



1 and 2. Cary Esser's *Topo 1-7*, 14 ft. (4.3 m) installed length, individual groupings to 33% in. (86 cm) in height, glazed fritware, steel, seven compositions of ceramic blocks arranged on a steel table, 2010. Photos: E.G. Schempf. 3. Paul Donnelly's flower brick, slip-cast porcelain, oxidation fired. 4. Paul Donnelly's platters, wheel-thrown porcelain, oxidation fired.

## Lay of the Land: George Timock, Cary Esser, and Paul Donnelly

by Glen R. Brown

Coinciding with the 125th anniversary of the Kansas City Art Institute (KCAI), “Lay of the Land: George Timock, Cary Esser, and Paul Donnelly” at Sherry Leedy Contemporary Art in Kansas City ([www.sherryleedy.com](http://www.sherryleedy.com)) seemed at first glance to provide precisely what one expected—that is, simply an opportunity to become better acquainted with the work of current faculty in one of the country’s most celebrated undergraduate programs in ceramics. That in itself might have justified the exhibition. After all, the dynamic between faculty members is a key element defining any academic department, and the particular makeup of KCAI’s ceramics area has been important both to the cultural life of Kansas City and to the field of contemporary ceramics at large. Since the days when Ken Ferguson and Victor Babu imparted their advice and inspiration to the burgeoning genius of students such as Richard Notkin, Kurt Weiser, Akio Takamori, Chris Gustin, and Chris Staley, the influence of KCAI’s ceramics department has rippled outward with significant momentum.

But the exhibition was really only incidentally about an institution, and any hints that it might have dropped about pedagogy were too vague to decipher. Inviting reflection on the complementarity of academic colleagues was obviously of lower priority than showcasing the latest pieces by three ceramists who appeared to have somewhat different aims. The placement of each artist’s works in a separate gallery space reinforced that appearance, creating the initial impression of three solo shows. Under that impression, it might have occurred to more than one contemplative visitor that the unity of the exhibition was only nominal: literally

the consequence of a name, or more specifically the exhibition’s title, which tentatively held everything together. That thought, however, would have raised intriguing consequences, since “lay of the land” is of course an idiom for how things work together—for, in other words, the very aspect of the exhibition that one was puzzling over. Thinking about the lay of the land ultimately produced some interesting interpretations.

If taken to refer to the field of contemporary ceramics as a whole, the exhibition’s title was certainly apt. As anyone with even a rudimentary experience can attest, contemporary ceramics is a picture of diversity, and some principal landmarks of its varied topography were nicely summarized by Donnelly’s utilitarian pieces, Timock’s vessel-referential works, and Esser’s sprawling, multipartite sculptures. In contemporary ceramics, the lay of the land is complex, consisting as much of disparity and even contradiction as of common ground. Lay of the land is also, of course, an idiom that borrows from the contexts of geology and landscape—and landscape, as it turned out, was a productive word to keep in mind, particularly if one allowed it to embrace the built environment as well as natural land formations. Ultimately, a strong element does unite the works of Esser, Timock, and Donnelly. It consists of a certain sensitivity to the relationship between architecture, the horizon, and topography.

Esser’s recent work, comprised mostly of sculptures of glazed fritware, conjures surfaces of weathered rock or expanses of mud that have dried and shivered into geometric patterns of crevices. Assembled from hexagonal units, wall-mounted pieces such as



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5. George Timock's *Vessel FFF*, Herend porcelain. 6. Cary Esser's *Shield 2*, 17¼ in. (44 cm) in width, glazed fritware mounted on wood, 2010. Photo: E.G. Schempf. 7. George Timock's *Untitled Vessel BBB*, 9 in. (23 cm) in width, Herend porcelain, 2008. 8. Paul Donnelly's platter, wheel-thrown porcelain, oxidation fired. 9. Cary Esser's *Topo 9*, 26½ in. (67 cm) in length, glazed fritware. Photo: E.G. Schempf. 10. George Timock's *Untitled Vessel BBB* (detail).

*Shield 2*, suggest a 90° realignment of horizontal sections of the earth toward the vertical plane, whereas horizontally disposed compositions such as *Topo 1–7*, which extend over a series of thin steel tabletops, are reminiscent of the tightly interlocking stone columns composing the famous Giant's Causeway of Northern Ireland. The hexagon, which forms in nature in rare instances when molten basalt forces its way through chalk beds, is in Esser's sculptures equally allusive to a tile shape commonly found in Islamic architecture. Nature, in fact, seems to metamorphose into architectonic lines in the *Topo* series, in which the horizontally arranged units—tiles extending to varying heights like leavened dough expanding and rising but maintaining their contours—become the visual equivalent of a city skyline, dentate with high-rise buildings dispersed along a stretch of coastline.

Timock's current work, dramatically different from the double-walled raku vessels that long anchored his reputation, reflects the strong influence of recent residencies at the International Ceramics Studio in Kecskemet, Hungary. Carved from milk-white Herend porcelain and accented with gold and silver lusters, these sculpted vessels manifest a different brand of opulence from Esser's earthy glistening, though the artists share some key aspects of sensibility. Timock's inspiration, too, encompasses the architectural, in particular the eclectic blend of classical, medieval, art-nouveau, and socialist architecture of Budapest and the gilded interior of that city's Saint Stephen's Basilica. But interspersed with the dramatically reconfigured detritus of rib vaulting, gold tesserae and monumental pedi-

ment ornaments in his pieces such as *Vessel BBB* are curved planes of a rougher, irregular, more geological texture that ties the building references to landscape and makes of the relief components a simultaneous reflection on architectonics and abstract natural topography.

The lay of the land in Donnelly's work is even easier to recognize, and he too refers abstractly to land and horizon and professes inspiration from architecture. This does not merely invoke the architectonics of the domestic interior—what he describes as a “landscape” in which his functional pottery operates—but also leads to a tendentious structural relationship between geometric and organic. The relationship is perhaps most obvious in his thinly celadon-glazed flower bricks, in which rectangular blocks rise from recesses in slab bases, their sides sheathed by a vertical fluting that imparts the impression of skirts of grass or vines working their way up building walls. Alternately, the effect could be perceived as indicative of deterioration: a flaking away of stucco from a building's exterior. Donnelly's plates, partly smooth and partly fluted, set up similar contrasts between an abstract organicism and indications of the human-made environment, often suggesting the meeting of grass and sidewalk.

In the end, the title *Lay of the Land* proved superbly suited to this exhibition, provoking, as titles ideally should, a flow of observations enriching the experience of all three artists' works.

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