



Forests of Gold
Tiles by Boris Aldridge



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Text by Lucien de Guise

Boris Aldridge is among the most creative studio ceramicists in the UK today. Born in Dublin in 1974, he has been hand crafting his distinctively unique tiles in Suffolk for almost 20 years.

Inspired by a high point in the history of tile making, his imagination is fired constantly by lustre wares from 13th-century Iran. In common with their calligraphic emphasis, he complements the shimmering gold and lively imagery of his works with words from the music and poetry that he writes.

His message is spread not only by his creations but also by the interest that he has generated through lectures and workshops conducted in the UK and overseas.

Foreword



From the moment I was presented with Boris's tile depicting a leaping golden hare on an intense cobalt-blue background, I was captivated. It was more than the undeniable beauty of his work; there was also the charm, purity and innocence of the image. I wanted to see more creations by this extraordinary artist.

I was shown other tiles that contained lines of beautiful words. A welcome surprise was the realisation that Boris is also a poet, and that sections of his poems sometimes appear on the tiles alongside the wonderful images. This added dimension – the amalgamation of shimmering images and English poetry – offers an irresistible attraction.

In an increasingly divided world, where being united is more important than ever, Boris's creations bring together cultures from distant lands. His inspiration to develop a new approach to tiles originated after visiting the magnificent palace of Alhambra. This, combined with the love he has always had for Persian medieval lustre tiles, led to the creations presented in this book.

In 2019, a decision was made by our gallery to share Boris's wonderful ceramic tiles with our clients and friends. His first solo exhibition that year, titled 'Aurum', was a huge success and resulted in a substantial commission by a prominent French collector. Today, Boris's work is housed and cherished in many private collections around the world, and his *Blue Forest No.1* panel has been shortlisted for the Royal Academy's Summer Exhibition 2022.

This publication aims to showcase the range of Boris's tiles produced in the past three years, as well as to introduce his work to art lovers who have not yet come across his magical harvest of dexterity and imagination.

There is no doubt that Boris is a very talented ceramicist, poet and musician. Above all, he is a true English gentleman. Thank you, Boris, for your collaboration with our gallery and for giving me a chance to present your enchanting work.

Soha Mohtashemi
April 2022

Introduction



The tentacles of inspiration spread far and take a long time. It would be hard to imagine two more different environments than rural Suffolk and the Iranian city of Kashan. One is as green now as it was when Constable painted its watery pleasures 200 years ago; the other is a small metropolis on the edge of a desert. The medium that brings these two poles together is ceramics, especially the wall tiles created in Kashan during the 12th and 13th centuries.

Boris Aldridge's Suffolk studio is less a shrine to Persian antiquity than a modern conductor of the tremendous energy and imagination that is often overlooked in the current rush for the contemporary. Every form of art involves continuity with the past. Artists either deny it in the pursuit of presumed originality or they acknowledge it with gratitude. Aldridge veritably embraces it.

Passion and perseverance are vital for ceramics. This is not a field that requires simply picking up a brush and daubing when you feel like it. Designing, moulding, incising, painting, firing, painting again and another firing are all part of a lustre process that requires total commitment. It's an intensive activity. The centres of ceramic production rise and fall, sometimes permanently.

Aldridge's inspiration is from a world that was once the aesthetic rage and has been off the popular radar for a hundred years or more. Like William Morris and William De Morgan, the prime movers of England's Arts and Crafts movement, Aldridge is captivated by the Islamic world. There was no single golden age, although for ceramics a contender would be Persia of the 12th and 13th centuries. It remains an era still filled with the lingering memory of romantic names. The science and poetry of Omar Khayyam are matched by the mysticism of Rumi and the rise of Sufism.

When the connoisseurship of Islamic culture really got going, in the late 19th century, it went by the name of 'Persian' art. Persia is the Islamic aesthetic heartland, of course, but it is not the entirety. The recent 'Epic Iran' exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum shows the full art history of a land with constantly shifting frontiers and cultures. There was a strong presence of wall tiles from the two centuries of Kashan's creative supremacy.



For Aldridge, these tiles provide a direct connection with another, unknowable age. It was by no means the most rabidly religious era in Islamic history. More of the supposed rules were broken there than in most places. In the arts, miniature paintings proliferated with living beings, as did weavings and metalwork. Ceramics acquired an extraordinary richness and diversity of subject matter. In both three-dimensional vessels and two-dimensional tiles, it was a world alive with creative innovation and technical ingenuity. People featured prominently.

Human subjects are not the focus of Aldridge's work. His dreamlike vision is driven by a proliferation of flora and even more fauna. Every available space is consumed by the natural world. Space itself is determined by geometry.

"For me, geometry finds its ultimate expression in the tile. There's something deeply satisfying in creating these incredibly complex geometric interweaving patterns using nothing more than a straight edge and a compass."

The vigorous spirit of the earlier lustre tiles is still alive, enabling this courtly West Asian culture to communicate with a ceramicist from East Anglia. In fact the new Mongol overlords of Persia were former nomads dipping a toe into more settled life while retaining their deep love of nature. The founder of the Il-khanid dynasty was a grandson of Genghis Khan who chose to roam the land with a tent after conquering the richest region in the world at the time.

Although Aldridge is not a nomad, nature is all around him and is as intrinsic to his work as geometry. A tremendous menagerie shines forth from his tiles. Creatures that are now extinct rub shoulders with the commonplace and with those that only ever existed in fantasy. His tiles are made singly or as panels that are more than the sum of their parts. He creates entire worlds that reflect the walls of Persia in that golden age. The tilework of that era is often a canopy that clothes the inside of buildings, just as glorious textiles once embellished the Il-khanid tents.



Il-khanid buildings are a more lasting legacy. Their tiles, in particular, have impressed ever since. Many a tomb has been raided to satisfy the urge to own a piece of this history. Aldridge's response is creative rather than destructive. Like those distant exemplars, his tiles are equally imposing when seen as a solitary work on a stand or as a panel fixed to the wall. He has given his life to furthering the art of the tile. For this artist, ceramics are anything but an inflexible canvas.

"Wall tiles occupy a unique position at the intersect of art and architecture."

His tiles are a thin layer of luminosity. They have more substance than a canvas and yet are not a sculpture in the round. They are more durable than most media, combining delicacy with a robust permanence. For the fullest effect, they need to be seen from different angles, catching the light as the viewer moves around. They are stationary and yet constantly changing. It is their lustre finish that helps them transcend the straightjacket of wall décor. It's a difficult, complicated and expensive technique that raises his tiles and their Persian ancestors from the potential deadness of two dimensions.

Eight hundred years ago, the potters of Kashan in northwestern Persia perfected the lustreware technique. In addition to lustre, they also took enamelled ceramics and other pioneering techniques to a level that even China had trouble rivalling.

In the Suffolk studio, lustre is the lodestone. It's almost as hard to explain the process as it is to produce, which doesn't stop him trying. Sometimes the magic is lost when too much time is spent under the microscope. This is not a newly analysed science. There are detailed descriptions from circa 1300. These would no doubt have appealed to scientific minds at the time but had minimal effect on those who preferred to marvel at wall coverings that transported them to a celestial realm. It is perhaps no coincidence that by far the greatest number of lustre tiles were seen by the flickering light of great leaders' tombs.



Two firings and the use of metal oxides are just part of the journey from clay that isn't really clay to a product that comes out differently every time. Nature has a part to play whenever lustreware is fired in the kiln. It's like travelling back to the age of photographic darkrooms and the emergence of something wondrous from an unpromisingly small and confusing negative. The difference is that with a photograph you can eventually replicate a print countless times with some consistency. With Aldridge's lustreware, nature always intervenes.

“The Japanese aesthetic of wabi-sabi is centered on the appreciation of a beauty that is imperfect, impermanent and incomplete. It's what gives life and character to my work. I find that the more 'perfect' and 'blemish free' a ceramic piece is the more lifeless and severe they appear. For that reason, I make sure that during the creative process I incorporate these principles of wabi-sabi into my own practice.”

Unpredictability is a vital ingredient in fine-art ceramics, but with tiles there is the added excitement of how harmoniously the different tile components work with their neighbours. Back in Kashan, where hundreds of tiles were often grouped together, consistency would have been essential. It's understandable that master ceramicists of that era have their names inscribed on tiles more than at any other point in Islamic-art history.

Aldridge is less concerned with applying his signature than with a different form of written expression. There are two sides to his tiles – not literally, as the back isn't meant to be seen. Instead there is the visual and the verbal. Seldom do artists bring these together, but then how often are artists poets as well? William Blake is one of the few, and he also happens to be an Aldridge favourite.

The most conspicuous feature of his tiles, apart from the tantalisingly irregular gleam of gold, is the text that often runs round the edges. Whether octagonal or cross-shaped, the words work perfectly with the medium. When they appear, Aldridge's words are almost the essence of the work, adding another dimension of balance and harmony.

His writings usually has an independent meaning from the images they surround, which makes them similar to the calligraphic borders on those ancient Kashan tiles. What is different is the sketchy nature of the old inscriptions, which lack the solidity of the newer works. Most importantly, those ornamental jottings of old were painted on the tiles by ceramicists using other people's words.

Aldridge's words are all his own. Fitting them into the space available is another part of the process that raises his art to a higher level. It also highlights why Western artists have tended not to try. Persia in the 12th and 13th centuries was increasingly open to East Asian influence in motifs rather than calligraphy. With Chinese and Japanese art, integrating words and images is at the heart of creativity; even better if you can also incorporate some music. Aldridge is, by the way, inclined to setting his words to music too.

Wall tiles with calligraphy are not part of the East Asian tradition, it is the Islamic world that mastered this medium. The integration of calligraphy and imagery reached its aesthetic summit in the tiles of medieval Kashan.

It is not just the lustre tiles of Kashan that have moved Aldridge in the direction he has taken. Buildings from as far west as the Alhambra have shown him the balance that Islamic art and architecture have pursued since the first purpose-built structure went up in the late 7th century. The Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem initiated an approach to design that continues to this day in Suffolk. Aldridge's intention is not to copy the past but to convey his appreciation of it.

"There is much in Islamic calligraphy and art that moves me. If I had to sum this up it would be the fusion of calligraphy, geometry and floral motifs in Islamic art that has had the profoundest influence on me."



Boris Aldridge, always at one with nature.



Wild Sea, 2018

*There's an ocean so vast in the depths of my heart
Where waters run untamed and free
The currents they swirl, some run hot, some run cold
Forever controlling my dreams, while my heart sleeps*

*This wild sea inside of me,
This wild sea won't let me be
This wild sea inside of me,
This wild sea will ever be a part of me*

*How sweetly it shines when the weather is fine
The waves ripple brightly and clear
But when the storm breaks, the Kraken awakes
And he'll drag you down into his lair, so beware*

*This wild sea inside of me,
This wild sea won't let me be
This wild sea inside of me,
This wild sea will ever be a part of me*

*The tides ebb and flow, wheresoe'er I may go
From hilltop to faraway shore
But no matter the place, the time or the space
I'll always hear your siren call
Whene'er I fall*

*This wild sea inside of me,
This wild sea won't let me be
This wild sea inside of me,
This wild sea will ever be a part of me*

THE INVISIBLE FOREST, 2019

Glazed ceramic tiles
120cm square

Collection John Studzinski CBE





THE WHITE HART, 2016

Glazed ceramic tile

24cm high

Among the first lustre star tiles made by Aldridge, this was from before the time he added his own poetry to the compositions. Emily Dickinson's 'The Wounded Deer' has always resonated with him. The poem also seemed to be a perfect match for the mood and content of this tile.

UK private collection





THE GOLDEN HARE, 2018

Glazed ceramic tile

20cm square

This golden hare is not exactly a hare. Aldridge's creation with the head of a hare and the body of a horse was one of his early experiments with animal motifs, in which the artist sought to blur the lines between real and mythical animals. His interest in myths and storytelling goes back long beforehand. To incorporate these into his imagery was the next natural step.

UK private collection





PREHISTORIA, 2018

Glazed ceramic tiles
36cm square

There is an inescapable playfulness about 'Seven Deadly Sins' from the Prehistoria series. It is inspired by one particular Kashan lustre tile, in which the tale of the Persian hero Rustam is accompanied by an unrelated picture. On this occasion Aldridge has deliberately kept considerable distance between text and image.

UK private collection

The Ballad of William Kidd, 2019

*William was a pirate who sailed the seven seas
With a gang of fifty by his side
He plundered and he pillaged for forty seven years
But now his body drifts upon the tide*

*William was a pirate who sailed the ocean wide
With a flintlock pistol by his side
His enemies they trembled when he looked into their eyes
But now his body drifts upon the tide*

*William was a pirate who lived on borrowed time
With the ghosts of victims close behind
Eventually they caught him and sentenced him to die
And now his body drifts upon the tide*



BORDER TILE, 2016

Glazed ceramic tile
27cm high, 30cm wide

This is a most unusual tile from an oeuvre that always has the power to surprise and challenge. The artist's earlier works were more inclined to geometry than figural imagery. In this case, the inspiration comes from two entirely different Islamic-art traditions: Turkey and Morocco. There is a lyrical dynamism generated by two unrelated and unequally proportioned elements.

UK private collection





THE SERPENT, 2019

Glazed ceramic tile
17cm high

UK private collection



A Suffolk Paradise, 2019

*Bring me a boat as tall as a mountain
Wide as the arc of a silvery moon
And we'll sail away across this great ocean
Over the sea to our home*

*Bring me a boat as light as the blossom
Falling like rain on a warm afternoon
And we'll sail away across this great ocean
Over the sea to our home*

*Bring me a boat as strong as a castle
Made for the dreams of a king long ago
And we'll sail away across this great ocean
Over the sea to our home*

*Bring me a boat as bright as the sunbeam
Shining like fire on the earth far below
And we'll sail away across this great ocean
Over the sea to our home*

*Bring me a crew of fine men and women
Working all night by the light of the moon
And we'll sail away across this great ocean
Over the sea to our home*

*So come with me tonight and we'll fly to
our Suffolk Paradise*

THE HARE, 2017

Glazed ceramic tile

54cm wide

It is often the shape of the tile and the patterns of the glaze that determine Aldridge's final decision on compositions before he paints them in lustre. After this half tile had emerged from the kiln, he imagined a hare staring directly back at him.

Lebanese private collection





BIRDS OF PARADISE, 2019

Glazed ceramic tiles

53cm square

The artist's vision of paradise brims with birds – mythical, real and extinct. They live and fly together amid flora that is vivid in his mind. The dodo has a special meaning for him as it occupies the space between myth and reality. Being extinct, like the dinosaurs before it, this flightless bird lives on in art and stories. With such subject matter, the artist's imagination can soar.

My Sweet Valentine, 2019

*We met by the light of a silvery moon
We sang and we danced 'til the day came too soon
Then you went on your way, no more to be mine
Goodbye my sweet valentine*

*We skipped down the hedgerows and old country roads
Until we arrived at a river of gold
Then you bad' me farewell, no more to be mine
Goodbye my sweet valentine*

*Even though you're far away you're always on my mind
I think about you every day, my sweet valentine*

*Your hair shimmered silver, your eyes shone like gold
You laughed when I told you you
I'll never grow old
But you bad' me farewell, no more to be mine
Goodbye my sweet valentine*

*We danced in the light of the stars up above
I thought to myself that we must be in love
But you went on your way, no more to be mine
Goodbye my sweet valentine*

*Even though you're far away you're always on my mind
I think about you every day, my sweet valentine*

*We danced in the light of the old city streets
Your lips met with mine and my heart skipped a beat
Then you went on your way, no more to be mine
Goodbye my sweet valentine*

*Even though you're far away you're always on my mind
I think about you every day, my sweet valentine*

Melody, 2019

*When you walk down the street
Then my heart skips a beat
Melody, I see you in my dreams*

*When your eyes meet with mine
Then I feel so alive
Melody, I see you in my dreams*

*The darkest shadows fall away
Oh I still love you 'till the end of days*

*When you call out my name
Then my heart bursts aflame
Melody, I see you in my dreams*

*When the stars glitter bright
Then I feel such delight
Melody, I see you in my dreams*

*The darkest shadows fall away
Oh I still love you 'till the end of days*





BEASTS OF PARADISE, 2019
Glazed ceramic tiles
53cm square

A Suffolk Carol, 2018

*Once upon a winter's morning
As the snow fell gentle
Came a voice so clear and pure
A melody eternal*

*Sing a song for me, love, a Suffolk lullaby
O sing a song for me, love, a Suffolk lullaby*

*Up above a star was shining
Brightly on a stable
Where a mother rocked her baby
Gently in a cradle*

*Sing a song for me, love, a Suffolk lullaby
O sing a song for me, love, a Suffolk lullaby*

*From afar three wise men travelled
Guided by the starlight
There to greet the newborn babe,
With gifts of wondrous magic*

*Sing a song for me, love, a Suffolk lullaby
O sing a song for me, love, a Suffolk lullaby*

*Hush now baby, softly sleeping
While the snow is falling
Let the world awake in gladness
On this Christmas morning*

*Sing a song for me, love, a Suffolk lullaby
O sing a song for me, love, a Suffolk lullaby*

Autumn Leaves, 2018

*Autumn leaves falling from the old oak trees
On an evening breeze
Empty nests, all the baby birds have long since flown
Now you're on your own*

*Seasons come and seasons go
Summer turns to winter and rain turns into snow
Days grow short and nights grow long
And through it all the autumn leaves are falling ever on*





**DEER, FROM THE NIGHT
FOREST SERIES, 2020**

Glazed ceramic tile
18cm high

UK private collection

A Suffolk Prayer, 2019

*Comfort me, Dear Lord I pray
Always be there by my side
Carry me along the way
To your home in paradise*

*Lift me up, Dear Lord I pray
Should I tumble to the floor
Guide me safely home today
To your celestial shore*

*Oh brother
Can't you see
Oh brother
Soon we will be free*

*Give me hope, Dear Lord I pray
When the shadows start to fall
Light the path so I can see
Clearly now and evermore*

*Shelter me, Dear Lord I pray
From the passage of the storm
Let the dark clouds fall away
With the coming of the dawn*

*Oh brother
Follow me
Oh brother
Soon we will be free*

*Comfort me, Dear Lord I pray
Keep me always by your side
Carry me along the way
To your home in paradise*





THE EMERALD FOREST, 2021

Glazed ceramic tiles

125cm square

Sweeter Than the Rain, 2019

*Ain't no sweeter music than the rain
No there ain't no sweeter music than the rain
Drumming on my doorstep, running down the pane
Ain't no sweeter music than the rain*

*Ain't no valley deeper than my love
No there ain't no valley deeper than my love
Stretching out before me to the stars above
Ain't no valley deeper than my love*

*Ain't no mountain higher than my dreams
No there ain't no mountain higher than my dreams
Rising up like fire to the sky unseen
Ain't no mountain higher than my dreams*

*Ain't no music louder than a choir
There ain't no music louder than a choir
Singing out your sweet name carries me higher
Ain't no music louder than a choir*

*Ain't no sweeter home than paradise
No there ain't no sweeter home than paradise
Carry me triumphant through this stormy night
To my home in God's sweet paradise*



**KOI, FROM THE BLUE FOREST
SERIES, 2021**

Glazed ceramic tile
24.5cm high

Japanese art often makes an entrance in Aldridge's work. By transforming the koi he has so often admired in woodblock prints into lustre tiles, he has paid homage to two traditions. The fish itself is a natural partner to ceramics, with its profound sense of calm and serenity.

A similar tile is in a USA private collection.





**THE GOLDEN HART, FROM THE
BLUE FOREST SERIES, 2021**

Glazed ceramic tile

25cm high

USA private collection

Lord, I'm on My Knees, 2021

*Lord I'm on my knees
My eyes are blind, I can't see
Sweet paradise ain't far away
Take my hand, lead me to your land
And there forever I shall stay*

*Lord I'm on my knees
They knocked me down, I can't breathe
Death's sweet hour is close at hand
Take my crown, I can't wear it now
And lead me to your promised land*

*Lord I'm on my knees
My wounds run deep, my cuts they bleed
Life's sweet light fades from my eyes
Take my soul, make my body whole
And lift me up into the sky*





**TWO DEER, FROM THE
BLUE FOREST SERIES, 2021**

Glazed ceramic tile
23cm high

The spontaneity of this tile's appearance is a reflection of the ceramicist's art, in which nothing can be predicted with absolute certainty. The outcome on this occasion is a burst of colour, like a blazing constellation, combined with a charming feeling of togetherness. It is two deer - and two worlds - in one composition.

USA private collection





Un Cygne Noir, 2020

*Un jour en hiver
J'aperçus un cygne noir
Dont le bec était rouge
Comme du sang*

THE SWAN, 2020

Glazed ceramic tile
18cm high

The artist's facility with the French language enabled him to record his feelings about a black swan he saw in France. Strikingly black and swimming on a lake, the swan was an ideal subject for poetry. The bird he has painted in lustre is not defined by colour but shimmers with ambiguous iridescence.

Similar tiles are in a French private collection.





**PEACOCK, FROM THE BLUE
FOREST SERIES, 2021**

Glazed ceramic tile
25cm high

This peacock radiates geometrical majesty. The tail is inspired by the celestial ceiling of the Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque in Iran, rising like the light of the sun. The gold in lustreware is the ideal expression of solar splendour.



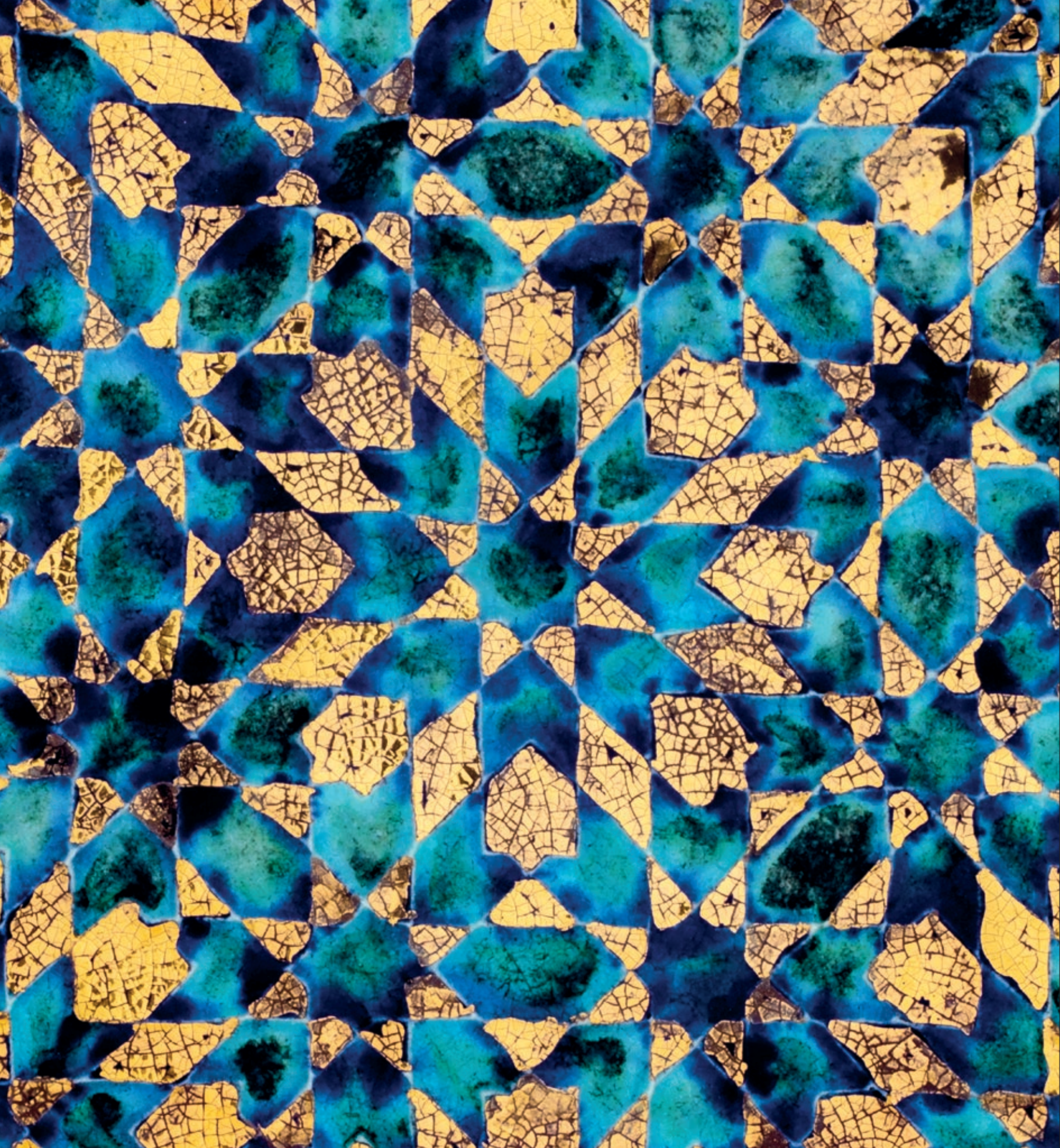
**THE ARCHED HARE, FROM THE
BLUE FOREST SERIES, 2021**

Glazed ceramic tile
19cm high, 21cm wide

Geometry plays an important part
in the form of Aldridge's works. The
arch on this tile has been created
in accordance with the principles
of Islamic geometric design. The
curve follows a set of very particular
parameters. The outcome is pure
harmony.

USA private collection





GEOMETRIC, 2021

Glazed ceramic tile

21cm high

Entirely geometric decoration is relatively rare in this artist's work. After studying Islamic geometric design, he realised that its perfect expression exists in the *Zellij* tiles of Morocco and the *Moraq* mosaics of Iran. His love of the subject still causes him to sometimes create patterns such as this. They are entirely his own and, of course, finished in rich lustre.

USA private collection





THE BLUE FOREST, 2021

Glazed ceramic tiles

125cm square

The size of this panel gives it a monumental presence, tempered by the intimate diversity of the menagerie that proliferates across its weathered surface. This work captures the harmony that is possible with a composition of wall tiles. The worlds of geometry and imagination brought together in two dimensions. If ever viewers were to lose themselves in wonder, the Blue Forest would be the ideal setting.

Dreaming, 2019

*I'm always dreaming of a place to call home
Where the mountains meet the sky
A small wooden cabin forever my home
One day I know you'll be mine*

*Wait there for me by the banks of an old mountain stream
Let your heart run free
in the green rolling valleys of my dreams*

*I'm always dreaming of a sweet paradise
Over the hills and far away
A small meadow garden where my dreams can fly
One day I'll see you again*

*Wait there for me by the banks of an old mountain stream
Let your heart run free
in the green rolling valleys of my dreams*

*I'm always waiting for light from above
Shining brightly through the night
Guide me gently with your tender love
And bring me home to paradise*

*Wait there for me by the banks of an old mountain stream
Let your heart run free
in the green rolling valleys of my dreams*

*I'll keep dreaming
I'll keep dreaming
I'll keep dreaming
Of the day you and I will meet again*

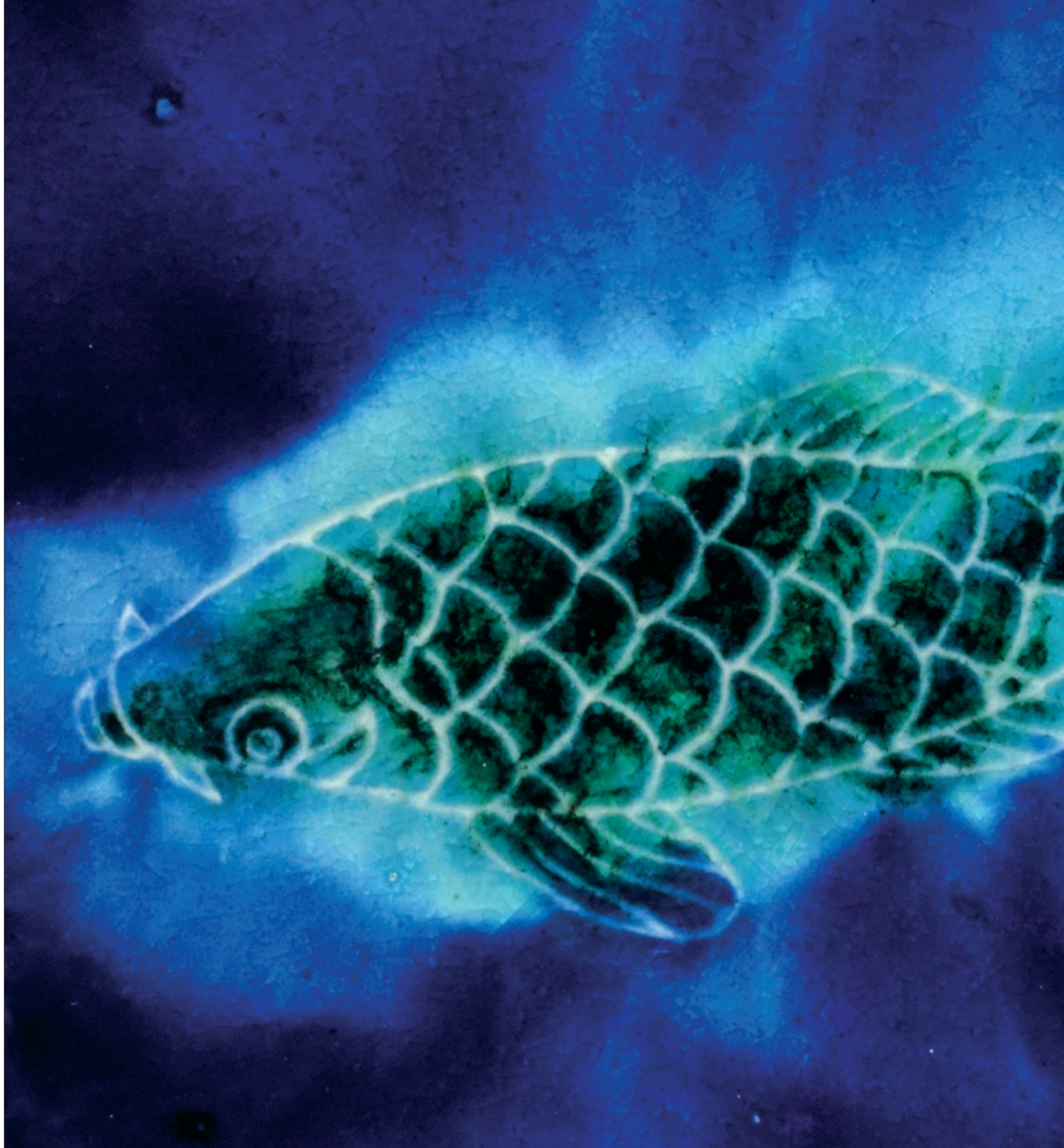
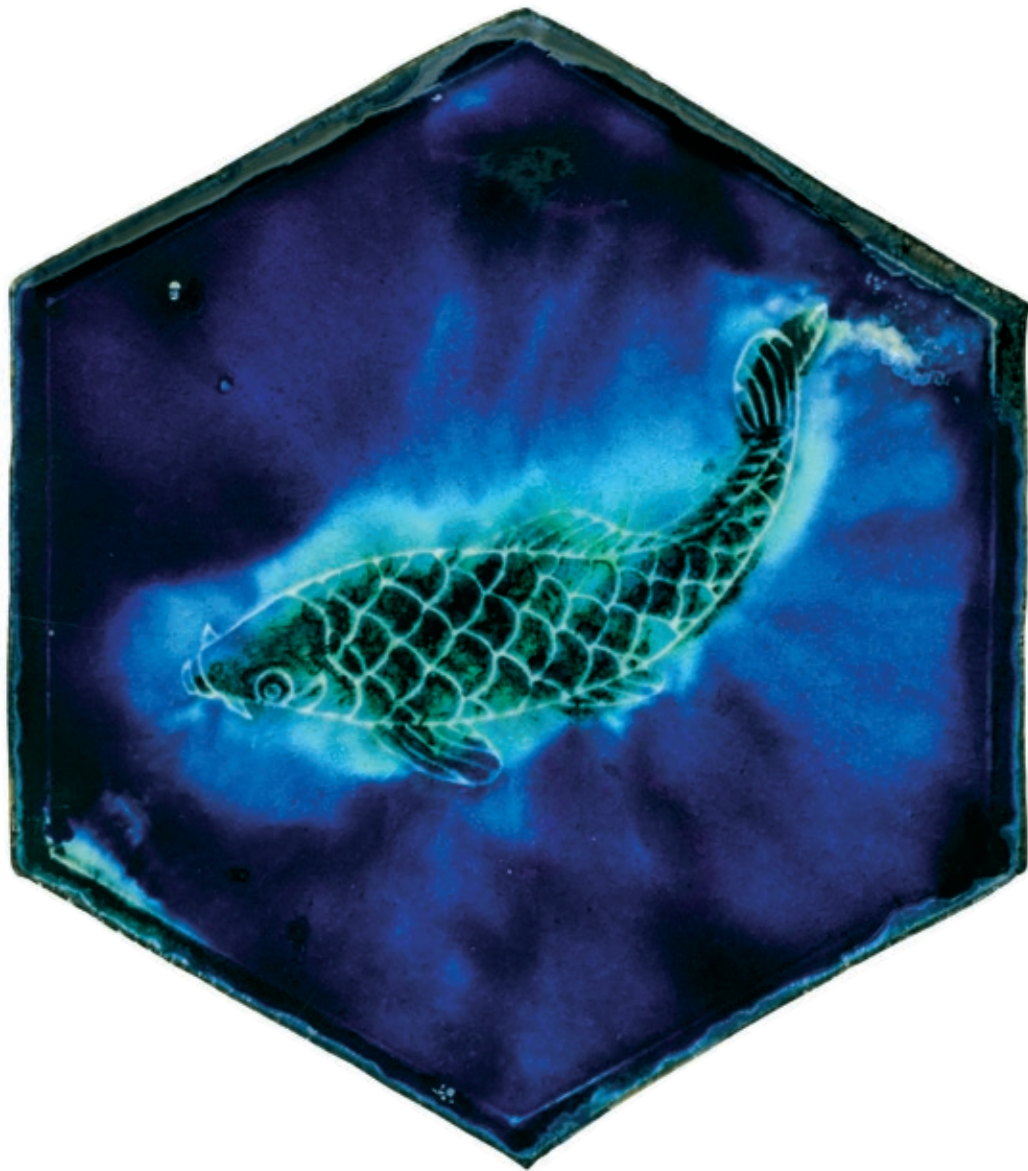


THE MOON FISH, 2021

Glazed ceramic tile

12.5cm high

Aldridge's testimonials to the diversity of creative influence are many. This tile owes more to Japanese printmaking than to Persian lustreware but still embodies the cross-cultural currents that are central to the ceramicist's art.





Text by
Lucien de Guise

Lyrics and poetry by
Boris Aldridge

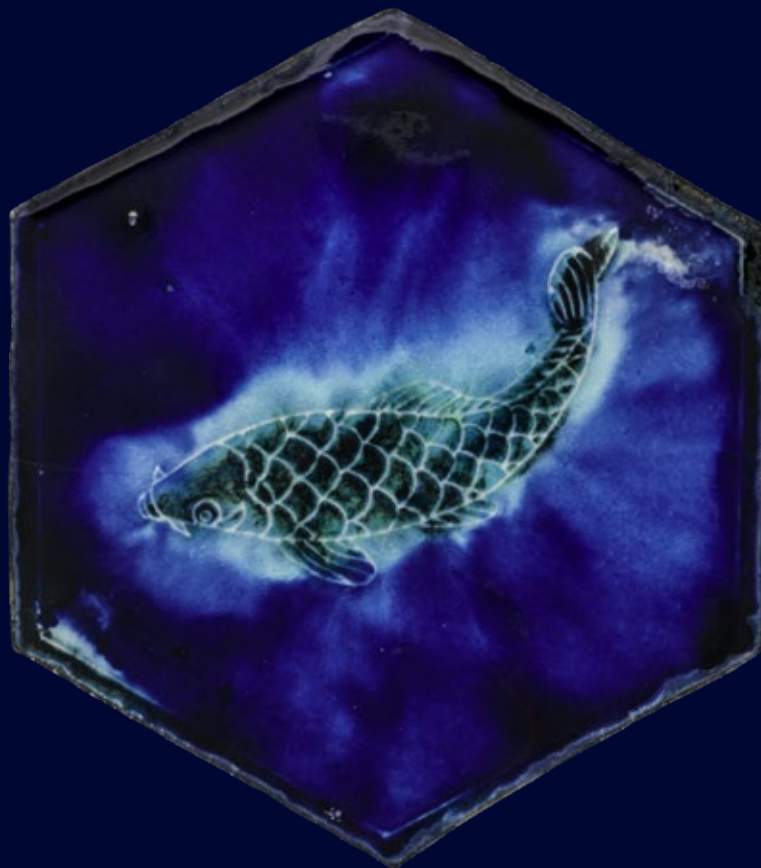
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