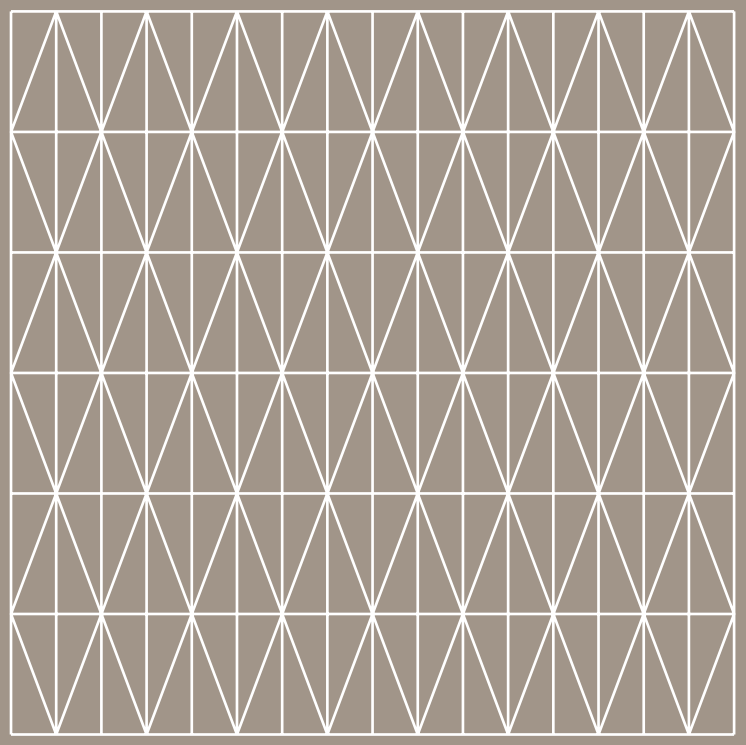

Five Sisters

Emma Biggs & Matthew Collings

Published on the occasion of
Emma Biggs and Matthew Collings'
exhibition *Five Sisters*, York St Mary's
23 May – 1 November 2009

Works:
Clay End, mosaic, 925cm × 323cm
Paintress 1–8, oil on canvas, 150 × 300cm
Paintress 9–20, oil on canvas, 200 × 300cm

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fig 1 (opposite). *Paintress 9–20 No.15*, oil on canvas, 75 × 75cm

Introduction

We are very pleased to see the transformation of York St Mary's this year, with the new work, *Five Sisters*, by Emma Biggs and Matthew Collings to whom we would like to express our thanks.

This new work is a response to the magnificent Five Sisters stained glass window in the Minster. The intervention comprises of oil paintings and a mosaic created largely out of medieval pottery sherds, the majority of which form part of the archaeological collection at the Yorkshire Museum. We think it may be the first art work created out of actual pieces of museum collections. Once the exhibition is over, the pieces will be returned to their storage in the museum.

The project has involved many people including York Museums Trust staff and volunteers who have helped with the sorting and cleaning of the sherds. Without this essential preparation we would not have been able to give Emma access to the material to create the work. We have also worked closely with the Institute of Public Understanding of the Past, University of York who have filmed the process of the making of *Five Sisters* enabling visitors to York St Mary's to understand more about the thinking behind the piece as well as seeing how it came together. We are very grateful to everyone who has helped to make this work possible especially the Arts Council Yorkshire who have funded the project.

Five Sisters is the fifth installation at York St Mary's. In 2004 we opened the deconsecrated church with *a light crescendo*, an exhibition of work by international artists, followed by *breathing space* by Caroline Broadhead in 2005, *echo* by Susie MacMurray in 2006 and for two years in 2007–8 *The Memory of Place* by Keiko Mukaide. Each artist responded to the church in very different ways. It is fascinating to see how each installation has brought out different aspects of the structure, history and meaning of this beautiful church and how *Five Sisters* continues this rich dialogue.

Janet Barnes
Chief Executive
York Museums Trust

fig 2. Paintress 1–8, with *Clay End* in the foreground. Photograph: Shannon Tofts

fig 3 (overleaf). *Paintress 9–20*, with *Clay End* in the foreground. Photograph: Shannon Tofts

fig 4. Clay End, detail. Photograph: Miki Slingsby

What *Five Sisters* is About

By Emma Biggs and Matthew Collings

Making and meaning

We want this show to be beautiful. Many people assume beauty is unserious — work is the serious thing. They might also believe that history is a matter of what happened in the past and don't necessarily think about how every aspect of existence connects to history. What we're trying to do with *Five Sisters* is expose the link between history, beauty and work — making an enormous recycling project not just literally with broken or fragmented forms, but exposing the historical fragments of ideas that underlie the way all of us see, and think. Our approach has been to create this new work, including paintings (*Paintress 1–20*) and a mosaic (*Clay End*), in response to another work — the Five Sisters in York Minster (see fig 9, p.10). This famous grisaille window — 'grisaille' is a method of painting using only monochrome, or shades of one colour; it means grey background — was completed in 1260.

Our installation brings together a modernist approach to materials — rightness and balance of design, an awareness of intrinsic physical qualities — with an inquiry into history and society. Some aspects of this attempt to look at one thing through another are quite literal. For example, the mosaic is constructed largely out of thirteenth and fourteenth century pottery fragments (known as 'sherds'), which have been made available by York Museums Trust. Sometimes the relationship of elements is more distanced, or in the realm of metaphor or allegory. In this case, the example might be the diamond-shapes of the grid pattern of the paintings, which echo the diamond grids of the windows of York St Mary's (see fig 2, p.2). But also the shimmering greys and off whites of the paintings are intended to recall the delicious variations of transparency and structured irregularity of the Minster window. And the mosaic is composed in a regular circular pattern that has constant irregularities, again recalling the window (see figs 5 and 6, this page).

For us these visual correlates are connected to ideas about society, history and work (and what the purpose of work might be). Our project allegorises these issues. Think of the treatment of the material from which the mosaic is made. Some circular sections or roundels consist entirely of ceramic ware indented by thumbprints of medieval potters (see fig 28, p.21), or rings in the clay produced by their fingers as they threw the pots (see fig 29, p.21), or marks made by the milling tools with which they decorated the pots. These deliberate groupings highlight the hand-made nature of medieval production, as opposed to the industrial production of today. In the making of *Clay End*, Biggs sometimes used medieval glazed ware exactly as it was found when it was dug up, but sometimes she reformed it. Cutting through the ceramic sherd, in order to re-shape the ware, occasionally revealed something else — a surprising secret hidden within the clay. The body of the clay has 'black-cored' — a consequence of the initial firing in the kiln which excluded oxygen. The beautiful effects black-coring produces (from inky blue-black to delicate greys at the heart of rings of gentle apricots, peaches and pinks, the latter created by allowing oxygen into the kiln at the end of the firing) tell the viewer about the technology of the time and the nature of the potters' work (see fig 26, p.20). It is also a clue to some of its difficulty. Black coring can be viewed as a 'fault', it can lead to bloating of the pot as it fires, weakness in the pot and explosions in the kiln. Today, people are used to uniformity of production. Pots made to the same shape, from the same clay, are likely to be more or less identical — our mosaic aims to highlight both similarities and differences, whether it is of colour, or of form. Similar forms have been grouped together, but these small collections of like objects often serve to highlight their individuality (see figs 19–25, pp.18,19).

The circular arrangement of the mosaic echoes the geometric forms, largely based around circles, in York Minster's Five

fig 5. The Five Sisters window, detail. Photograph: Louise Haywood-Schiefer

fig 6. Clay End, detail. Photograph: Emma Biggs

Sisters window itself (see figs 11,12, p.10). Biggs improvised the asymmetrical placement of the fragments that make up the circles in *Clay End*. The main principle of her invented form was to highlight qualities the ceramic material possessed. These might be the reflectivity of the green glaze used in the medieval period, or differences coming from the way the material was fired — smoky greys rather than vivid peach colour — or it might be finding strange sculptural forms created by the handles or broken bodies of the vessels (see fig 15, p.13).

The use of medieval ceramic ware as the main material of *Clay End* is very important, it's about history itself. The medieval sherds with which Biggs created the mosaic have been preserved and treasured, just as the York Minster window has been preserved and restored, and all this careful conservation over the centuries has an end: people want to understand themselves and where they come from.

One can also see that the allegory of the role of labour, skill and value in the Five Sisters window is continued in the paintings we've created for the project and placed at either end of York St Mary's. These paintings are abstract. They don't picture the York Minster window or copy them — it's more like a relationship of visual metaphor. The link is the fragmentary look of both. Geometrical rigour has been subject to random arrangement, stemming from considerations of colour, tone and overall balance, (see fig 14, p.12). With the Minster window visual fragmentation is the result of careful preservation, the labour of generations of conservators. The glass is preserved, and in the overall compositional structure, which has arisen haphazardly (and doesn't replicate the original foliate design) a new expression of the old design has emerged. These paintings, which we create through a division of labour, Biggs conceiving and Collings executing, have a fragmented, shimmery, intensely intricate and faceted look — the result of endless revision. Our jointly-made paintings usually have vibrant, rich colours but for *Five Sisters* the colour level was radically altered — every painting is made up of a variety of gradations of white and grey, like the grisaille of the Minster window. The paintings take a long time to do and a number of factors go into them: sheer lines are countered by brushy, scrubby surfaces: balance and harmony are arrived at by trial and error (see fig 7, this page).

They are not made according to a rigid system — the diamonds are sometimes vertical and sometimes horizontal (see figs 30,31, pp.22,23), the form of the canvases may or may not be square (see fig 14, p.12). Within the geometric system, we allow ourselves freedom in the service of visual liveliness and animation. Some decisions are spontaneous: a green tone will suddenly go pink or yellow — such moves are not intellectual but simply what feels right. The brushy look of the surfaces is not calculated but arises from a natural, intuitive involvement with materials: the viscosity of the paint, the weave of the canvas. This range of variables both responds to the rules of the tradition of pleasure in visual depiction, and demonstrates (by looking at the meaning of creative work) a more knowing awareness that this kind of freedom, this kind of 'work', is ideologically loaded.

We are looking at the meaning of these gestures through a joint sensibility formed by post-postmodernism. When you've got an installation like this, where the viewer is asked to engage with at least three traditions or periods of history: medievalism, modernism, postmodernism, you see that meaning changes — nothing is fixed forever.

There is an accumulation of skills behind the medieval window as everyone now sees it, and the same applies to this set of twenty-first century paintings — they are both multi-faceted, like our installation as a whole. There are the skills of the people who mended and preserved the window, and with us the skills include those that we employ in our individual working lives outside our collaboration,

fig 7. Paintress, detail.
Photograph: Shannon Tofts

aspects of which we bring to bear in the studio. We work together as artists but we have other lives too. (As well as being a practising mosaicist, Biggs teaches mosaic and writes about its history and techniques, and Collings is the author of many books and TV programmes about traditional and contemporary art.) All our work involves crafting, making and visualising, as well as intellectually analysing, criticising, and re-presenting. The fragmented nature of our work — artist/teacher/explainer/describer — and the fragmentation you see in *Five Sisters* — both the mosaic and the paintings — responds to and allegorises modern times, modern people's inability to believe in one overarching ideology. Of course when the Five Sisters window was conceived no one would have questioned the idea that a work of art would contain a single unitary viewpoint. Our installation isn't at all a cry for a return to medievalism. It's basically about creating something for our own age that looks great. But its proposal is also that meaning and history, and objects made for visual or social use are culturally labile — 'meaning' isn't fixed, it moves around.

Use of materials

A note about materials — there are two sorts of sherds that have been used for the mosaic. Sherds that have archaeological and historical importance are accessioned into York Museums Trust's collections. These sherds have been marked with a code which you may see written on some of the pots (although mostly it's hidden because of the way the pieces have been laid) and could not be cut up in any way. Unaccessioned sherds that have no archaeological or historical value have been cut in order to make a form that can demonstrate something about their physical history. The sherds are laid using a non-toxic water-soluble glue. At the end of the exhibition all the accessioned sherds will be returned to the museum.

The mosaic is actually made from different materials, new as well as old. The principle one is the thirteenth and fourteenth century pottery. But in order for the variety of forms to be made clear another one has been used as a background, rather

fig 8. View along *Clay End* towards *Paintress 1–8*. Photograph: Shannon Tofts

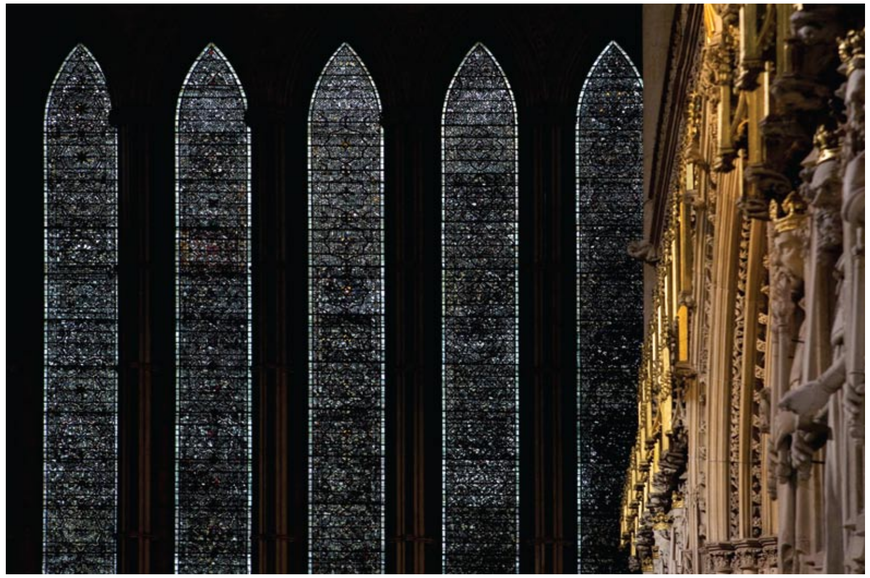


fig 9. The Five Sisters window, York Minster. Photograph: Louise Haywood-Schiefer

fig 10. Drawing of the Five Sisters window by John Browne.

fig 11. Five Sisters window, detail. Photograph: Emma Biggs

fig 12. Clay End, detail. Photograph: Miki Slingsby

like the lead in the Five Sisters window. This is a modern soft, unglazed ceramic mosaic tile. (You can see it surrounding both the large and small circles).

This is really all we have to say about *Five Sisters*. We want people to feel OK about just enjoying the look of it. We feel privileged to have been allowed to make something for this resonant and beautiful location. But you might like to know a bit more about the history of the Five Sisters window. We like to think of our project at York St Mary's as a sort of consciousness raising exercise: there are still some things in life that resist contemporary technology. The window is completely un-photographable in our opinion, and the only way to appreciate it properly is to go and see it.

Reassembling

The Five Sisters window was once much more visually predictable than it seems today. The whole thing has been described as a 'glorious wreck' — a collage of different kinds of glass, from a variety of periods. The dark matrix holding the glass pieces in place is lead, and there are now many more leaded sections than there would have been. The original medieval geometric foliate design has been reassembled over the centuries in an attempt to save and hold in place panes that have broken. The window even includes a curious figurative section of coloured Norman glass — a vignette of Daniel in the Lion's Den — entirely foreign to the geometrical rigour of the original. The story goes that this section of the window was destroyed by a stray cannon ball during the Civil War. The thirteenth century design was made with grisaille glass. Mainly white, (although medieval glass was often more green or grey than truly white) and the surface decorated with vitreous glass paint, it was then fired in a kiln to make the paint more permanent. Five Sisters also had small quantities of coloured stained glass — used sparingly to help define the geometric patterns. A hand coloured watercolour drawing made before the catastrophic fire in the Minster in 1840 (see fig 10, opposite) clearly shows the medieval design.

This fire severely damaged the windows. A great deal of the glass was salvaged, but many panes were replaced. Only traces of the foliate design survive (see fig 11, opposite).

The Abbey of Fontenay in Burgundy, demonstrates how light and elegant geometric grisaille windows can be (see fig 13, this page). After the fire in York Minster many of the replacement panes for the Five Sisters window were painted with glass paint or stain to reduce the 'glare'. The nineteenth century clergy preferred an ecclesiastical gloom. The Five Sisters was not the only Minster window to have been treated in this way.

In the 1950s, Eric Milner-White, the Very Reverend Dean of York who supervised a great deal of restoration of the Minster's glass, knew and cared about the windows. He embarked on a (never completed) personal campaign to scratch off the nineteenth century stain, which he felt was anachronistic, and an aesthetic error.

The window is an accretion of numerous styles. No one conceived it to look as it does today. Gleaming with a thousand variations of transparency, like mother of pearl, the five 'lights' (as the individual windows are known) are rigorously ordered, but also free, asymmetrical and unpredictable. They have an anachronistic modernism. Their visual appeal comes partly from a quality of restraint they must always have had, but also from a reinterpretation given by careful preservation and repair. Centuries of being remade seems to have given Five Sisters a greater visual weight than something conceived from a single unitary viewpoint.

The way fragments of objects and ideas are constantly reassembled into something new — and can quite literally be remade — is what *Five Sisters* is about, and it's what we always want to get across in our work — whatever form it may take.

fig 13. Grisaille window in Fontenay Abbey. Photograph: George Walker

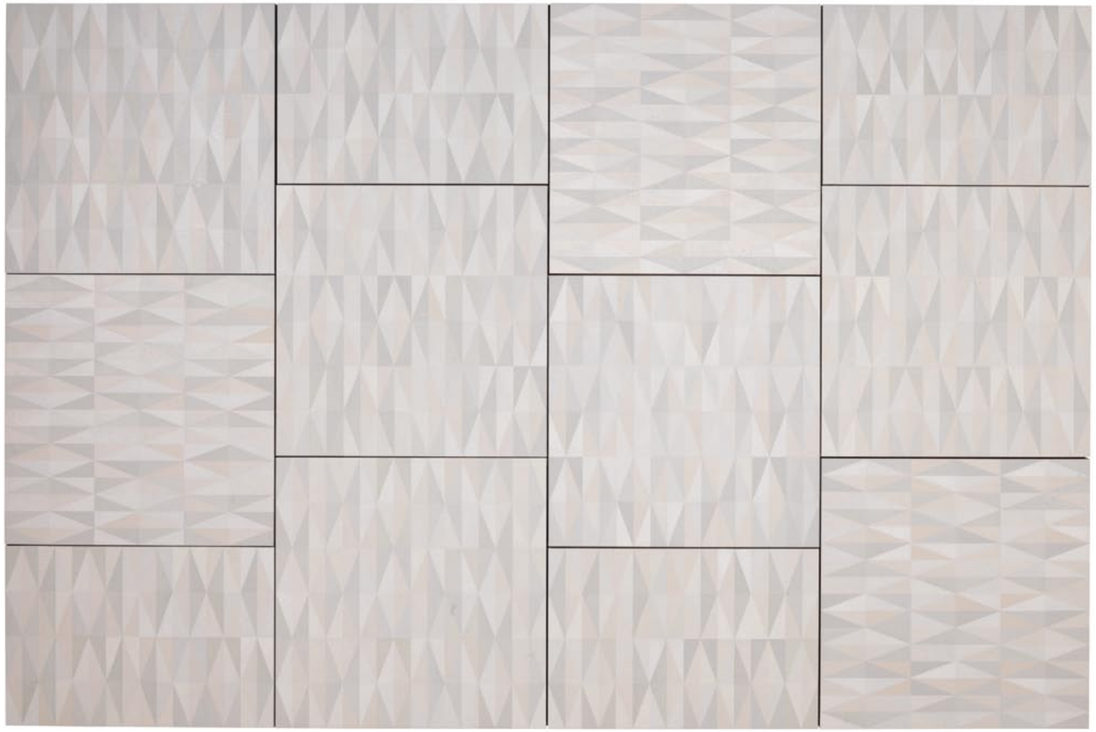


fig 14. Paintress 9–20, oil on canvas, 200 × 300cm. Photograph: Shannon Tofts

fig 15. Clay End, detail. Photograph: Shannon Tofts

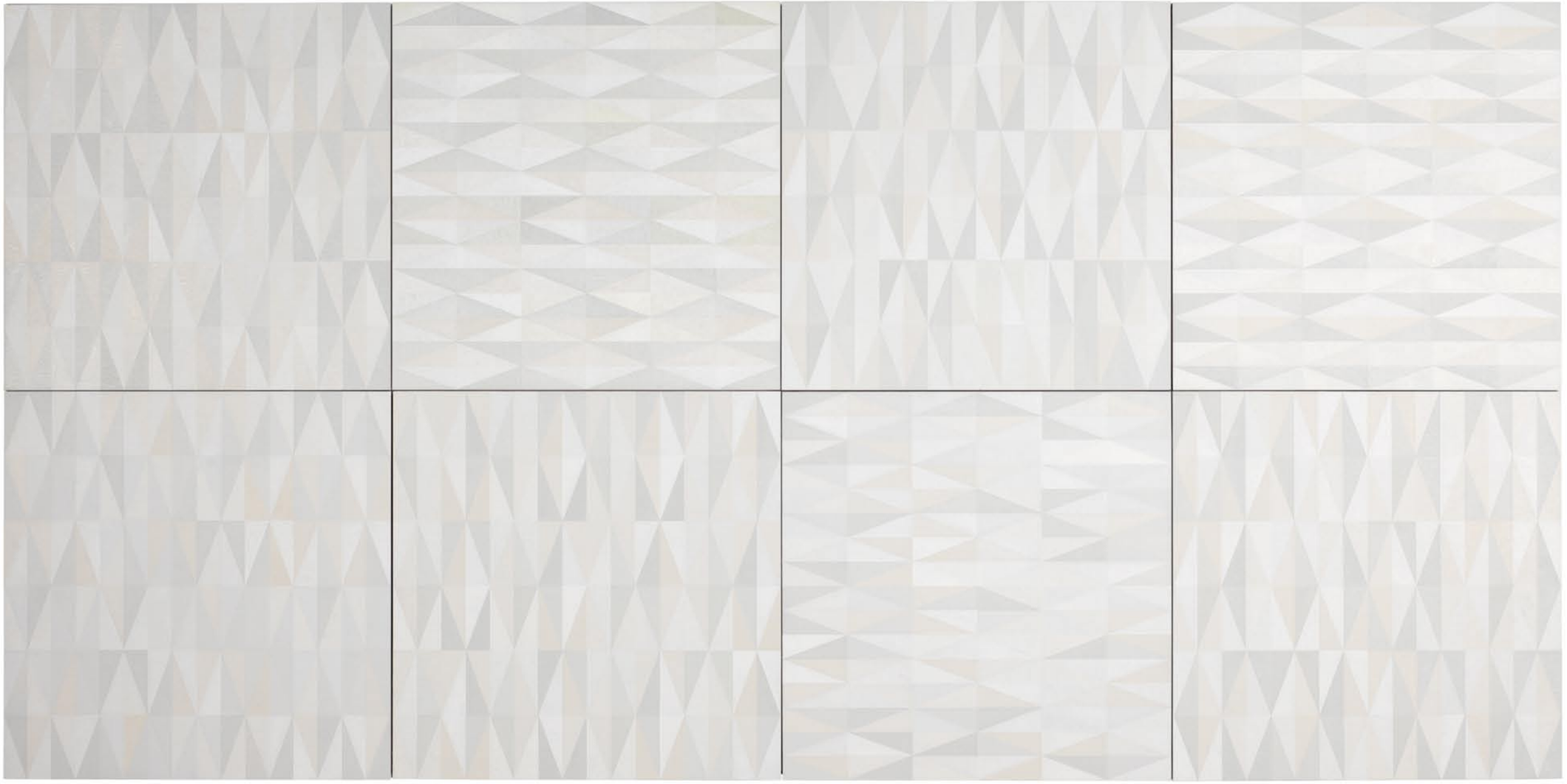


fig 16. Paintress 1–8, oil on canvas, 150 × 300cm. Photograph: Shannon Tofts

fig 17. Paintress 1–8 No. 8, detail. Photograph: Shannon Tofts

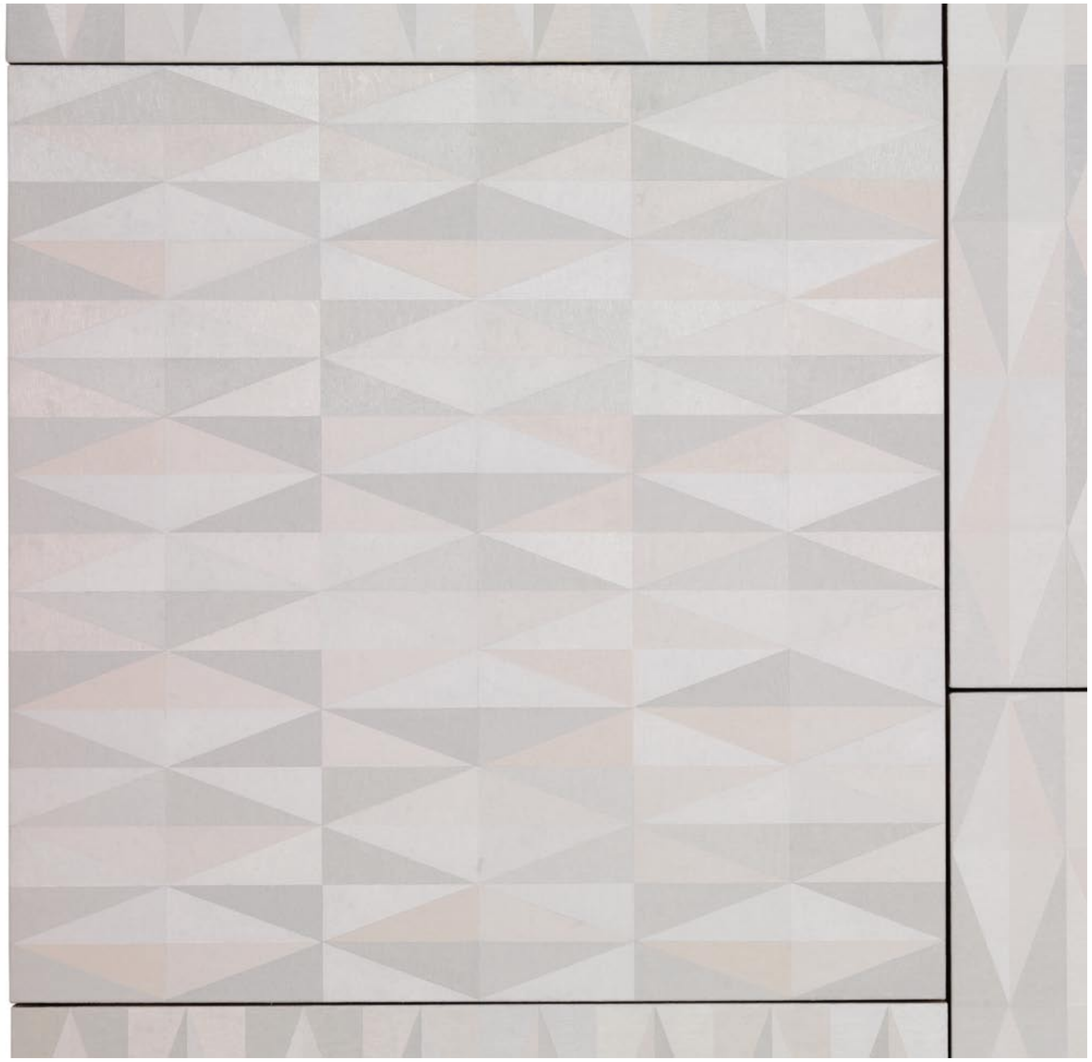
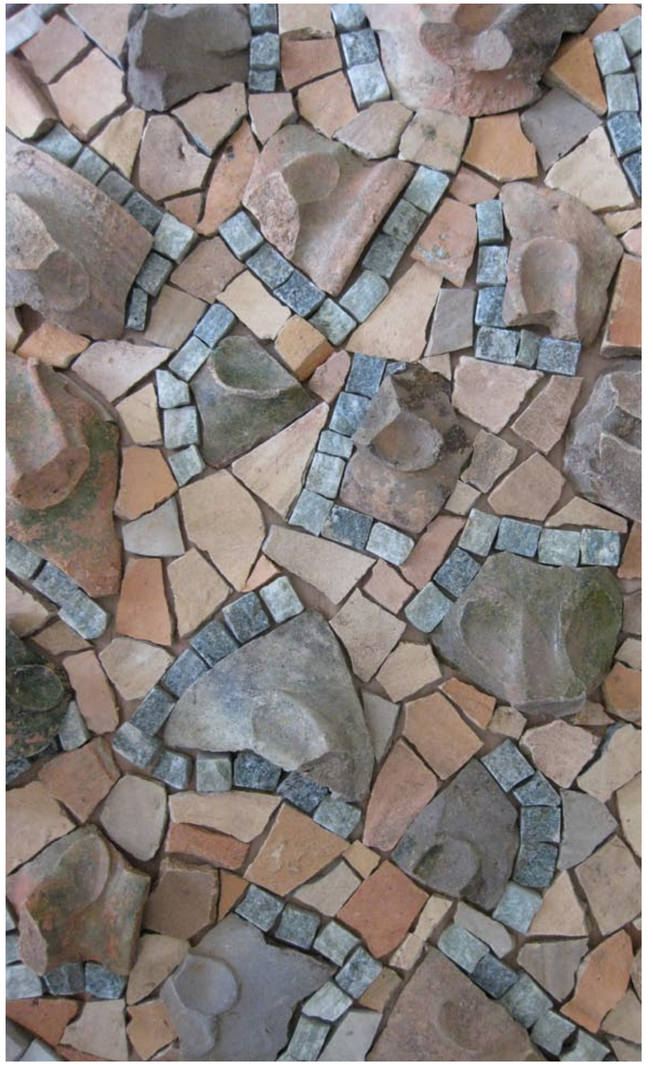


fig 18. Paintress 9–20, detail, oil on canvas. Photograph: Shannon Tofts

figs 19-25, Clay End, details (this page top 19, bottom 20, 21,22. Opposite top 23, bottom 24, 25). Photographs: Louise Haywood-Schiefer (19,20) Emma Biggs (21–25)



figs 26–29. *Clay End*, details. Photographs: Emma Biggs

fig 30. Paintress 1–8, No.2, 75 × 75cm. Photograph: Shannon Tofts

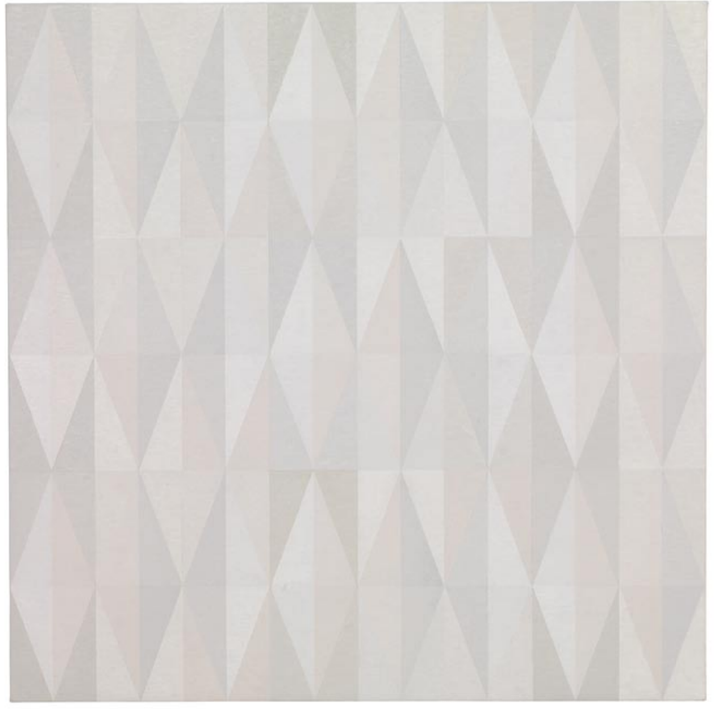


fig 31. Paintress 9–20, No.18, 75 × 75cm. Photograph: Shannon Tofts

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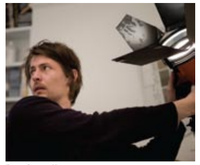

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