

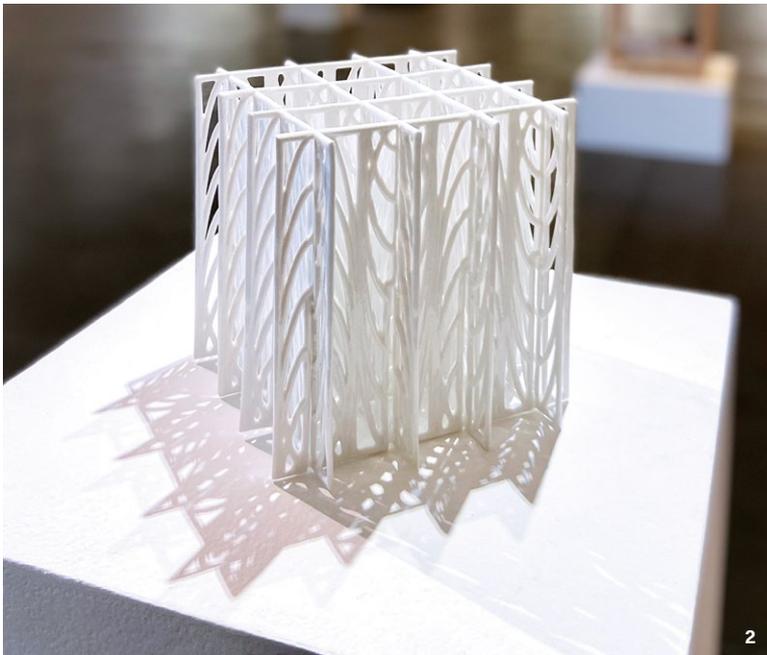
CONSTRUCTED LANDSCAPES

BRICK, TILE AND PILLAR

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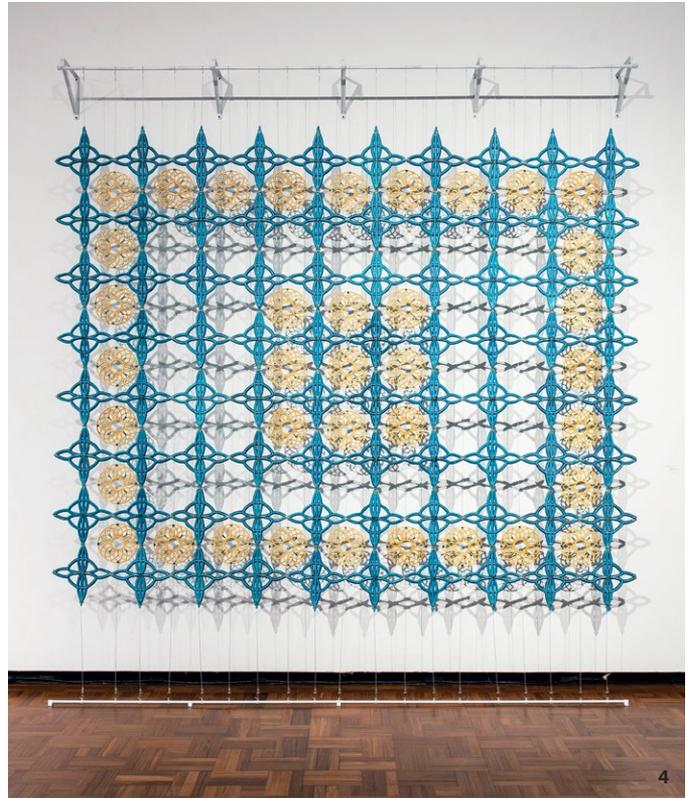
Constructed Landscapes

by Heidi McKenzie



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As I entered Blue Line Arts in Roseville, California, where “Constructed Landscapes” was on view as one of three exhibitions held there in conjunction with the National Council for the Education of the Ceramic Arts (NCECA) conference in Sacramento, I was immediately struck by the sense of rhythm and pacing in this exhibition. Eliza Au, a transplanted West-Coast Canadian who is teaching at the University of North Texas in Denton, Texas, curated this exhibition and included these artists: Grace Nickel, Sarah Heitmeyer, and Audrey An. The organizing principle is brilliant and fresh: women working with technology and ceramics in innovative ways. More than that, Au references symmetry, pattern, and architecture, locating the complex or carefully designed structure of objects within a liminal space between culture and nature. Au asks her public to consider the relationships of mimicry and pattern, as well as the interplay of digital processes in the ornamentation, editing, and modification of image and form.



1 Gallery view of "Constructed Landscapes" at Blue Line Arts. 2 Eliza Au's *Slot Cube*, 8 in. (20 cm) in height, porcelain, 2019. 3 Eliza Au's *Lattice Screen* (side view), 10 ft. (3 m) in length, stoneware, 2021. 1-3 Photos courtesy of Blue Line Arts. 4 Eliza Au's *Lattice Screen* (front view), 10 ft. (3 m) in length, stoneware, 2021. Photo: Stephanie Gerhart. 5 Eliza Au's *Raised Tile*, 5 ft. 5 in. (1.7 m) in height, stoneware, porcelain, 2021. Photo: Megan DeSoto.

Moments of Beauty

New York-based ceramic artist Sarah Heitmeyer renders the patterns she photographs—more specifically, the surface ripples of water in nature—into waves in ceramic tiles. Heitmeyer started working with computer-aided design (CAD) software at the State University of New York (SUNY New Paltz). She discovered that when she imported a black-and-white photograph into CAD, it would read the monochromatic color values of the ripple surface topographically. Once Heitmeyer had a tile pattern ready, she would build the model in plastic using a 3D printer, cast the model in plaster, and use the plaster cast to press mold her tile. More recently, Heitmeyer has streamlined her process, running the custom CAD file through a CNC router that carves the forms in foam, which she uses directly as the face of a press mold. Heitmeyer curates her assemblages of tiles through digital manipulation. She exploits her patterns; transposes them for mirror effects; and inverts, rearranges, or zooms in, creating an ordered geometry, all from the original wave that occurred in nature. Heitmeyer works in stoneware, handbuilds the side walls of the tiles, and plays with glaze pooling to achieve an uncanny verisimilitude. She describes her work as “uniquely self-referential and semi-realistic.” Her process is a meditation on the similarities between moments of beauty in nature and the immersive mosaics found in sacred spaces.

Depth and Innovation

Grace Nickel is a Winnipeg-based ceramic artist and associate professor at the University of Manitoba School of Art. She has an impressive multi-decade career that has, since receiving her MFA from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NASCAD) in 2014, pivoted around the growth and decay of trees and fungi. Nickel collaborates with her life partner, photographer,



digital-media artist, and designer, Michael Zajac. Nickel's work often circles back in self-reference. Zajac photographed the tree trunk of an earlier sculpture in the round, and stitched the images together into a flat surface. This sculpture formed the 3D model from which the flat surfaces of *JDZ Tile No. 1* and *No. 3* were derived in gray tones. They were digitized into prints, transferred into large-format decals, and fired onto porcelain tile. The effect creates something of a fantasy-landscape: a monochromatic, enchanted forest with a depth that could not have been achieved without the multitiered digital processes undertaken.

This morphing of three dimensions into two dimensions, an inversion of the conventional sketch to model, is further developed in Nickel's *Espalier* series. The surfaces seem to glisten off the porcelain, as they employ a sintering process whereby black liquid material is etched onto the ceramic surface using a laser cutter, again creating an interiority of landscape that holds the viewers' imagination in ways that would be impossible to glimpse from the original model. Not better, but different, innovative, regenerative.

Au also chose to include Nickel's series, *Plume*, which consists of seven 19-inch-square, ethereal, skeletal prints of 3D models drawn from Nickel's *Eruption* series. Here Zajac employed highly

specialized photogrammetry. Zajac shot 75–200 images, rotating the work on a turntable in a lighting tent. The computer program identified between 30,000 to 100,000 tie points and triangulated them into 3D space: from there, a dense cloud of 2–12 million points was generated to define the surfaces of the plume in high resolution. The surface points were interpolated into a digital-mesh model with half a million to a million faced triangles. For the prints, the models were sampled down to a lower resolution of around 20,000–30,000 triangles.

Auto-biographic Diaries

Audrey An is a recent MFA graduate from Penn State University in State College, Pennsylvania. Much like Nickel, An seeks to preserve and memorialize through the lens of digital-clay method and decision-making. An describes her works as imaginative furniture-scapes. She is inspired by furniture design, museum dioramas, and still-life paintings from part of her bicultural heritage: Korean Chaekeori painting. Her methodology is create, remix, and sample (i.e. collage). Of primary importance to An is her bicultural South Korean/American upbringing, where she finds herself in different liminal spaces, not fully at home in either place. Her works can



6 Sarah Heitmeyer's *Water Symmetry Studies 1–4*, 11 in. (28 cm) in width, stoneware, glaze, 2021. Photo: Blue Line Arts. **7** Sarah Heitmeyer's *Sand Pair*, 24 in. (61 cm) in width, stoneware, glaze, 2021. **8** Sarah Heitmeyer's *Sky-Water Symmetry*, 24 in. (61 cm) in width, stoneware, glaze, 2021.





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9 Grace Nickel's *Erbium Plume*, 19 in. (48 cm) in height, inkjet print, 2019. 10 Grace Nickel's *Espalier 1-5*, 28½ in. (72 cm) in width, Jingdezhen porcelain tile, laser marked image, 2015. 11 Grace Nickel's *JDZ Tile No. 1*, 27 in. (68 cm) in width, ceramic decal on unglazed porcelain. 9-11 Photos: Michael Zajac.

be viewed as autobiographic diaries of versions of herself, “the transcultural making of me.”

The two assemblages of works in *Constructed Landscape*, *Mobile Thoughts* and *Symbiotic Places*, are both multimedia, using ceramics with wood and/or foam. The scale of the works is reminiscent of furniture, a small trolley or bedside table and an old chair. Each of the objects is carefully considered, and at the same time surprising to their audience. I found myself being drawn into the works to really see them and consider the choices

that the artist made in creating these modern, minimalist collisions. *Symbolic Places* has a large ceramic sculpture of a Korean celebratory yarn ball sitting prominently on what seems to be a small bench or chair. An tells her audience that this yarn ball is traditionally given to an infant in Korea on their first birthday. The work is backed by a CNC-formed landscape in a terra-cotta color. Collectively, the work leaves me wanting to know more about the artist’s life experiences, as if I only had a few elements of the puzzle to piece together.



12 Audrey An's *Symbiotic Places*, 3 ft. 9 in. (1.2 m) in height, ceramics, foam, wood, 2021. Photo: Courtesy of the artist. **13** Audrey An's *Mobile Thoughts*, 3 ft. 5 in. (1 m) in height, ceramics, wood, 2021. Photo: Andrew Castaneda.



Mobile Thoughts is a three-tiered sculpture. Each layer holds its distinct narrative: on the top layer we find a hand holding a small red object; the middle layer, a lemon perched in one corner; and on the bottom layer, a folded paper crane. Separately, each object is ordinary; together they connect us to the artist's daily life in an intimate way.

Drawn From Patterns

Eliza Au selected a broad range of her own works to install. She finds inspiration amidst the connective tissues of ornamentation of sacred spaces across any number of religious or spiritual practices, both past and present. Au's works are highly geometric, drawn from pattern motifs that have been abstracted through the ages. The *Slot Bowl* and *Slot Box* are exactly that—latticework pieces made of individual slices of pattern. The prototypes are designed and manipulated digitally, then 3D printed. I had the opportunity to attend Au's Fab Lab demonstration during the NCECA conference. Au makes two-piece plaster molds with special hoses that create passageways for her to force out the moisture from the plaster with an air compressor. That then releases the soft clay in its delicate patterns. Once leather

hard, the pieces are high fired, slotted together, and glazed together in a low-temperature firing. The larger installations morph into visual mandalas. *Brocade* and *Raised Tiles* are wall-mounted multiples, whereas the monumental presence of *Lattice Screen*, which is suspended like a curtain and spans an 8×10-foot area but is a mere ½ inch thick, reminds me of the Mogul jaali screens I visited in India. Au creates in a muted color palette, soft pastels with deep or light celadons, possibly a nod to her own Southeast Asian roots. More recently, Au allows the whiteness of the ceramic body to shine for itself with the simplicity of a clear glaze. The repetition and pattern in Au's body of work is mesmerizing.

Constructed Landscapes is an eloquent investigation into these artists' need to imitate the patterns in nature and built landscapes. As An so eloquently remarks, "our works explore ways to evoke emotions such as comfort, solitude, and yearning through observing landscapes." Each artist samples their particular landscapes at the micro or macro levels to make meaning of their/our place in the world.

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