Over the years Kansas City has become known as a centre for creativity, innovation and education in the ceramic arts. In 2002 more than 4000 people attended the NCECA (National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts) conference hosted there. Much has been written about Ken Ferguson and his teaching legacy at the Kansas City Art Institute (KCAI). Five years after his death, Kansas City is still home to a vibrant ceramics community in which artists are creating a range of compelling work. This article showcases the ground-breaking work of four artists who use ceramic material in diverse ways and who are active in the Kansas City artistic community in various roles. Artists Cary Esser, Rain Harris, Linda Lighton and Meredith Host produce high quality work that ranges from tiles, installation, sculpture and pottery while simultaneously serving

Article by Tara Polansky

Below left: Cary Esser. Landscape II (Detail). Photo by EG Schempf.
the ceramics community in their respective positions as educator, studio artist, activist and studio potter. **CARY ESSER**

Cary Esser’s recent eye-catching tile artwork, *Landscape*, references nature, geometry and ornament. The colours range from bold and bright to subtle and muted. The surfaces are alternately wet, sensual, matte and dry. Viewers often feel the impulse to touch and even taste the pieces. Esser’s complex compositions move across the flat horizontal surface of the pedestal with tiles standing next to each other at various heights. The eye is drawn to the complex patterns created by the tiles based on their colour, height, texture, sheen and shape. The tessellating patterns are like puzzles, building blocks, architecture, honeycomb, candy.

Esser’s use of oxides and glazes creates a brilliant and diverse palette. In places, the glaze crawls away from the clay. In others it blankets it smoothly and, on some tiles, the colour transitions from dull to bright. These details pull the viewer in close to look at the amazing details while the overall pattern encourages the viewer to step back and take in the piece as a whole. This simultaneous desire to see the piece in its entirety, as well as dwelling in the smallest details of the crevices and cracks, has a meditative effect that is not dissimilar to Chinese landscape paintings.

Cary Esser’s contributions to the ceramics community extend beyond her studio work. She is an educator who has been influential in shaping the development of many artists working in ceramics today. Since 1996 she has served as professor and chair of the Ceramics Department at KCAI. Under her leadership, the department trains students to become technically proficient in a wide range of construction, surface treatment and firing methods while challenging them to develop their work conceptually. **RAIN HARRIS**

Rain Harris produces complex installations using ceramic objects of her creation. She uses technology to build these installations and at times incorporates non-ceramic materials with exciting results. She blurs the lines between beauty and ugliness, pattern and disorder, good taste and bad taste and decoration and infestation.

Her 2008 installation *Spurge* at Urban Arts Space in Columbus, Ohio was composed of concentrations of overlapping pieces of repeated shapes that spread across the walls and floor seemingly of their own volition. The irregular pattern is dense in areas but as it extends from its centre becomes more sparse and fades out. The forms go from flat vinyl and paint on the wall to pieces of pink foam that are slightly dimensional, to porcelain pieces of greater width. As these pieces are piled on top of

each other, they spread not just across the wall but also out from the wall into space.

The pieces are curly linear objects that branch out and end with circular dots. They could be a stylized, flattened interpretation of a branch of a tree or a plant. The curve to them is playful and the colours, light pinks, mustard yellow, olive green, brown, are fairly quiet. But the pattern is in fact a stylized representation of a *Stachybotrys Atra* spore. As Harris writes in her statement, “There is a hint of underlying decay and ugliness. There is a malignancy inherent in the work; it cannot just inhabit a space – it must invade and overwhelm.”

Since 2008, Rain Harris works as a full-time studio artist in Kansas City. She exhibits her work nationally and internationally. In addition to her fine artwork, she has a line of porcelain jewellery that is available for sale online on Etsy.com, in retail stores and galleries and at craft shows.

**LINDA LIGHTON**

Linda Lighton builds energetic sculpture that is at once floral and figurative. The flowers that she creates take on dynamic feminine qualities. The pieces activate the air around the sculpture and have lively sense of movement. Some draw the viewer in with their brightly covered surfaces while others display the bright white porcelain clay body that Lighton favours.

Lighton’s sculpture titled *Triple White Zinnia* presents three flowers, each in different stages of blossoming. They are full and open with a shiny, wet, white glassy surface. They appear to be breathing, puffing themselves up, with stems twisted behind, ready to pounce. They are seductive, at once dangerous and beautiful.

*Thistle* showcases Lighton’s love of colour and china painting skill. The lustred and china-painted surface shines brazenly, enticing the viewer. Flower petals extend up and out. Blossoms perch atop snaky stems that refuse to grow down and root themselves in the earth but rather coil and curl, suggesting mobility rather than stagnation. The petals move energetically, one blossom opens completely, petals outstretched, while the other extends up. In both pieces as we look from one blossom to the next, we see various stages of growth. A transition happens as the eye moves over the stems: growth, opening, blossoming. The flowers seem to personify female sexuality.

Lighton’s ceramic work was recognized in 2009 when she was awarded the Missouri Arts Award, the state’s highest honour in the arts which is given by the Governor’s office. In addition to being prolific in her studio, Lighton is a tenacious activist and advocate of the arts. Among her many contributions to the ceramics community, she administers the Lighton International Artists Exchange Program at the Kansas City
Artists Coalition. During the last five years the grant has provided funding for 75 artists to travel to 46 countries to create work and to exchange ideas with other artists and residents. The program has proven to be a life-changing experience for many of those artists and has built bridges between cultures.

Linda Lighton serves on the boards of several important organizations in her community including the Kansas City Jewish Museum and the National Committee at the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art. She played a key role in bringing the One Percent for the Arts Program to Kansas City. This program provides much-needed funding for public art. She has a large studio that she rents out to other artists in the Kansas City community and is also involved in the larger ceramics community, serving on the Advisory Board of NCECA and as a member of the International Academy of Ceramics.

**Meredith Host**

Potter Meredith Host makes dinnerware with the effect of a psychological thriller movie. Her dinnerware simultaneously attracts and repulses. Her surfaces are subtle contrasts of white on white with playful patterns of polka dots and stripes. Her whites alternate between bright and dingy white. Upon closer inspection, tucked under the rim of a plate or on the interior of a cup, the user might find an unpleasant surprise: mouse droppings, lipstick marks, a coffee stain, a stray hair, sponge swipes, even food residue.

Host’s work is about surprise, dark humour, anxiety and good old-fashioned fun. At first glance, the disgusting element might be overlooked and some viewers might not ever notice it. One dish in an entire set might be ‘contaminated’. Once noticed, the effect is lingering. We ask ourselves, “are these things sanitary?” In contrast to the anxiety that the surface ‘decoration’ provokes, Host’s forms are based entirely on comfort. Her tumblers are designed to have a comfortable hold and her dishes are built for use.

Since earning her MFA from the Ohio State University in 2008, Host has become a full-time studio potter. She returned to Kansas City, the city in which she had earned her BFA under Esser’s tutelage at KCAI. While she is still laying the groundwork for surviving off of her artwork alone, her hand-made pottery line is gaining recognition. Meredith Host has established a commercial line and also sells her work through her web site, on Etsy and at crafts fairs. Additionally, she shows her work in gallery retail spaces and exhibits nationally.