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GLASS BY JENNI KEMARRE MARTINIELLO
& MAUREEN CAHILL; WOOD BY BUD LATVEN;
CERAMICS BY GREG DALY & JEAN FRANCIOS

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'Staccato', 2008, bronze, diam. 30.5 x 15.2 cm

PHOTO: TONY WEST



'Harlequin Shifts', 2005, unglazed clay, diam. 30.5 x 16 cm

PHOTO: JONATHAN KEENAN

Complex Structures

HALIMA CASSELL'S WORKS IN CLAY, GLASS & BRONZE

Whilst Halima Cassell is working in three different types of media and respecting their unique characteristics, she is also intent on discerning just how bronze, glass, marble and clay can articulate the same message. Text Ian Wilson.

INTERVIEWING Halima Cassell at a major applied arts event in London was a tête-à-tête frequently interrupted by visitors to her display area who were intrigued by, and inquisitive about, her carving in clay. Cassell moved between the different kinds of questions asked by potential punters and a journalist with no sign of disconcertion but with graciousness and focused attention. Chatting with her some years later at the same function, the serene, warm-hearted courtesy was unchanged, but this time it was also exciting to see and hear people discussing not only the sculptures in clay, but also her work in glass and bronze.

Cassell came to England as a young child from Pakistan, and it was at the University of Central Lancashire that she completed undergraduate and postgraduate studies in 3D Design. Light and mathematics and architecture have always been of great importance to her, and these passions are clearly manifested in her oeuvre. Buildings which she

finds fascinating range from the temples of Angkor Wat in Cambodia to Blackwell in Cumbria, a signature Arts and Crafts residence built in 1901 by the architect M.H. Baillie Scott, and the venue of an exhibition of her work in 2012. In the catalogue accompanying this exposition, Cassell explains how deeply she was moved by 'the quality of natural light falling across the internal architecture' – and it is precisely this falling of light upon the architecture of her vessels which is so important to the viewer's appreciation and understanding. The play of light and shade not only reveals unsuspected aspects of the geometrical beauty in the complex patterning, but also evokes a sense of movement, or inner life, within these structures.

The large, unglazed clay works can vary – within a single piece – from 1mm to 80 mm in thickness, and Cassell only begins carving when the clay has passed the leather-hard stage. These are works in which the viewer learns that



'R.E.M.' 2006, hand-carved unglazed clay, diam. 45.7 x 18 cm

PHOTO: TONY WEST



'Phoenix', 2011, hand-carved unglazed clay, diam. 45.7 cm



'Nautilus', 2011, Carrara marble, 54.5 x 48.25 x 30.5 cm



'Calliope', 2011, marble, 55.8 x 12 cm

patterning and symmetry have their own profound validity, refuting the ill-informed and deprecatory point of view noted and recorded by Peter G. Roe in his essay, "At Play in the Fields of Symmetry": 'In our own ethnoaesthetic taxonomy of affecting form, geometric art is classified as mere decorative art, fit only for rugs or pillowcases.'

Hand-building is Cassell's forte and experience has shown that turning on the wheel cannot achieve the cogency of the architectural construction that characterises her corpus in clay. Also, she has realised that in hand-building it is the design which decides the completed form, whereas in throwing it is the form which determines the design. There are no detailed diagrams plotted out beforehand and she begins carving aided only by a sketch which she translates three-dimensionally. It is also her ability to focus acutely on the segment being carved that prevents the intricacy of the overall design from diverting her attention.

At Blackwell, standing on a deep ledge in front of a stained glass window of stylised tulips, *Amoeba Pool II* (2012) measures 48 x 48 cm and exemplifies the materialisation of the longing to work in glass, an aspiration that Cassell has had since her student days. The manner in which her glass vessels are created is an extensive process that has required several years to perfect. As Andrew Lambirth explains in his catalogue essay accompanying the show – which was entitled "Light Structures: Halima Cassell at Blackwell" – the bowl was 'cast from an initial clay carving, from which a silicon mould was then made. From this a wax impression was taken, and the heavy glass was cast via the lost-wax process used for bronze.' This lengthy preparation – which included the time Cassell spent working with a glass artist – before commencing creative work in this medium, and the abjuring of shortcuts was more than justified when glass workers recognised the complexity which had been achieved.

It was conveying clarity and an evocation of rippling water that Cassell had had in her mind when the glass project commenced, and this was achieved in *Amoeba Pool*, but she was persuaded that there should also be a casting in coloured glass. Thus a version was made in rhubarb lead

PHOTO: TONY WEST

PHOTO: TONY WEST

PHOTO: MARTYN EASTWOOD



PHOTO: JOHN HOLT

'Makonde', 2008, bronze, 198 x 76 cm

crystal, and *Amoeba Pool II* of the preceding paragraph came into being. In natural light it has a rosé colouring and without any natural light it is green. It also possesses the capacity to appear as a mixture of red and green. The light on the glass confuses the viewing eye and thus incites people to investigate the piece more thoroughly in order to discover its characteristics, and to consider them more conscientiously. This process is similar to that which occurs when looking at the carved vessels. The eye, beguiled by the patterns and by the light and shade within the valleys and crevices, is drawn into "reading" the geography of these surfaces and in so doing finds not only juxtapositions which were not initially perceived, but also unsuspected ancillary motifs within the principal pattern.

It was a friend who had completed an apprenticeship in "Makonde" carving in Tanzania who awoke the artist's interest in the genre, and what particularly attracts her is the manner in which these sculptures can be 'figurative in an abstract way'. Cassell's *Makonde* stands six feet high (183 cm), is cast in bronze and has suggestions of a figure in drapery. When shown in the grounds of Lister Park, Bradford, the rhythms of the flowing, deeply incised curves

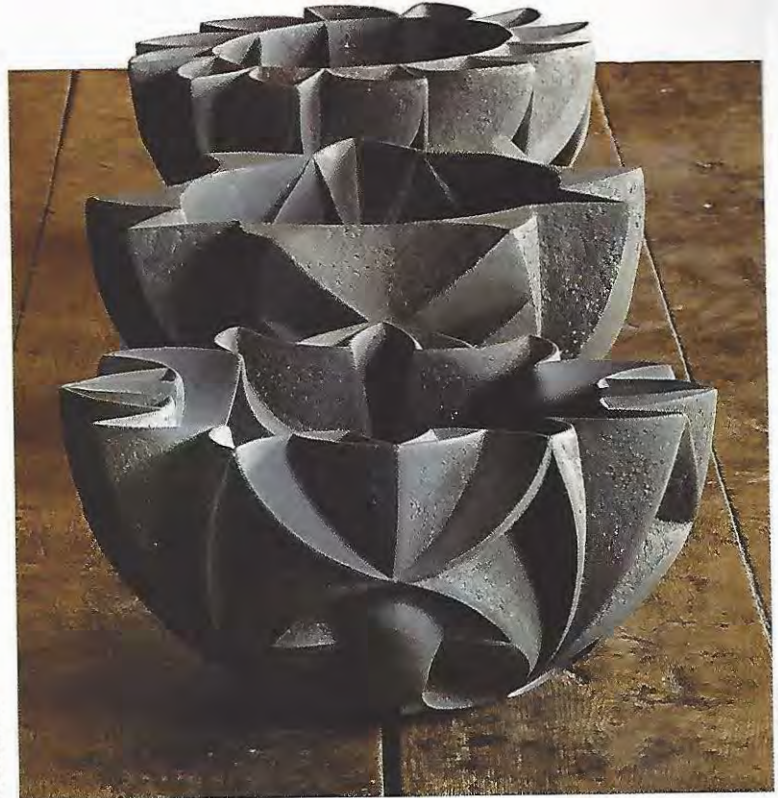


PHOTO: TONY WEST

'Group Installation', 2010, black stoneware, each diam. 30.5 x 15 cm



PHOTO: JOHNATHAN KEEVAN

'Wu-Li (pattern of organic energy)', 2011, carved unglazed clay, diam. 30 cm



'Dreams Made Manifest', 2008, bronze

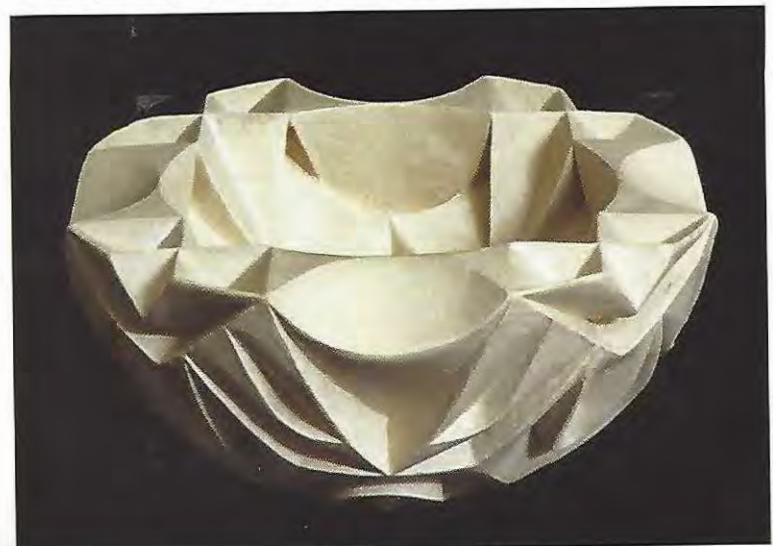


PHOTO: DANIEL WALMSLEY

'Cupola', 2010, unglazed clay, diam. 30.5 x 16 cm



'Ameoba Pool', 2011, clear cast lead crystal, 45.7 cm sq

PHOTO: SIMON BRUNTNELL



'Ameoba Pool, Rhubarb', 2011, cast lead crystal, 45.7 cm sq

PHOTO: SIMON BRUNTNELL

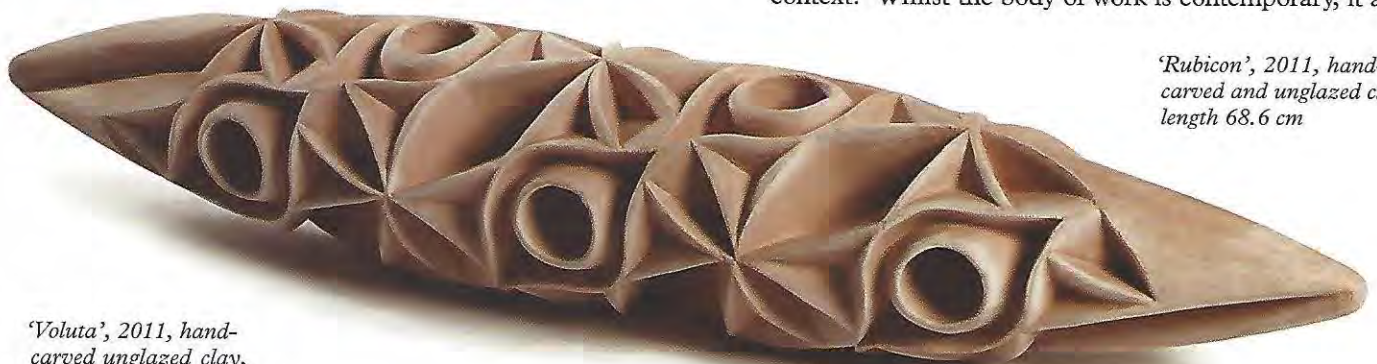


'R.E.M.' 2006, hand-carved unglazed clay, diam. 45.7 x 18 cm

PHOTO: JOHNATHAN KEENAN

form a stimulating visual contrast when viewed against a background that is dominated by the "Edwardian baroque" architecture of the Cartwright Hall Art Gallery (1904). *Makonde* has a stature – not merely because of its size – which wholly distinguishes it from the better-known carved, wooden examples which are a staple of all-too-many "airport art" counters. The artist has been inspired by this school of Tanzanian carving but interpreted it in a manner which is wholly her own.²

Halima Cassell has now extended her repertoire to include works in glass, marble and bronze as well as in clay, which shows how her great love of patterning is always allied to a keen interest in the material with which she is working. The study drawings for *Inflorescence Wallpaper*, which were part of the Blackwell exhibition, exemplify what the artist said about her work being displayed in an Arts & Crafts context: "Whilst the body of work is contemporary, it also



'Rubicon', 2011, hand-carved and unglazed clay, length 68.6 cm

PHOTO: JOHNATHAN KEENAN

'Voluta', 2011, hand-carved unglazed clay, diam. 30.5 x 15 cm



PHOTO: JOHNATHAN KEENAN

reflects the basic principles and overriding design considerations of a movement which continues to inspire and excite me.' Similarly, it is also true that although Cassell is creating in different media – and respecting the unique characteristics of her material while doing so – she is also intent on discerning just how bronze, glass, marble and clay can 'speak the same language'.

Ian Wilson

Footnotes:

1. Peter G. Roe, "At Play in the Fields of Symmetry", edited by Dorothy K. Washburn and Donald W. Crowe, *Symmetry Comes of Age – The Role of Pattern in Culture* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004), p 289.

2. For fine examples of the carving produced by the Makonde communities of Tanzania and Mozambique, see Tom Phillips (ed) *Africa: The Art of a Continent* (Translated from the French by Caroline Beamish), Munich & New York: Prestel, 1995, pp 170–177.

This book was first published on the occasion of the exhibition "Africa: The Art of a Continent", Royal Academy of the Arts, London, 4 October 1995 – 21 January 1996.