

Sculpting *humanity*

Ceramic artist Halima Cassell's ambitious latest work was chosen for *Things of Beauty Growing*, the major exhibition celebrating British studio pottery. *Joanna Bird* discusses why Halima's ongoing *Virtues of Unity* project deserves to be in the spotlight



Halima Cassell was born in Kashmir in 1975. She came to Manchester with her parents and siblings a year later. She still feels a strong connection with her mother's country, Pakistan – the smells, the air, the people – yet when she returned there for a residency at the National College of Arts in Lahore and Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture in Karachi she was dismayed to be regarded as a foreigner from England.

A lot happened in the previous 34 years. A natural creativity presented itself at an early age and was nurtured to fruition during the years that lay ahead. Her talent was recognised by her art teacher at Blackburn High School; even at this early stage, Halima seemed clearly destined to be a sculptor. After school, she went to Blackburn College in 1994 and then on to the University of Central Lancashire in 1997, where she studied 3D Design, specialising in ceramics.

She has always worked hard, having to pay her own way to study for her BA and MA, which she completed in 2002. Her part-time employments included caring for disabled and emotionally disturbed children, which led to other work in the social services. Through her empathy and experience she was earning twice the minimum wage at

a job she was good at and enjoyed. A dilemma presented itself – should she make her career in social work or art? She decided to follow her dream, and became an artist.

SUPPORT FROM HIGH PLACES

Halima set herself up with support from a council grant scheme and applied herself with diligence to making ceramics in her one-bedroom flat. After finishing a large piece, a friend was needed to help carry it down the stairs from the top floor. She fired her work in various kilns belonging to other makers and educational establishments and gave talks, demonstrations and workshops in return.

Pattern is a universal language common to all people, and recurring patterns are Halima's own favoured territory. She concentrates on combining strong geometric elements with simple forms, in order to maximise the impact of the complex, rhythmic surface patterns and deeper contours. In 2004, through an Arts Council funded project, Bolton Museum and Art Gallery offered her the chance to exhibit and tour a solo show, *Carved Earth*. She was asked to produce three new pieces; she made 20.

On the back of her solo show, Halima asked *Ceramic Review* if she could be featured in their next edition and as a result Emmanuel Cooper, then editor, came to interview her in the tiny flat. He was deeply impressed. Her work starred on the front cover of the issue, which featured Emmanuel's six-page article. This was a landmark in her

LEFT: *Virtues of Unity*, an installation of 36 carved sculptures in unglazed stoneware and earthenware

ABOVE: *Urn*, carved unglazed stoneware clay



ABOVE FROM LEFT: *Fidelity*, Belgium; *Vitality*, Israel OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: *Creativity*, New Zealand; *Hilarity*, Cuba; *Unity*, Belgium; *Hope*, Germany; *Serenity*, Ireland

career; shortly after, the V&A bought her work. It was, in Halima's words, 'one good thing after another'. Her work is now held in 17 museums.

A residency in Fuki, Japan from 2006 to 2007 was followed by another: carving stone at Pietrasanta in Italy, which allowed her time to work in Carrara marble. In the quarry her diminutive figure wearing protective eye goggles was to be seen carving up large sections of marble with heavy tools, which she would then finish by hand.

Hoping to further explore her skill with various materials, an opportunity presented itself in 2012 when Halima was offered a solo exhibition at Blackwell, the Arts & Crafts House in Cumbria. She showed work in clay, glass and marble – and this proved to be another landmark in her career. The Arts & Crafts house designed by Mackay Hugh Baillie Scott was the perfect setting for her dramatic carved pieces.

Baillie Scott had already made a name for himself when Blackwell was completed in 1901 by publishing his ideas in *The Studio*, a magazine read by everyone interested in architecture and interior design. Blackwell offered him the opportunity to put those ideas on the use of space, light and texture into practice. Halima's work embraced these same principles. The light and shade of Blackwell's carved oak interiors complemented her work and amplified Baillie Scott's original vision. The exhibition developed Halima's desire to work on a larger scale – leading to her ambitious latest project, *Virtues of Unity*.

ESTEEMED COMPANY

Halima was one of the artists whose work was exhibited in the recent exhibition *Things of Beauty Growing: British Studio Pottery*. This show, an inspiring survey of the studio pottery movement in the UK, was long overdue (Ed. note: see feature in CR 290). It opened in New Haven, Connecticut at the Yale Center for British Art before moving to the Fitzwilliam

Museum in Cambridge, England. Co-curators Martina Droth, Glenn Adamson and Simon Olding selected work that takes us from early studio potters, including Edwin Beer Fishley, Michael Cardew and Bernard Leach, plus their Far Eastern antecedents, up to the ceramic art of the present day. Halima's installation *Virtues of Unity* was part of the exhibition, yet her contribution was different to the others by being a work in progress: she presented the overture to the symphony that she is creating. The project began in 2009; she anticipates it will take a lifetime to complete.

SHARED WORLD

The aim of *Virtues of Unity* is to reflect upon humanity's shared nature through the metaphor of the ceramic vessel. But not just one ceramic vessel – her ambition is to work with clay from 195 countries around the world. The 36 pieces made to date, shown as part of *Things of Beauty Growing*, were each carved from clay native to a specific country, from France to New Zealand, Cuba to the USA. The sculptures are all of similar size, giving them a strength in uniformity. They were arranged according to their hue, from dark to light, with a round hole in each suggesting their interconnectedness. Halima wishes, she says, to 'embody and reinforce the idea of humanity as a single species within a shared world.'

To complete the work, she has another 159 countries left from which to source clay to be carved. The concept is a personal one, springing from her own evolution; her childhood memories of multicultural beginnings – the dichotomy between India and Pakistan, followed by her life in England. Each sculpture is named after a virtue Halima associates with our collective values: from *Charity* and *Honour*, to *Temperance* and *Tranquility*. It is both unifying and peaceful. It might equally be called, 'Where do I come from? Where do I belong?' No one witnessing it first hand could deny its sense of unity, nor its gentle energy.



'Her aim in Virtues of Unity is to reflect upon humanity's shared nature through the metaphor of the ceramic vessel. But not just one ceramic vessel – her ambition is to work with clay from 195 countries around the world'



Images: Jon Stoke, Chris Smart, Jonathan Keenen, Richard Caspol

TOP: *Virtues of Unity* at the Yale Center for British Art

BOTTOM: Halima at work in her studio



GRAPHIC AMBITIONS

One glimpse of Halima's complex, deeply carved work immediately takes me back to Moghul architecture and Islamic ornament. She has never visited the Red Fort or Fatehpur Sikri in Agra, yet the timeless beauty of this period – where buildings were designed to last forever – seems to translate by osmosis into Halima's contemporary pieces. On seeing *Virtues of Unity*, the question strikes one: where has this work come from?

When I questioned Halima about artists who have inspired her, she mentioned M.C. Escher ("for his optical illusions and mathematics"), founder of the Op Art movement Victor Vasarely, the painter Bridget Riley, and the potter Elizabeth Fritsch. Although I can see why these artists attract Halima, aiding her graphic understanding and analysis of designs, it is her own perspicacity and artistic interpretation that appears in constant evidence, making every curve in her work meaningful.

Whatever Halima takes on, her artistic vision is driven by her childhood background. Nothing frightens her – she is a powerhouse of energy and ambition. She can harness the necessary forces to transform a lump of clay, a 20-foot piece of wood or a wheelbarrow of concrete into a sublime hand-carved piece. Halima's work is timeless, dramatic and sophisticated. There is no point in her stamping it – no one else could produce such gems of splendour, alive with integrity. 

To find out more, visit halimacassell.com
 Joanna Bird is a curator and gallerist who represents Halima, among other ceramic artists; joannabird.com



CARVING HER PATH

- **1975:** born in Kashmir, Pakistan
- **1994:** BTEC National Diploma in Art and Design, Blackburn College, Lancashire
- **1997:** BA (Hons) in 3D Design, University of Central Lancashire
- **2002:** MA in Design, University of Central Lancashire
- **2004:** solo show *Carved Earth* at Bolton Museum and Art Gallery
- **2012:** solo show *Light Structures* at Blackwell, The Arts & Crafts House, Cumbria
- **2016:** elected a Fellow of the British Society of Sculptors
- **2017–18:** *Virtues of Unity* exhibited in *Things of Beauty Growing: British Studio Pottery*, Yale Center for British Art, New Haven and Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge
- **2018:** awarded the *Grand Prize* at the *Sovereign Asian Art Prize* exhibition, Hong Kong