Interaction between the geometric and the organic in art can be a simple matter of formal contrast—of squares, triangles, and circles negotiating space with softer, less predictable floral or visceral elements—or it can be a more complex process of wedding forms to motives with which they are not naturally compatible. For example, the organic shapes of the body’s organs can be subjected, as in Duchamp and Picabia’s compositions of the 1910s, to a machine-like organization of parts that is distinctly less human than the workings of a respiratory, circulatory, or reproductive system. Likewise, as in the recent sculptures of Cary Esser, the regularity of a pentagon or a heptagon can be infused with an apparent predilection to growth and a rectangle’s balanced perfection can be undermined by the melancholy influence of death and decay. In Esser’s work geometry—specifically the geometry of the ceramic tile—retains its abstract nature but at the same time appears to stir with implications of vitality or disintegrate through the inevitable fate of all things that live. The geometric and the organic are not treated simply as visual polarities but rather as variables in a relationship of formal structures and underlying motives that is open to
manipulation. As in Aristotelian thought, form seems schooled by an inner cause, but in Esser’s work the relationship between the two is clearly synthetic and exploratory: a matter of art not nature.

Esser’s recent work has evolved from a career-long dedication to tile as a medium and an equally important, albeit less obvious, interest in metaphors relating to the human body. Perhaps the two emerged in tandem, since Esser’s early work treated the tile not as an autonomous object but rather as a component of architecture: of structures designed to house and reflect the human body through their utility and their aesthetics respectively. A student at the Kansas City Art Institute in the 1970s, Esser observed the urban environment and took particular note of the impressive ceramic architectural ornament on Art Deco structures such as the Union Carbide building. The result of this observation was a shift in her focus from pots to tiles, forms that, for Esser, were closely related through a shared connection to containment and to human needs. “I thought about how clay had been used for architecture as well as for vessels,” she recalls. “Architecture is a container and the terra-cotta ornament is a veneer on the container.”

While still an undergraduate student, Esser explored the potential of the tile as a functional and aesthetic form by constructing a temporary building on the KCAI campus and sheathing it in ceramic ornament. After graduation, as a resident at the Archie Bray Foundation in Helena, Montana, in the early 1980s, she applied a colorful ceramic-tile mural to the interior of a Victorian cupola that had been salvaged for reuse as a gazebo on the Bray’s grounds. Later, following completion of her MFA at Alfred University and a move to North Carolina for an artist residency at Duke University and a stint of adjunct teaching at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, she produced a number of public works on commission. Such tile reliefs as *Punica Granatum, Campsis,* and *Oinochoe,* produced for an urban garden in Durham, featured robust depictions of flowers and pottery, and *Sandhills Flora: Winter, Spring, Summer and Fall,* designed for a brick wall in Sanford, consisted of four shield-shaped floral relief medallions.

The medallions in her work reflected a reawakening of Esser’s interest in heraldic devices, a subject she recalled from an architectural history course taken as an undergraduate. “The professor discussed the use of shields on buildings,” she explains, “and how they imparted a feeling of status and conveyed lineage. That’s become latent in ornament in the last two hundred years; some of the devices have been used for centuries and they don’t really have any overt meaning anymore.” Perhaps this sense of disconnection between heraldic imagery and its former symbolism gave Esser implicit encouragement to separate the medallion from its architectural context and produce a series of autonomous botanical and geometric carved tiles. Sometimes these were singular, like the heraldic devices set into Spanish Plateresque façades or English Tudor chapels; sometimes they were intended to be displayed in patterned groups more suggestive of Middle-Eastern tiled walls. Such precedents appealed to Esser, who tended to absorb and recast the spirit of historical works.

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1 Parfleche 1, 11¼ in. (30 cm) in height, slip-cast red earthenware, fired to cone 01, 2014. 2 Labyrinth: Chartres, Maze, and Ear Canal, 5 ft. 10 in. (1.78 m) in length, press-molded and incised red earthenware, terra sigillata, glaze, fired to cone 02, 1999. Photo: Jeff Bruce. 3 Topo 1–7, 14 ft. 10 in. (4.5 m) in length, press-molded fritware, glaze, fired to cone 02, steel, 2010. 1, 3 Photos: E.G. Schempf.
rather than imitate their specific details. For example, the reliefs of the Leaf Stream series—with their carved elements and glazed blue and turquoise surfaces—subtly conjured rather than copied the ancient brick murals of Babylon and Persepolis.

Esser’s Labyrinth series of the 1990s continued the use of both the tile format and the reference to architectural shields, medallions, and heraldic devices but also introduced allusions to the human body. Some of these were obvious, even diagrammatic. Labyrinth: Chartres, Maze, and Ear Canal, for example, pairs a map of a garden maze and an image of the famous eleven-circuit labyrinth of Chartres Cathedral with an incised drawing of the inner workings of the human ear: the bony labyrinth that houses the cochlea, the semi-circular canals, and the vestibule. Other allusions to the body were subtler. “I have an interest in the mass of clay,” Esser comments. “The raw material has a physicality about it that reminds me of bodies, of musculature. What was most important about those pieces was that I put holes about an inch in diameter and an inch deep into each shield at the center of the labyrinth. That had to do with my idea of orifices and the interior of the body. It’s not really sexual or scatological. The holes are as much about the pores of the skin and the follicles of the hair as anything else, and they relate to how the orifices in the body make us vulnerable yet help us to survive both psychologically and physically.”

By employing tropes such as metaphor (clay and musculature; architectural labyrinth and inner ear) and metonymy (shield and body), the Labyrinth works seem in retrospect to have constituted important, if still somewhat tentative, steps on a path toward what would become a significantly more complex exploration of connections between tile and body. The Labyrinth tiles were sculptural, divided into curvaceous, biomorphic sections, but their vertical orientation and display against the wall brooked no ambiguity about their status as tiles. Likewise, the organic was referenced, but only as form—orifice, ear, musculature—rather than as motive. The next stage in Esser’s work would see a greater emphasis of concepts such as systematization and growth. Not coincidentally, the transition evolved from a renewed concentration on ceramic processes, most importantly glazing.

As a professor at the Kansas City Art Institute, Esser noticed several years ago that her students had largely embraced the recent trend in ceramic art toward monochromy. Hoping to pique their curiosity about color, she revived an earlier penchant for glaze testing, never suspecting how profoundly the experimentation would influence the direction of her own art and even the underpinnings of a new body of work in 2010. The Topo series constituted an embodiment of organic process in geometric form that aptly evolved as Esser worked with materials. “I was just testing,” she recalls. “I got out every low-fire glaze
that I had, and instead of testing on tiles that were square I decided to make a pattern. I made tiles in two shapes: one with seven sides and one with five. I tested glazes on those, and in the process they started growing on the studio table. I was composing and arranging with color, and I decided to start playing with different heights, because the tiles were made in slightly different molds and I liked the effect. So my recent work all really grew out of process and experimentation with material, color, pattern, and form."

The Topo sculptures resolved the difficulties still present in the Labyrinth series of moving beyond a purely formal dialog between organic and geometric, and it made subtler the dynamic between tile and body. As the tiles took on varying heights, the chief bodily metaphors became relevant to growth and, to a lesser extent, physiology rather than anatomy. Likewise, references to functional tiles became

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4 (Detail) Landscape I, 4 ft. (1.2 m) in diameter, press-molded fritware, glaze, fired to cone 02, 2008. Photo: E.G. Schempf. 5 Landscape I and II, 4 ft. (1.2 m) in diameter, press-molded fritware, glaze, fired to cone 02, 2008. Photo: E.G. Schempf.


2001


2010

2008 (Detail) Landscape II, 4 ft. (1.2 m) in diameter, press-molded fritware, glaze, fired to cone 02, 2008. Photo: E.G. Schempf.

Parfleche 1, 11½ in. (29.8 cm) in height, red earthenware, slip cast, fired to cone 01, 2014. Private collection. Photo: E.G. Schempf.

2014
less obvious. The shift in orientation from the vertical to the horizontal might have been construed simply as a transition in reference from wall tiles to floor tiles, but Esser deliberately distanced her work from such straightforward interpretation by elevating her compositions on shelves, pedestals, or custom-fabricated tables. The result was a lifting of the tiles from the immediacy of utility and a settling of them in the conceptual space of sculpture. In this detached and contemplative space the works became suggestive of dramatically varied landscapes, hence the series’ title, but their retention of geometric form seemed to make them equally allusive to architecture and other technologically produced structures.

Despite their formal origins in geometric patterning (the pentagon-heptagon format was first encountered by Esser in a textbook on periodic tiling) the units composing the *Topo* sculptures escape the absolute rigidity of formulas. Their production in press molds, the evidence of which is plain in the creases and pockets that articulate their walls into organic irregularity, imparts individuality to each tile/column, giving the compositions the appearance of conglomerates of units that share a common shape but vary in other particulars, most importantly the implications of stages of growth that are conveyed by their differing heights. Like people in a group or cells in a tissue, the units imply different stages of maturation in the organic process of growth.

The natural counterpart to growth in the life cycle is decay, and it is perhaps not surprising that the implicit integration of this process with the timelessness of geometric form would occur in another of Esser’s current series of sculptures. This as yet untitled series began during a residency at the Northern Clay Center in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in 2010 but its roots stretched back to experiments more than ten years earlier with a process of slip casting tiles. “I was trying to cast solid tiles,” Esser remembers. “I made a series of plaster slabs and strips that were an inch-and-a-half to an inch thick. I used the strips to make a rectangular space on the slab and then on top of that laid another slab with a funnel hole in it for adding slip. Sometimes if I didn’t fill the funnel all the way because I got called away from the process, there were some interesting things that happened to the surfaces. Then one time I didn’t have a big enough slab for the top so I used two. That created an interesting seam line. It was just something that I was playing around with.”

When Esser later revived her slip casting efforts the imperfections were deliberately sought, especially those causing the hollow tiles to appear ruptured. In part the effect was appealing for its affinities with the slashed paintings of Lucio Fontana, an exhibition of whose work she had visited a few years earlier. Modern, particularly Minimalist, painting had drawn her interest since the 1970s, and the rectangular format of her new wall pieces made them reminiscent of canvases. From this perspective the bubbles and creases marking their surfaces could be seen as analogous to brushstrokes. It is significant, however, that unlike the *Topo* sculptures, the wall pieces are not glazed. Their warm reddish brown or off-white surfaces, smooth and inviting of touch where they are not lacerated or peeling, are curiously skinlike. “I think of these pieces as bodies,” Esser explains, “especially in the relationship between their interiors and exteriors.” The ragged edges separating these spaces, as a consequence, cannot help but convey hints of the fate of the body: its destiny in decay. At the same time, the wall pieces are geometric forms, rectangles that would ordinarily transcend the organic processes regulating life. In these latest works Esser subjects the absolute and timeless to the frailty inherent in the finite, and the result is a moving artistic synthesis: an inducement to contemplation that neither nature nor geometry could provide alone.

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the author Glen R. Brown, a frequent contributor to Ceramics Monthly, is a professor of art history at Kansas State University in Manhattan, Kansas.
Having an open-face plaster mold with flexible dimensions provides a lot of options when slip casting tiles. To make a mold like this, I cast a large flat plaster slab, as well as long thin plaster strips of varying thicknesses. (The strips shown here resemble pieces of wood, but they really are plaster!) Creating a tile using these molds starts with drawing a rectangle the size of desired slip-cast tile onto the large plaster slab (1). I place plaster strips around the drawn rectangle, to create a space into which casting slip will be poured. The space inside this open-face mold is approximately 15 x 10 x 1½ inches.

Once the narrow strips are arranged, I am ready to pour casting slip into the mold. I mix the slip with paper pulp and sand, thus making it very thick. Therefore, it is not necessary to dam the cracks around the plaster strips with clay to prevent slip from escaping the mold (2). If using a thinner casting slip, to avoid leaks it would be necessary to seal the cracks with soft coils of clay placed on the outside edges where the plaster strips and slab meet.

I pour the casting slip into the open face mold (3) and check to make sure the slip is level with the height of the plaster strips that create the mold (4). Next, I place plaster slabs onto the top face of the freshly poured tile to create patterns in the face of the tile. Note the spaces between the slabs (5).

The casting is left in the mold for at least 24 hours to allow water from the slip to be drawn into the plaster.

The next day, I remove the plaster slabs from the top of the cast tile (6). The linear fissures were created by the spaces that were left between the plaster slabs placed on top of the slip. The holes were created by air pockets created between the slip and the plaster slabs during the casting process. When dry, the tiles are once-fired to cone 01 in an electric kiln. No glaze or other surface treatment is applied. To hang the tile, a ¾-inch deep, wooden panel with an inset wooden cleat is epoxied onto the back of the tile. The rectangular dimension of the wooden panel is smaller than the tile so that it isn’t visible when hung. To ensure that the epoxy effectively attaches the tile to the wooden panel, I use a grinder and drill to cut angled holes and grooves into the wood face and the back of the tile before gluing.