself upon her imagination. The variations in colour and foliage that each season displayed saturated her with visual delight. Negative space particularly interested her, though at the time she had no word for what the spaces between tree limbs were called. She just enjoyed seeing the sky in fragmented shapes; the light tessellated and unpredictable. A moulded glass light fixture in her bedroom caught reflections and cast fascinating shadows that absorbed her. In high

school, she took a ceramics class and felt an immediate connection to the wheel. The centrifugal force, wet clay and interaction of the artist's body with the dense, elemental materials created an immediate sense of physical structure. Esser appreciated the mastery of a tangible manual skill that enhanced the harmony of daily domestic ritual.

The foundations classes at the Kansas City Art Institute deepened her awareness of her environment. For the first time, she found herself living in an urban setting. The architecture of Kansas City fascinated her the way the natural beauty of North Carolina had when she was a child. The artist loved being in a city and rode her bicycle throughout the various neighbourhoods, absorbing her environment much in the way

she had immersed herself in the woods and pastures of the rural Southeast. She found herself marvelling at the majesty of the architecture, observing the cohesion and stateliness of the buildings and then zooming in to focus on the architectural embellishments that she observed adorning these complex structures. Here, she saw negative space in a new way: not as absence of form but as an integral part of structure and aesthetic relationship. Each unit of a tremendous whole holds metaphoric and visual power. She discovered that the ornamentation that enthralled her was ceramic and she began to investigate architectural ornamentation as a vehicle for personal expression.

Article by Tanya Hartman



An innate ability to sculpt pattern directly into clay surfaces and to build visual harmony and symmetry through individual units dominates the work that Esser created while in residence at the Archie Bray Foundation in Helena Montana. She spent time there directly after her graduation from college; moving again from an urban to a bucolic, rural setting. Her work from this period reflects a synthesis of nature and architecture and is expressive of her reflective temperament and her passionate response to colour. At the Bray, Esser developed style and content that are generous and original. In an era infatuated with dissonance and personal disclosure, Esser's ceramic murals dared to be symmetrical, harmonious, beautiful and objective. Mixing bi-lateral botanical imagery with geometric, colour-saturated shapes and expressive lines, the artist was able to build ceramic wall paintings that bear down with conceptual power and formal elegance. These are works that fill the viewer with awe.

One of Esser's pieces that is permanently installed at the Bray, focuses on the elemental simplicity of leaf forms, which are repeated and duplicated until they evoke more than themselves and can be interpreted as snowflakes, icons, moments of structural stasis and stability amid the space and luminosity presented by the overall composition. Anchoring the edges of the mural are lemon yellow shapes that tip elegantly inward and act as parentheses of sunlight that accentuate the depth of the sky blue in the composition's centre. Hovering above is an orange orb, like a sun, deep and fiery. The four corners of

Facing page: Cycle. 1989. Earthenware with terra sigillata and glaze. Burtonsville, Maryland, Montgomery County Public Art Program. 72 x 216 x 3 in. Photo by Seth Tice-Lewis.

Above: Labyrinth (French Gardens). 1999. Earthenware with terra sigillata and glaze. 29 x 46 x 3 in. Photo by Jeff Bruce. Collection of First National Bank, Columbia, Missouri.

the composition are filled with indigo darkness. The composition is arranged to imply infinity: the imagery could repeat interminably. And thus, through formal means, Esser communicates that nature cradles and sustains us but is larger than we are. Forms of life such as the leaf are rooted and tangible, but ephemeral. It is the sky that is limitless and the void is the central fact of existence. Within this mystery there are infinite patterns. Hers is an art that addresses the collective and the universal.

This capacity to use repetitions of the partial to evoke an entity greater than the human mind can easily perceive is now a hallmark of Esser's ceramic sculpture. It is fascinating to observe the trajectory of her work from monumental, highly embellished murals constructed from individual tiles, each articulate and specific in colour and intent, to her current work, which is more austere and dimensional. Like a novelist who begins a career writing epic and colourful narratives and who then pares her vision to specific, jewel-like short stories and then goes deeper to write short, luminous poems, Esser has moved her work from expansive and colourful wall murals to table mounted ceramic sculpture that is restrained and mystical, shimmering with latent content and poetic implication. And yet, what makes this brilliant



Above and inset: *Topo 1–7*. 2010. Glazed fritware and steel.
29 x 178 x 26 in. Photo by E G Schempf.
Collection of el dorado architects, Kansas City, Missouri.

artist's body of work so fascinating and consistent is that its intention is unswerving, iterated and reiterated through successions of modified formal presentations that each delve ever deeper into complex conceptual evocations.

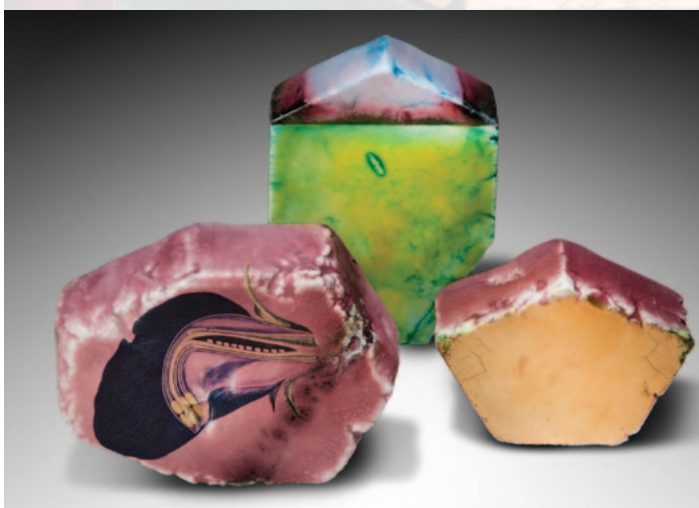
In an early mural permanently installed in a high school in the Southeast, Esser pushed terra sigillata into high relief, the floral motifs ruffled and crimped to the extent that they seem ready to rise from the tiles and commence a distinct life of their own. They tumble and cavort, presented in fourths, halves and wholes, their colours alternately earthy and bright. Though the images are clearly botanical in origin, they read as avian, the petals of each blossom like wings. The complexity of the modelling is astounding. There is a sense of air and earth, lightness and weight, soil and sky. Yet, the tiles that ground the images evoke permanence, stability and architectural integrity. The effect is that of seeing colourful songbirds, flying insouciantly around a massive and venerable building on a day of shifting light and shadow. Esser brings opposites together and, in doing so, is able to comment upon universal human dilemmas such as how much space we occupy in the universe, our relative lightness versus our hope for *gravitas* and weight and, the fact that we are each partial but in aggregate, we compose a stunningly complex and mysterious matrix.

Having explored botanical imagery in murals, the artist began to probe microscopically into the

metaphor of natural forms, investigating them on a suggestive and poetic cellular level. Moving away from the idiom of the mural, Esser progressed into installation, tipping her planes from vertical to horizontal and displaying her three dimensional, octagonal tiles on elegant steel pedestals that contrast in their mechanical, cool and disaffected surfaces to the crackling, meaty and compressed presences upon them. These works are profoundly about colour, the glazes so vivid and seductive that one stands transfixed, as if before a Rothko painting. The spectacular colours support content, allowing the viewer to imagine fathoms of hidden worlds, complete and vibrant but unattainable; available only through the lens of imagination. Birds are again evoked – the fleeting parrots and songbirds of a dense and tropical jungle. What is revealed is always a partial glimpse of a mystery too vast and too profound to be fully accessible for presentation or understanding.

The table pieces can be read on multiple levels. Though the octagonal tiles suggest cellular structures, in cumulative mass they speak of fragments and architectural details from lost civilizations. The work repeatedly points to the fact of partial understanding of mystery, be it molecules, the landscapes that surround us or the cultures that preceded our own. This is profound work, disciplined, intelligent and original, speaking always of collective experience and eschewing the common trend towards the confessional.

Though Esser is a colourist, she is willing to forsake bright hues for the sake of aesthetic integrity. A piece displayed in 2010 at Sherry Leedy Contemporary



Art in Kansas City, Missouri, titled *Topo 1-7*, presents seven linked steel tables, each displaying constellations of chunky 'tiles' that have grown so tall that each has an individual presence as sculpture. The edges of these small sculptures are fleshy and veined with strata. They seem to express that they have grown throughout deep time, too ancient and elemental to be anything but a crystalline and pure white. Glaze pools and cracks over and in them, a part of their integral structure and yet on the surface as well. They seem like the building blocks upon which all of life could be built.

Here is an artist who is willing to discuss both the physical territory of earth and the mysterious kingdom of all that is not easily revealed. The fact that Cary Esser achieves this without ever being literal, always pushing herself to invent visual displays that are ambitious, highly original and formally cohesive, reaffirms for me the potency of human imaginative capacity and the power of visual art to express that which language cannot easily define.

Tanya Hartman was educated at The Rhode Island School of Design and at Yale University. She teaches painting and drawing at the University of Kansas, US. She has received numerous awards including

Top left: **Topo 9**. 2010. Glazed fritware and steel. 27.75 x 26 x 29 in.

Below left: **Rocks**. 2010. Glazed fritware and decal. Largest 3 x 5 x 1.5 in.

Top right: **Topo 10 and Torso Tiles**. 2010. Glazed fritware and steel. Dimensions variable. **Topo 10**, collection of the Daum Museum.

Above photos by E G Schempf.

Above: **Gazebo**. 1982. Earthenware with terra sigillata. Archie Bray Foundation, Helena, Montana, US. Photo by Chris Autio. 108 x 72 x 1.5 in.

three Hall Center Creative Work Fellowships and a Fulbright Research Fellowship to pursue post-graduate research in Sweden. Other honours include a grant from the Puffin Foundation and various teaching awards at Yale and at the University of Kansas including the TIAA-Creiff Award for Excellence in Teaching and an award for outstanding teaching at the graduate level from the Center for Teaching Excellence at the University of Kansas. Other writings are at www.tanyahartmanart.com.