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# Front/Row

DECEMBER 2014

**STEP RIGHT UP:**  
Emswiler Burd  
meant for her  
hand-printed tiles  
to be used.  
She wants people to  
walk on them.

Q & A

## SHE HAS THE FLOOR

**Cassandra Emswiler Burd** made her artistic breakthrough with an ordinary object.

*By Peter Simek*

**E**ARLIER THIS YEAR, Dallas Contemporary director Peter Doroshenko presented artist Cassandra Emswiler Burd with a challenge. He had seen her work—hand-printed tiles with designs that riff on everything from medieval art to everyday linoleum patterns—in one of Dallas' small-

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est galleries, the tiny Safe Room Gallery in the Texas Theatre. Now Doroshenko wanted Emswiler Burd to go big. The result is a huge and exquisite floor installation at the Contemporary comprised of the artist's tile designs. The piece references everything from minimalist artist Carl Andre to the gardens of Louis XIV to the mass-produced domestic accessories found at Home Depot. It is one of the year's most engaging and dynamic works of art by a locally based artist, and it represents a breakout moment for one of this city's rising talents.

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**So often your work is intimate and personal in nature. This is the largest installation you've worked on. How did that shift your thinking?** Originally we were planning on tiling that entire gallery, but it became cost prohibitive. I had always intended to think of the space as an enclosed garden. Starting around 2009, I became really interested in fortifications and military structures and got into the *hortus conclusus* history. That's around the time I started to work with tiles. I had all these designs that were based on tiles found in early Flemish painting—Jan van Eyck and Hans Memling. Early in the summer, I kind of rethought everything.

**What happened when you scrapped your plans?** In returning to these simpler quadrants with less tile, I was able to bring in the concrete floor and that aspect of the room into the piece and create something that was more of what I'm generally inclined to do, which is mining my own family history and relating that to what I'm making.

**How does your family history come into play here?** Back in 2009, when my mom sold my childhood home, on moving day, the washing machine was removed from its location in the kitchen. My parents painted and collaged and were always changing the surfaces of everything. The kitchen floor had been covered up for a number of years, but with the removal of the washing machine, that original kitchen linoleum was there. And seeing it, especially on moving day, when I'm saying goodbye to this place, it was so intense and moving. It was like my whole life story was in that motif and



*“I began to get really curious about why we are compelled to add these consistent types of decoration.”*

pattern. It was just a tremendously transformative moment.

**How did that experience begin to manifest itself in your art?** When I was a resident at CentralTrak, I was at Home Depot all the time. You see those 20-plus tile pallets that are at any Home Depot throughout the United States. At the same time, I was looking at documentation of historic gardens and fortifications. You look at the ground plan of the Tuileries, and it looks like a bunch of tiles next to each other. I started thinking about where these patterns and motifs come from and how they've been passed down and how they're really quite ideological. I began to get really curious about why we are compelled to add these consistent

types of decoration. What does it really mean, and how are they working on us? How does that change daily life?

**Are you trying to forge a heightened awareness of these kinds of subliminal historical connections with your work?** I think I'm just extremely curious. I'm not necessarily arriving at conclusions about these things. I'm just exploring and meditating and working through all of the ideas that fill my mind and haunt me

through the structure of these histories. There's something satisfying about trying to reunite them and trying to make a connection. Some of it is probably valid, and

some of it is probably poetic, and some of it is probably kind of pretty and empty. And all of that is interesting.

**At your installation at the Contemporary, you are insistent that people walk on the art. I think this is something I've really realized more recently—the potential of ordinary everyday space that we're able to forget about. I don't think that those tiles in my kitchen floor could have meant as much to me if they were a pattern that was a picture framed on the wall. By becoming part of an environment in a way that is so obvious and so banal, they can enter into someone's life and memory in a much more deeply rooted way.**

**Does that affect how you think about how you want your work to be exhibited?** I want my work to be placed in those kinds of locations. I want to make backsplashes for people, and tile their kitchen floor, and put a tile border in their pool or in their shower. And, of course, the Contemporary installation is temporary, and I'm happy to be able to expose the work to a wide audience. But ideally the work is going to span time.

**And have a function, and not just be an aestheticized object?** Somebody spilled wine on my floor, and it was great. There's a really wonderful casualness and joy that is so nice to see, just letting people live with it and be themselves. **D**

Write to [peter.simek@dmagazine.com](mailto:peter.simek@dmagazine.com).



### My Dreams Will Pull You Through This Garden Gate

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