

Cary Esser
Labyrinth
Solo Exhibition
Sherry Leedy Contemporary Art, October 1999

Artist Statement

Historic forms of architectural tile and terra cotta detail offer me a narrative structure to explore the language of ornament. I use the traditions of architectural ornament and ceramics to interpret my perceptions of human culture and the natural world. Ancient symbols and motifs that include representations of plants and animals, geometric patterns, and shields are of particular interest to me. For centuries these motifs have been recycled and reinterpreted from the viewpoints of many cultures. By the early twentieth century the continued recycling of these images, and their mass production through the machinations of the Industrial Age in Europe and North America, led to the consumption of their meanings as a viable visual language. My work for several years has revisited the forms and knowledge of the historical language of architectural ornament. I see evidence of this lexicon around me everyday in the embellishments on older buildings of Kansas City.

Recently, my use of the historic motifs is directed to images that extend a pictorial interpretation of ornamental subject matter. Diagrams of garden design, architecture, and the anatomies of plants and animals have emerged in my work. These new motifs take the forms of maps whose schematics are often linked by both visual similarities and verbal descriptions. The labyrinth is such an example. I have used it in the work shown here to initiate a series of ceramic relief panels.

The labyrinth has a history deep in the mythologies of Egypt, Crete, and many other old civilizations. Its use as a word, as an identifiable visual form, and as a symbolic structure has continued through time in various ways to the present day. For instance, my rendering of the labyrinth from the floor of the Chartres cathedral refers to an icon laden with mythological and Christian symbolic meaning, the plans of 16th century French garden mazes represent the myriad fanciful designs of aristocratic dalliance and pleasure in Nature, while my drawing of the human ear labyrinth refers to the ancient symbol only in its description of a spiral form.

These and other maze-like designs are incised into modified shields made of earthenware clay. The shield is an abstracted form of the human torso. It has been conventionalized through the heraldic device to the current, often meaningless, decorative motif. Looking back to the shield's use as armor to protect and defend the vital organs, I have chosen it as a body form: the physical, complex, and vulnerable manifestation of our lives. A hole is pierced through the center spiral of each labyrinth and into the clay shield. The labyrinth leads to the body's interior, my interior.