1 *Don't You Know It's Gonna Be All Right,* 2004, W480cm **2** *…With Sovereignty and Action* (detail), 2006, W480cm **3** *Old New Borrowed Blue,* mural at Churchill Hospital, Oxford

Tilted & Skewed

Bonnie Kemske is mesmerised by Robert Dawson's intriguing tiled walls.





In *The Eyes of the Skin* the Finnish architect Juhani Pallasmaa challenges our culture's emphasis on visual clarity. His statement that our experience is adversely limited by our obsession with 'focused vision, conscious intentionality and perspectival representation', can just as easily be applied to contemporary ceramics. He proposes that we cultivate our unfocused and peripheral vision to take us beyond being 'mere spectators'. Robert Dawson's works, in particular his large tile installations, exploit these issues as he plays both clarity and perspective off each of their opposites and off our own expectations.

When speaking to Dawson it is easy to see that these artistic issues arise from a view of the world that is, to say the least, unsettled. Perhaps this view is partly due to his undefined identity. Most of us are given our cultural and national identities – Dawson seems not to have inherited one. Although now London-based, he was born in the USA and raised in Geneva, but considers neither his home. 'The world is so uncertain', he says, 'and I've always felt uncertain about myself. It's like being stoned or something, where things are tilted, skewed. But not just the outside things – things on the inside too'.

He has turned this unsettled outlook into a strength in works such as *Don't You Know It's Gonna Be All Right* (2004), a large tiled mural of a repeated familiar motif that visually pulls away, distorts and disintegrates in the centre. Our normal orientation is challenged in works such as *Verticality* (2007), where dinner plates based on the Willow Pattern, which you would expect to see flat on a table, are mounted as a vertical wall installation. Again, in *Floored* (2008) an image based on Victorian Minton floor tiles is mounted on the vertical. Yellow Brick Road meets Alice's Looking Glass; the tiles lead you towards a vanishing point somewhere in the distance, but rather than being underfoot, they go up and into the wall. As you look at *Shallow Bond* (2008) you suddenly recognise its purply-blue



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waves as the marks in the adhesive that a tiler makes to secure the tiles to the wall, what Dawson calls the professional tiler's 'action painting'. What was hidden has migrated to become the focus.

Dawson's earlier well-known plates with distorted and fragmented blue Willow Pattern – for instance *Can You Walk From the Garden? Does Your Heart Understand?* (1995) and *In Perspective Willow* (1996) – were made through the use of photography, especially the wide-angle lens. 'You get these angles that don't really exist and you can employ many camera angles, because we live in a world where the language of photography now exists and we are familiar with it. Like you can put a movie camera on the floor and shoot from there, but in the past nobody would paint a picture from a position such

4 *Play On*, The Art House, Wakefield
5 *After Willow Pattern* platter, Ø32cm
6 Untitled (floor tiles), print on ceramic tiles, 2003, W15cm each **7** *Verticality*, print on bone china, Ø27cm each **8** Untitled (tilings with urinal images), print on ceramic tiles, H210cm (with Steve Bunn)



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as that.' The photographs were then screen-printed (in the earliest work) and reproduced using a photocopier (in the later).

In the current work photographs are manipulated on the computer, then pushed beyond the software's limits to create unfocused areas and, in some cases, 'tide marks' and what appear to be contour lines. An example of this is *You Too Can be Confident* (2000), a 1.2 x 4.8 metre wall installation, where a focused aspect becomes simply blue and a baroque pattern becomes unreadable. Dawson has stretched the normal constraints of the software to produce this 'accidental' blurred decoration, rather than the rigidly focused and more controlled and defined images normally associated with the use of the computer.

Another large tiled project that could not have been created without the computer was a commission at the Churchill Hospital, Oxford, installed in July 2008. Made in standard 15 x 15 centimetre tiles, the mural consists of one image, a close-up of a giant tilted blue Willow Pattern plate that more than fills the wall, spanning 3.7 x 7.5 metres. Of all Dawson's wall work, this one may be the most immediate and powerful to date. The giant plate appears to be dramatically sliding off the wall to the floor beneath your feet.

THE GRID Underlying all the visual warpages and distortions he uses is the permanence of the tile grid. Dawson uses perfectly formed industrially-produced tiles. 'The grid becomes the sanity that shows up the insanity'. He has further exploited this in a commission for The Art House in Wakefield, Yorkshire, which provides studio and exhibition opportunities to disabled and non-disabled artists and craftspeople. Entitled *Play On* (2007) the piece comprises approximately




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2,500 tiles and through seven discrete panels spans 28 metres, almost covering the upper area of the building's façade. In this multi-sectioned mural the original black and white grid of a chessboard goes from small to large with Escher-esque corners, twists, and impossible angles. As with much of his work, the optical illusions have multi-stability, the images move inwards and outwards, being visually neither stable nor totally unstable.

Not all the tiled work is on the scale of public art however. *Durbar* (2008) is made up of two panels of nine 15 x 15 centimetre tiles in 3 x 3 grids. This piece takes its inspiration from the Durbar Hall in Hastings Museum, Kent, created by nineteenth century Indian craftsmen using Islamic patterns. In this piece Dawson explored and exploited 'accidental' cracking through several different processes, which included photography, laser printing of iron oxide and the cracking quality of clay. Having made nine cracked tiles that make up a square he had photographic transfers made for another nine.



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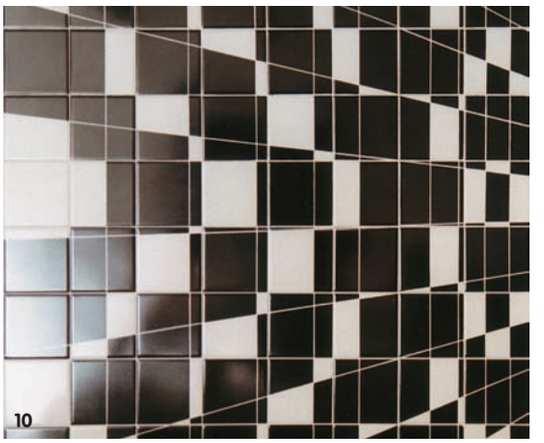

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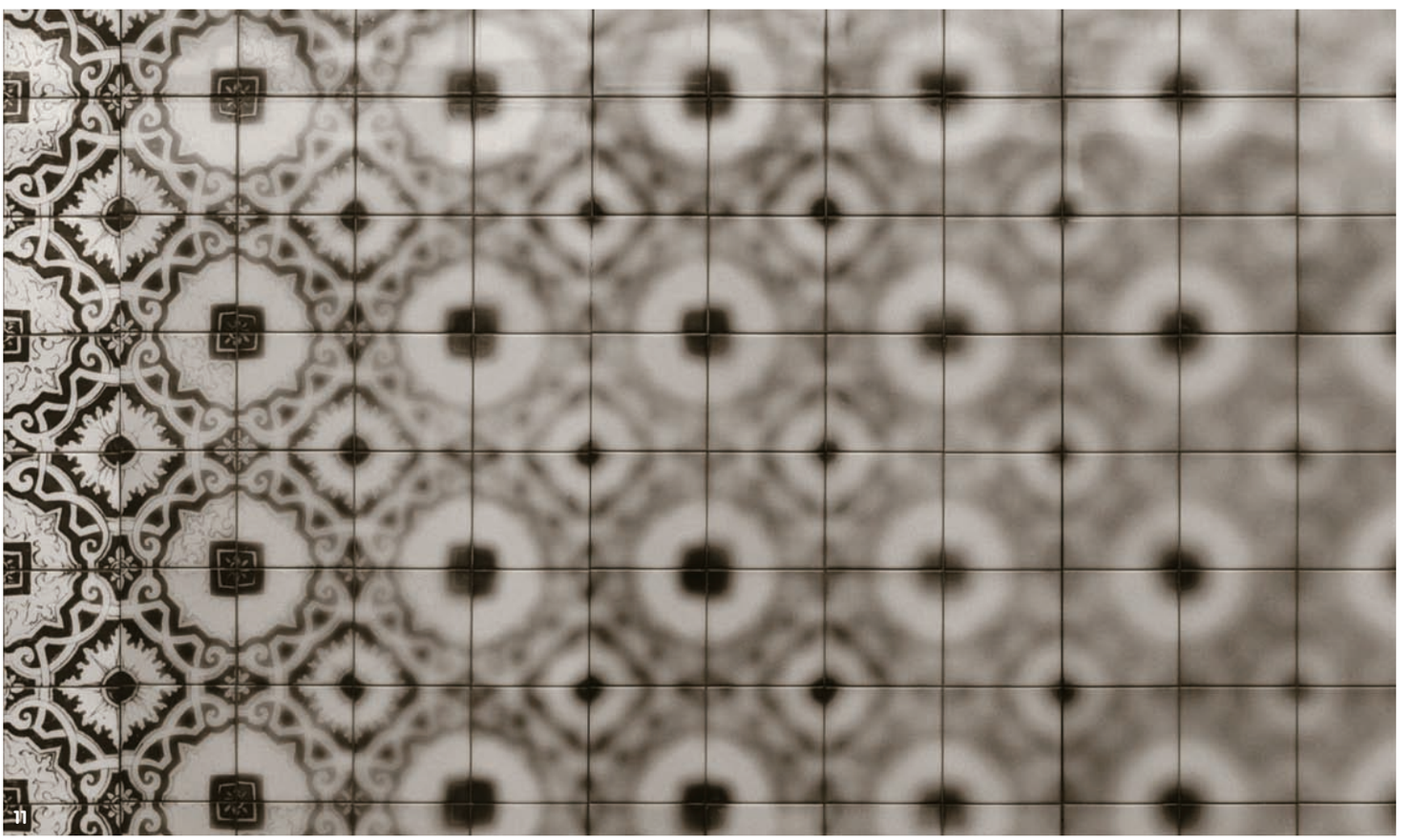

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So the image was re-created but with a markedly different quality. The two types of tiles, cracked in reality and cracked in image, were intermingled on the two panels.

In creating new work, Dawson says he is often motivated by a desire to avoid the current fashions in ceramics and the broader art world. When he sees something, he is impelled to create the opposite. He says that this is because he does not look deep inside (and does not want to), but reacts with immediacy to the world around him. The embrace of the different perspective and the skewed outlook that is evident in his work, leads him to state, 'The only thing I'd "worship" is the mystery itself – and instability, change, and our insecurity. If we didn't have these, if we weren't so vulnerable, life would be unliveable.' This attitude reflects a kind of self-effacing self-consciousness that is evident in his work, a quality that is both engaging and rewardingly demanding at the same time.

Dawson does not like to be referred to as a post-modernist, yet the uncertainty he expresses both personally and in his work exemplifies post-modernism, as does his discerning references to ceramic history, his use of ornate decorative prints that he presents

9 *…With Sublimation Climaxing,* 2005, W800cm **10** *In Perspective* tiling, 1993, W120cm **11** *You Too Can be Confident* (detail), 2000, W180cm **12** *Can You Walk From the Garden? Does Your Heart Understand?,* 1995, Ø27cm each

Exhibitions *Object Factory: the Art of Industrial Ceramics,* Museum of Arts and Design, New York, USA, 6 May-23 August 2009; *House of Words: Celebrating the tercentenary of the birth of Dr Johnson in 2009,* Dr Johnson's House, London, June-August 2009; *Fragiles – Porcelain, Glass & Ceramics,* Al Sabbah Art and Design Collection, Dubai, Summer 2009 (dates to be confirmed); V&A New Ceramics Galleries, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, opening 18 September 2009
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with both gentle mockery and deference, the fragmentation of those images and the disturbance of perspective that de-centres the viewer. More than any of these, however, it is his quiet use of irony that shouts post-modernism loudest – irony of perspective, of planar orientation and of the sabotage of familiar patterns and images that form part of our ceramic vocabulary. However, it is an irony without cynicism or cruelty, a positive, softly-humoured challenge rather than a brutal attack. CR