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The Duchess



A woman with a green headscarf and goggles is carving a large, teardrop-shaped white marble piece. She is wearing a dark blue long-sleeved shirt and blue gloves. In the foreground, there is a smaller, more intricate white marble carving with a spiral design. The background shows a wooden structure and some greenery.

Carve her name with **pride**

Susan Riley meets an artist who has overcome personal tragedy to create national and international success

Halima on her residency in Tuscany where she learnt how to carve stone and beautiful white marble



Finishing touches are added to one of her sculptures

She's always had a quiet confidence about her work and refused to sell her degree pieces. 'In a couple of years my work had quadrupled in price! Some times it's better to show work than sell it.' Now her pieces sell from £1,500, to stone sculptures in the region of £25,000.

One country where she doesn't have any pieces in a public collection is Pakistan where she was born, although her parents moved to Manchester when she was a baby. When both her parents died before she was 12 Halima went into the British care system. While so many youngsters go off the rails Halima said her love of art was the thing which grounded her.

'Art was something I was able to do and my art teacher at secondary school (John Costello) allowed me to pursue my ideas. I have been really lucky because art is really positive, that kind of release and fulfillment, it gives you a positive outlook. I stayed grounded because I used to do night classes in art in any spare time I had,' she said.

Then she attended university at Preston studying for a degree and an MA and it was there she developed her trademark geometric style after doing two separate projects on North African surface design and another looking at architecture and her Islamic roots. Now all her work incorporates elements of her love of architecture and North African designs. 'I say to students they should follow their intuition and something will come together, when you try too hard (to develop a style) you

may be disappointed.'

She never signs a piece, letting the work speak for itself. 'I call them sculptures not pots. If you work in bronze or stone people have a different perception instantly that you are a sculptor but that is what I am doing in clay.'

Last year she had a solo exhibition at the arts and crafts house Blackwell near Windermere; designed five wallpapers for Blackburn company Graham & Brown and completed several other private commissions. This year she is hard at work for high-profile shows at the Saatchi Gallery in London where she will display work in clay, marble and bronze and another exhibition in Brussels later in the year.

'Each year changes,' she says. 2013 will also be one of the first years when she hasn't been on an overseas scholarship or residency – in the past she's spent time and exhibited in Korea, Italy, Pakistan and Japan where ceramics are seen as a particularly high art form. But that's not the case everywhere. 'If you fail at everything else you get to do ceramics!' she says, referring to Pakistan.

Now Halima has ambitions to have a solo exhibition at Yorkshire Sculpture Park and to work with an architect to design a building. Given her humble beginnings and the success she has made of her career so far, she's certainly an artist to watch.



Her pieces can cost
up to £25,000

LEFT: One of Halima's signature bowl sculptures which are in public collections around the world
Photo: Jonothan Kennan
BELOW: Halima working on a large marble sculpture towards the end of her scholarship in Italy

When the sculptures she had spent three months creating exploded in the kiln, people were in tears. But not Halima Cassell. After all some of the best times of her life have emerged from disaster.

She simply bundled up the fragments and sent them to the Hepworth Wakefield which had commissioned the sculptures. The pieces were so intriguing they were put into a touring exhibition which led to an invite to join the Royal British Society of Sculptors and through that Halima was awarded a residency in Tuscany with her family for three months where she learnt to carve stone.

Halima's life is full of such stories and at 37 her career has gone from one success to the next with exhibitions in Europe and America and her sculptures in prestigious collections across the UK, including London's Victoria and Albert Museum and most of the museums and galleries in Lancashire where she lives.

Halima's attitude to life has undoubtedly helped shape her success. 'I am a great believer that it does not matter where you study or where you live, it's what you make of what you have got. You have got to have it within you to push yourself, you have to have a certain type of thinking. People said "Go to the Royal College to up your profile" but I didn't. My career has been a very steady uphill incline.'

Many of her sculptures (including the V & A piece) were made when she lived in her one bedroom flat in Blackburn. These days she lives in a slightly bigger house in the east Lancashire town with her partner and two-year-old son Izak. She still does much of her work in her dining room although she also rents



a studio nearby for the larger stone sculptures.

Her house is crammed with her signature 12 inch clay bowls, with their heavily carved architectural patterns which take from 90 to 200 hours to create. She now works in other materials, including bronze, glass, marble and stone, but always returns to clay.

'Each one is different and I bring in new ideas but you want the same language to run through the work. It's important to push the boundaries. The visual aspect of my work has stayed the same but the work is a lot freer. My early work is more hard edged and as the work develops it becomes curvier,' she said.