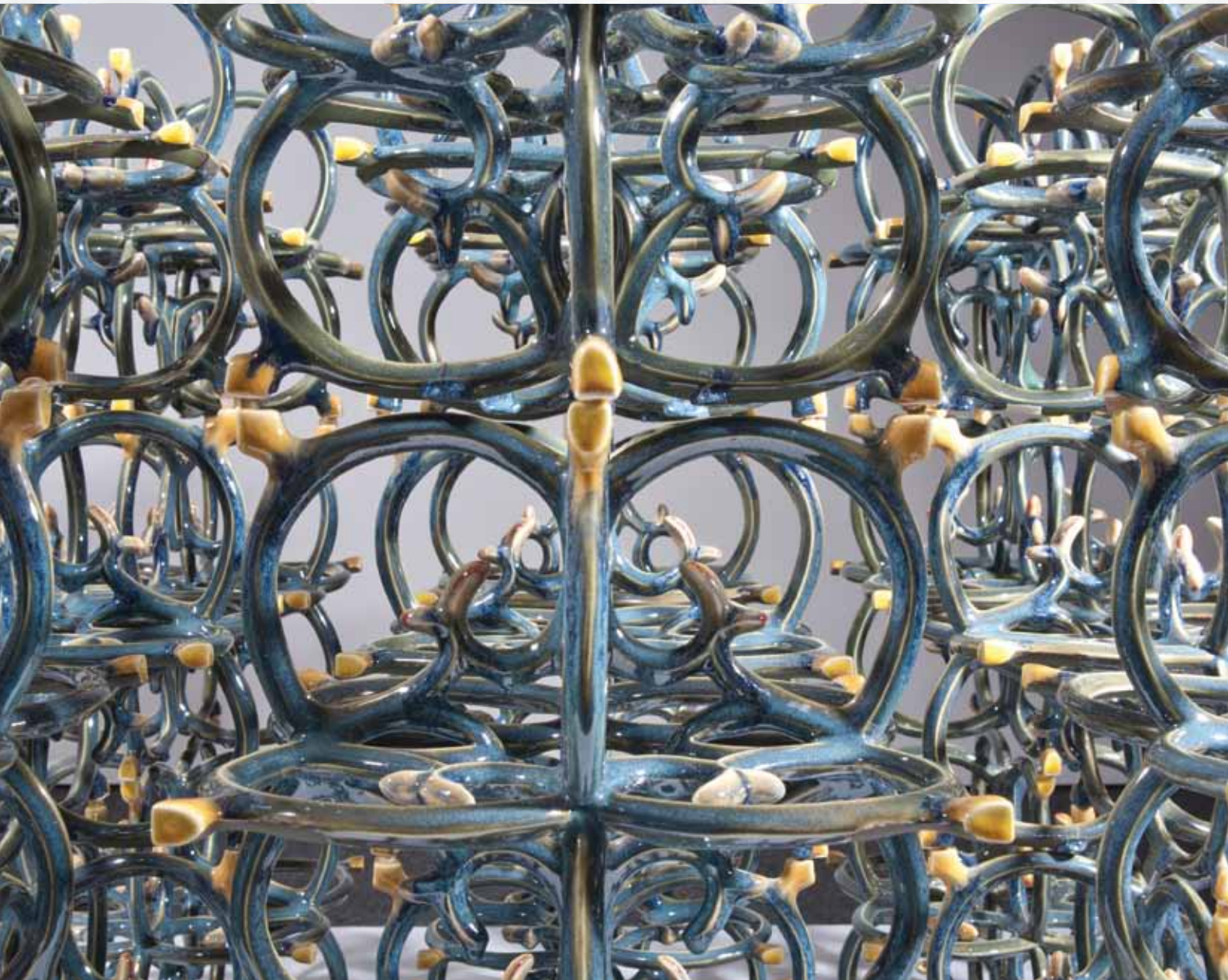
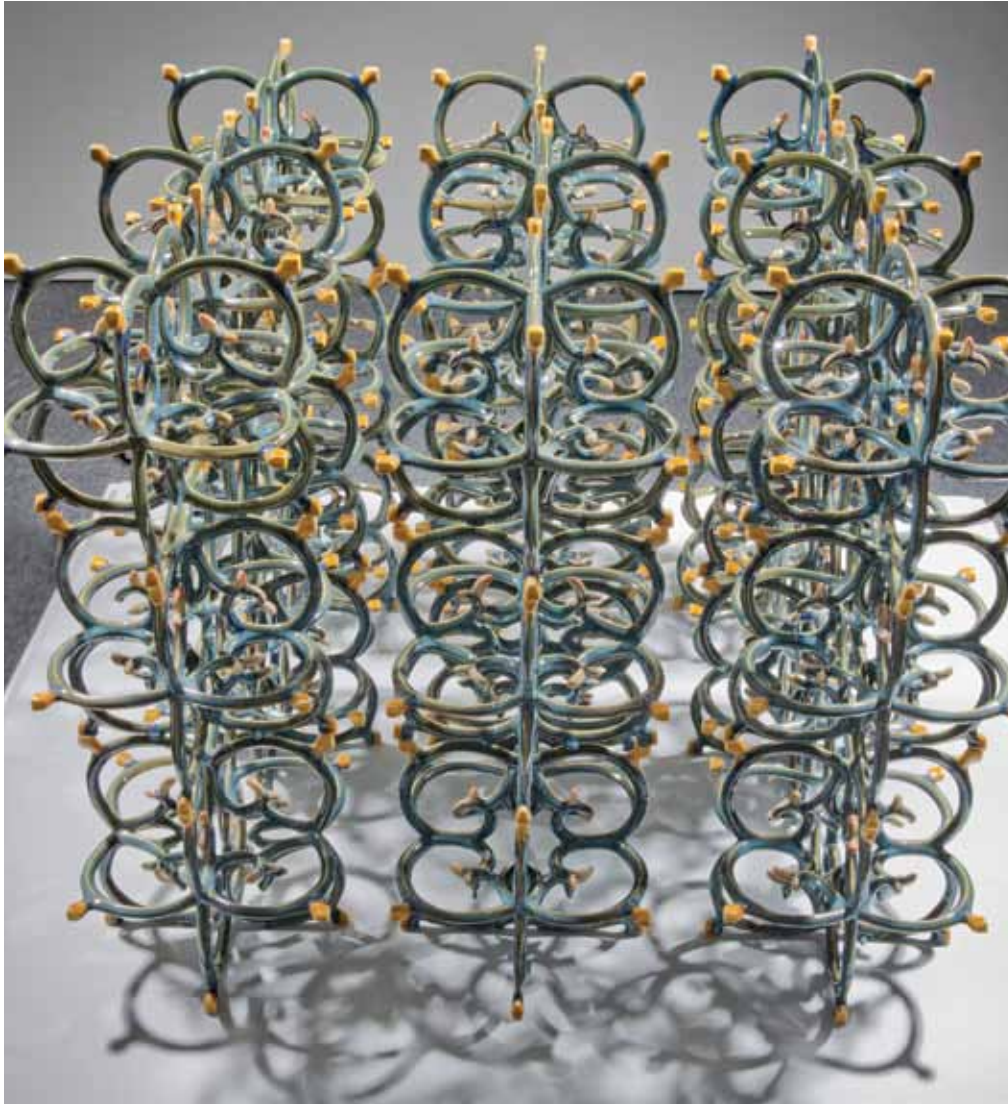




Eliza Au:
**THE BEAUTY
OF ORDER**

BY AMY GOGARTY





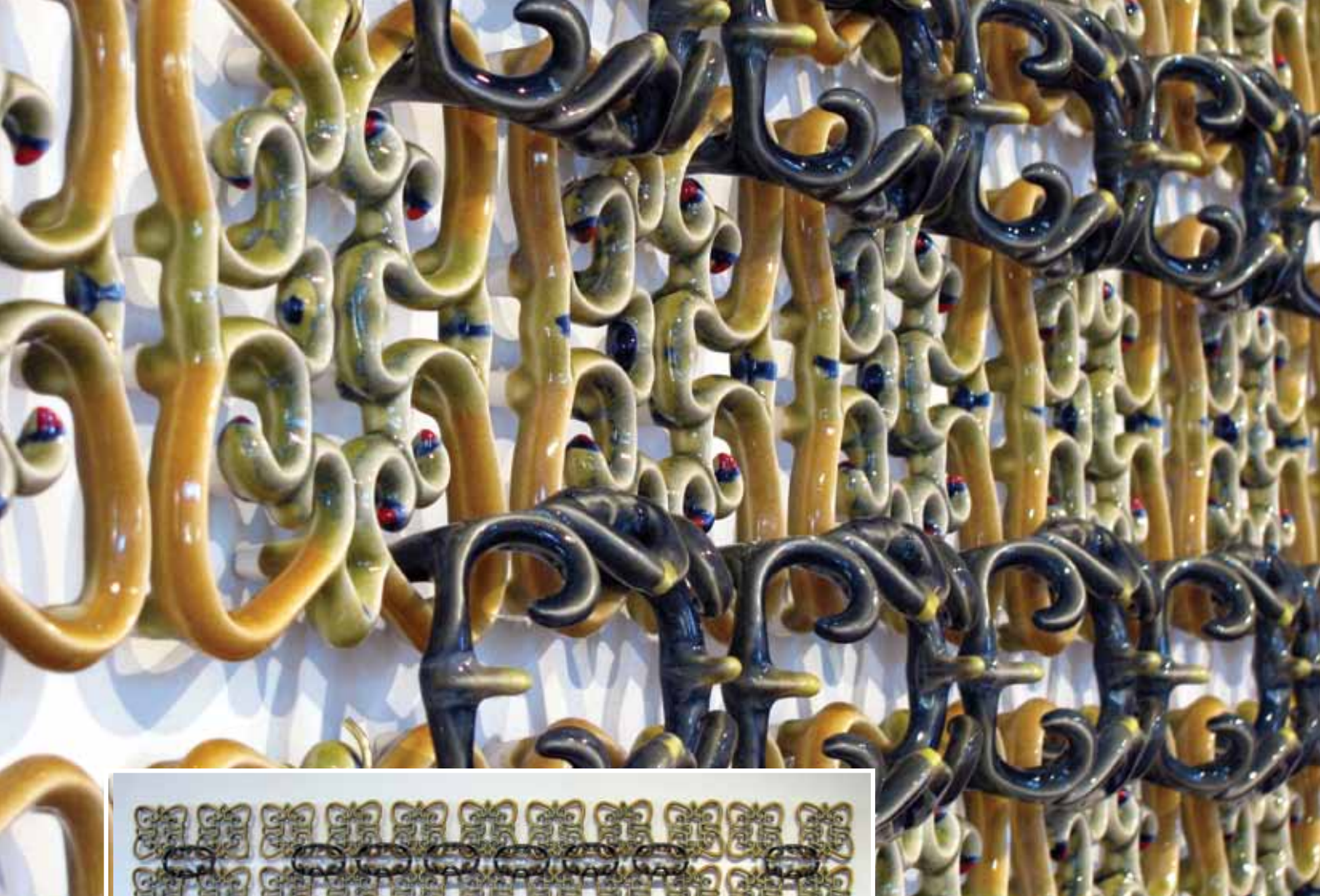
Opposite and above: *Axis*, 36 in. (92 cm) in height, cone 6 slip-cast stoneware, 2011.

Eliza Au loves pattern, symmetry, and order, finding metaphors for inner peace and spiritual healing in organized, repeating forms. In her work, she arranges linear ornaments around a central axis, a motif she identifies in spiritual artifacts from both the East and West including mandalas, rose windows, and prayer carpets. She points to attributes of symmetry and repetition in the cycle of life, DNA patterns, and the cosmos, with “its mathematical complexity, infinite repetitions, and compositions.”

Au was born in British Columbia, Canada, where she currently resides. She studied at Emily Carr University of Art and Design in Vancouver, British Columbia; Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) in Providence, Rhode Island; Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NSCAD) in Halifax, Nova Scotia; and the University of Regina in Regina, Saskatchewan; prior to attending the New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University in Alfred, New York, where she obtained her MFA degree in 2009.

While in graduate school, she worked with wax, paper, metal, and glass in addition to clay. Recently, glass has become a far more significant material for her, and she has honed her skills with this demanding medium through artist residencies at the Studio at the Corning Museum of Glass in New York and at the Pilchuck Glass School in Washington state. In 2011, she was featured as an emerging artist at the National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts conference, and was one of five nominees for the Royal Bank of Canada (RBC) Emerging Artist People’s Choice Award in Canada. For the award exhibition, held at the Gardiner Museum of Ceramic Art in Toronto, she created *Axis*, a work that reflects her interest in complexity, symmetry, beauty, and order.

Au works extensively with molds to produce the large numbers of identical units required for her installations. Introduced to mold-making and casting processes when she took a class with Frank Bosco at RISD, she was drawn to a technique that allowed



Brocade, 9 ft. 1 in. (2.8 m) in length, cone 6 slip-cast porcelain, 2011.

for perfect repetition, and she felt she had found her direction in ceramics. Unlike many who cast from nature or found objects, Au was never interested in replicating the everyday. Instead, she preferred to make conceptual statements based on complex interlocking structures, which required extensive planning and preliminary models.

Molds enable her to work across media. She is sensitive to the intrinsic qualities of her materials and allows them to influence each other through what she calls “cross-pollination.” Often, economic factors govern her choice of material. For example, a work that would take a long time to make in metal or ceramics can be made quickly from paper, something she discovered early on when using paper to mock-up an idea. She came to see the soft drape of the paper as something positive to be exploited rather than overlooked, and she brings a similar openness to the use of digital technology.

With the advent of CNC (Computer Numerical Controlled) milling and the Rhinoceros™ (Rhino) 3-D modelling program, Au

is able to bring a project from concept to execution more quickly and with greater assurance. Rhino allows her to efficiently design a form, examine it from any direction, and evaluate different aspects of her model. She has used CNC technology to produce prototypes for glass projects, but she often prefers to make her original from Victory Brown microcrystalline wax using her Rhino drawing as a guide. For slip-casting clay, she begins with soft plaster, which she carves into a model and later casts to make a mold. In addition to plaster, she has worked with silicone and other materials depending on the requirements for the particular material she is casting.

Au’s interest in spiritual and personal exploration is independent of any specific religious or philosophical system. Her use of ornaments and patterns from a variety of contexts reflects her placement in a multicultural society. The use of pattern and ornament to express the sacred has deep roots in many cultures. *In Ornament: A Modern Perspective*, art historian James Trilling writes that displays of luxury constitute an “almost universally understood metaphor for the sacred veneration made visible and tangible an

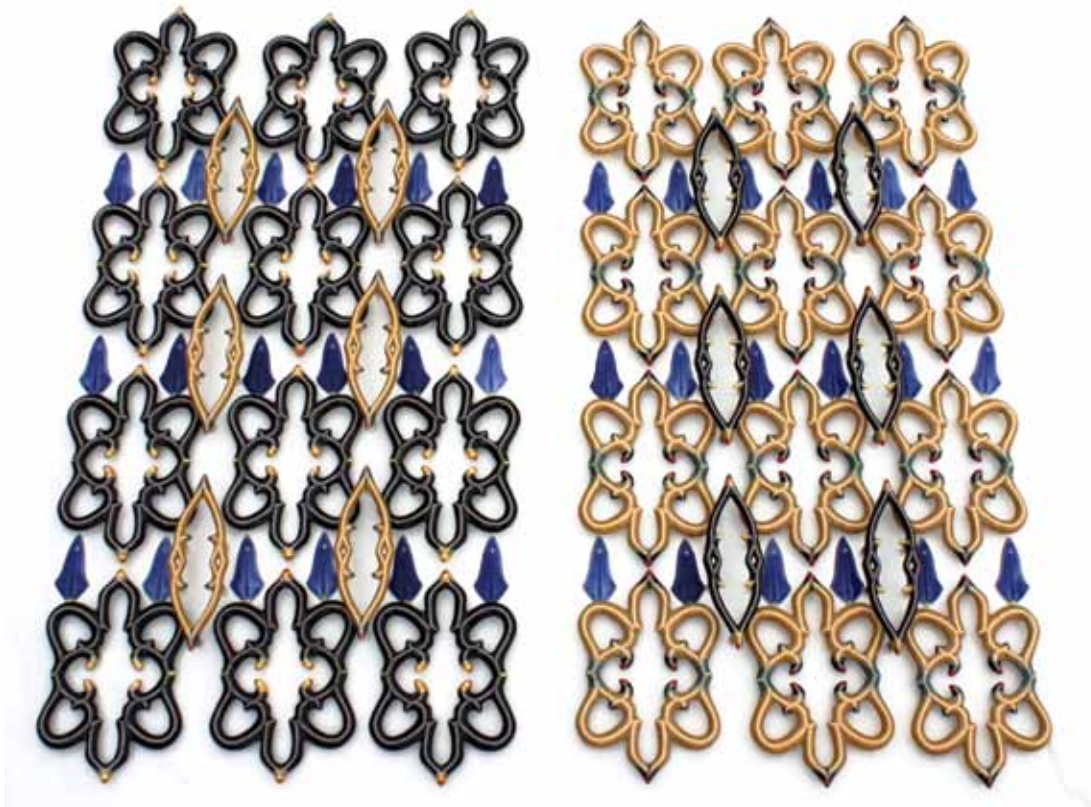
offering up of that which is most demanding of effort, skill, and expense.” Although Au’s sculptures and installations do not make specific religious claims, they focus effort and skill toward suggestions of the sacred.

Axis consists of 27 modules arranged in a cube with nine columns, each stacked three modules high. Each module consists of twelve slip-cast stoneware components measuring six inches square when cast and slightly less when fired. The modules are assembled in layers inside a wooden box prior to bisquing (see Building in a Box). The whole is spray-glazed a deep blue-green that breaks to yellow-green and bright blue at the edges. Tips to the curling forms are glazed yellow, making the overall construction rich and variegated. The cubic arrangement resembles a dense thicket or a cage constructed from Gothic tracery. The title was arrived at only after the work was completed and refers to the three axes (X, Y and Z), that constitute the mathematical definition of three-dimensional space. From certain angles, the form is clear and easily read, while from others, the eye becomes lost in teasing out and following the complex, curving forms.

While *Axis* is strongly three-dimensional, Au also produces floor- and wall-based works that suggest carpets or textiles from the Middle East and Asia. The use of the prayer-carpet format suggests prayer and meditation, the creation of a sacred space. Au points to the combination of mathematical relationships, abstract vegetal forms, and potentially limitless repetition that were thought to represent the divine through replicating the underlying patterns of nature. She responds to the color, texture, and



The Fragility of Belief, 4 ft. 6 in. (137 cm) in length, cast glass, 2010.



Dual, 6 ft. 8 in. (2 m) in height, cone 6 slip-cast porcelain, 2011.

BUILDING IN A BOX

Eliza Au

In making *Axis*, I was faced with the problem of constructing and firing a complex form. After two failed attempts to make a casting mold of the entire piece, I discovered using a wooden box as a form worked well as it allowed me to touch the piece as little as possible and to remove the form later without hitting or jarring the piece.

To create *Axis*, I used three book molds, each of which produces four components. In a book mold, both sides of a mold section are used, to create two different pieces. When sandwiched together, with two end cap sections, each mold is completed. A stoneware casting slip is poured into the book molds and allowed to set for seven to ten minutes (figure 1). Four molds for rectangular posts that will be used as firing supports are also poured at this stage. These supports are made from the same clay and will shrink at the same rate as the piece. After the molds are turned over and drained, they are left for fifteen to twenty minutes for the clay to stiffen and release from the mold (figure 2). The individual pieces are then removed from the mold and placed on a sheet of foam to prevent deforming. They are allowed to dry another 15–20 minutes.

To start building the piece, the wooden box is placed over a Rhino drawing of the cross-section of the piece, and the rectangular posts are placed in the corners of the box (figure 3). For the first layer, four pieces are joined vertically

at 90° to each other. For the second layer, four more pieces are joined at right angles to the first layer (figure 4). The corners of these pieces are supported by the rectangular posts. The last layer is joined vertically to the second layer.

The piece is left to dry slowly in the box to make sure the joints will hold. Two sides of the box are unscrewed (figure 5), and, after the piece is hard enough to pick up, the joints are smoothed and patched with clay. I dry the piece with plastic over it for at least one day and then covered with fabric overnight prior to putting it in the kiln. Green underglaze is applied where the piece will touch the rectangular posts and the kiln shelf.

The pieces are bisqued with the rectangular supports. After the bisque, the corners and points are taped to resist the glaze (figure 6). The piece is put on a banding wheel and sprayed with glaze. Places where the underglaze was applied are sponged to remove glaze. After this, the glazed pieces are put into the kiln with the rectangular supports and fired to cone 6 (figure 7).

To transport my work to the Gardiner Museum, I hired a shipping company to pack my work. They used rectangular foam with a cross groove cut into it to hold each piece in place in a cardboard box (figure 8). *Axis* was packed in three layers of nine boxes in a large wheeled crate for shipping.



1 Stoneware casting slip is poured into the secured book molds.



2 Once the molds are drained and the clay is dry enough to release from the plaster, the mold is opened.



3 Four pieces are placed in a wooden box and joined together vertically at 90° to create the first layer.



4 Next, four more pieces are joined at right angles to the first layer. The corners are supported by clay posts.



5 After another vertical layer is added and the piece dries, two sides of the box are unscrewed.



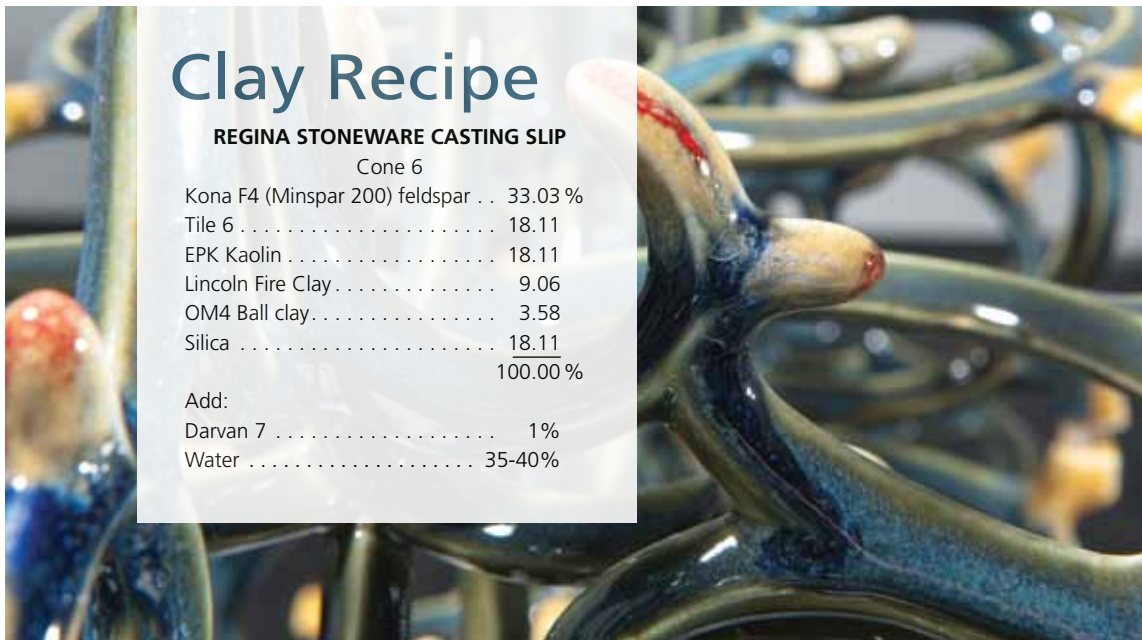
6 After the bisque firing (which includes the supports), the corners of the pieces are taped off to resist glaze.



7 Glazed pieces are put in the kiln on the bisque fired supports and fired to cone 6.



8 To pack the work, rectangular foam that has a cross groove cut into it is used to hold each piece in place in a cardboard box.



Clay Recipe

REGINA STONEWARE CASTING SLIP

Cone 6

Kona F4 (Minspar 200) feldspar . . .	33.03 %
Tile 6	18.11
EPK Kaolin	18.11
Lincoln Fire Clay	9.06
OM4 Ball clay	3.58
Silica	18.11
	100.00 %

Add:

Darvan 7	1%
Water	35-40%

softness of carpets, and plays with dualities of hard/soft, rigid/flexible, and durable/fragile that emerge through contrasting ceramics, glass, and textile. *The Fragility of Belief* (2010), a cast-glass work completed at the Studio at the Corning Museum of Glass, centers around “the idea of fragility as a metaphor for doubt.” Au believes that we decorate and give meaning to our beliefs out of a desire to create certainty in an unpredictable world, yet the very nature of glass indicates how fragile she considers those efforts to be. In this work, a field of 20 frosted-glass palmette motifs overlap and penetrate a series of interlinked blue medallions. The work suggests a wrought iron gate or stone tracery that serves as both an entryway and a barrier to the viewer, who is suspended between doubt and belief. Like *Axis*, *Dual* is assembled from slip-cast and glazed ceramic components, in this case, porcelain. It consists of two side-by-side carpet pieces constructed in two layers. In one, six-pointed star forms are glazed a straw yellow, with overlying pointed ovals glazed gray-black. In the other, the glazing is reversed, possibly symbolizing two individuals or two sides to the same person. A third carpet piece, *Brocade*, consists of a similar structure, but it is in the form of a long rectangle, which can be understood as marking a direction, a hallway, an entrance way or a particularly significant spot. In all of these, Au engages in a process of analysis, meditation, and self-discovery that comes with making something beautiful and difficult; the artwork is a fortuitous if not specifically intentional result.

The incorporation of geometric forms has a long history in the fine arts, and an even longer one in the applied arts, where symmetry, repetition, and order are the basis for decorative pattern. In the 20 century, the Russian artist Vladimir Malevich painted a black square on a white ground, initiating an art based on rationalism and mathematics. The Constructivists applied this approach to sculpture, embracing new technologies to create works with the “clarity of mathematical models.” Later, Mini-

malism generated works that avoided metaphorical associations while seeking to embody “clarity, conceptual rigour, literalness, and simplicity.” Sol LeWitt embraced industrial materials and the grid with its potential for limitless repetitions of identical units, while others produced works that appeared to consist of little more than stacked boxes or firebricks, minimizing the presence of the artist’s hand. Eliza Au’s works make an interesting contrast to these conceptual pieces in that they similarly exhibit mathematical clarity, repetition, and even industrial processes, yet they aspire to express spirituality, which she feels underlies our everyday experience of reality.

For Au, discerning the pattern underlying a complicated form generates the pleasure and satisfaction that comes from understanding how something works. It also constitutes a sort of “spiritual searching” that accompanies the expenditure of effort and time in the production of a beautiful object. A medieval Jewish saying that originated in Iraq, where stucco ornaments were common, reads “A mind settled on an intelligent thought is like the stucco decoration on the wall of a colonnade.” Intelligent contemplation is likened to that which makes the wall beautiful and complete.

Au is attracted to the idea of order “because it is more straightforward.” Life might be messy and chaotic, but art brings clarity and control, a source of power over chaos. Order and clarity do not necessarily imply perfection. If anything, Au now values the slight slumping, warping or other “imperfections” that necessarily develop over the course of casting, assembling, and firing a work, as they introduce a sense of the human touch. She can generate perfection from a machine, but that lacks humanity. Her intricate constructions reflect craft traditions, offering serenity and a very human vision of beauty.

the author *Amy Gogarty is an artist, educator, curator, and writer living in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada.*