

my SHREWSBURY

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LUKE CRUMP

Kelda adventure

Record-breaking Atlantic rower Kelda Wood on her new adventure film

Pandemic start-ups

A host of Shrewsbury entrepreneurs are giving business a go despite Covid-19

Halima Cassell

An interview with one of Britain's leading contemporary sculptors



CLAY CREATIVE

*One of Britain's leading contemporary sculptors **Halima Cassell** was awarded an MBE in the New Year Honours list and is represented in Shrewsbury's **Soden Collection**. **Katy Rink** spoke to her about her journey to success.*

Sometimes you just know you are in the presence of very great talent – even if you're on zoom and the talent has her camera turned off!

Artist and ceramicist Halima Cassell was having problems with her tech when we connected. She's not a fan of screens, she just wants to create. And hurrah for humankind that she does, because her output is absolutely stunning.

Halima, 45, pushes clay to its limits – sculpting rather than throwing it into dynamic, three-dimensional creations with strong geometric elements and recurring patterns. Her style is influenced

by Islamic art and North African surface design and she can work equally in wood, bronze, marble and even glass, transforming it into beautiful, flowing shapes with repeating patterns. She's never made the same design twice.

Her pieces arouse an irresistible impulse to physically trace the lines. They mirror nature's mesmerising motifs – snowflakes, waves, webs and roots. It's a kind of ordered chaos that we are powerless to resist.

Halima translates these potent patterns into pleasing 3D structures. Don't be fooled by her artlessness and soft Lancastrian accent, she's a mathematical genius, manipulating our physiological responses with her devilishly arousing

fractal geometries. Each piece represents hundreds of hours of work – upwards of 280 for the largest (Halima has learned to carve with both hands to save time).

The kiln can destroy a piece in a nanosecond and Halima has had some spectacular breakages. Some of her disasters might have derailed a less resilient soul, but Halima chooses to see mistakes as opportunities – and makes something even more remarkable out of the fragments.

Take the porcelain clay of *Japonica* (2019) which cracked in Cassell's studio. Inspired by the Japanese art form kintsugi, she filled the cracks with 22 carat gold.

"I don't get too upset about it," Halima says. "I always think there's a reason and



a possible lesson to be learnt - and good things can come out of it.

"People responded really well to *Japonica*, comparing the cracks to mental or physical scars of past events of hardship and trauma or stretch marks after pregnancy."

In 2008, she was preparing for an exhibition at the Hepworth Gallery in Wakefield, readying a commission meant to represent the old and new buildings at the gallery, when disaster struck: "I'd spent three months working on them but both of them blew up in the kiln the day before the exhibition was due to open. The friend who was with me wanted to cry.

"I thought I'll take all the fragments and put them on the plinth. The reaction to the fragments was really wonderful. People saw them as quite beautiful objects in their own right."

Halima used one of the fragments as a maquette for a 6ft cast bronze: "The Royal Society of Sculptors asked me to become a member because of that fragment," she said. "Every cloud has a silver lining."

Softly spoken Halima moved to the UK from Kashmir aged one in 1976, and has built her career from the ground up. There was no gilded route to success. Her parents died unexpectedly when she was very young and, from the age of 12 to

18, she was brought up in care.

It was a tough life but she is remarkably sanguine about it: "I was never truly alone - I always had my art," she says. "Doing art has always lifted me. I always believe creativity is better than medication."

Her 'inspirational' secondary school art teacher helped her get onto a BTEC in Art and Design at Blackburn College in 1994 - and gave Halima her first commission.

"One of the biggest things for me has been having people believe in what I do," she says. "That meant a lot, having that kind of emotional support."

She went on to study for a Masters in Design at the University of Central Lancashire, where she first began to carve into clay, developing her distinctive, geometric style.

She almost followed a career in mental health, but resisted the urge to swap her art for a steady salary and settled instead for a one-bedroom flat in Blackburn.

It was in that tiny space that Halima made some of the most significant early pieces of her career - including one for the V&A museum and a commission for the Hepworth Wakefield.

"Students sometimes think they need a big studio to be successful," Halima says. "I tell them a lot of important pieces were made in that flat."

Halima was advised to get elocution lessons and to do a second degree in a leading London institution, to help her navigate the art world.

She refused. "I said I don't want people to look at me, I want them to look at and like my art."

The editor of the *Ceramic Review* at that time, Emmanuel Cooper, was so impressed with Halima's work, he put her on the front cover of the next issue (2005).

Residences followed in Japan, Pakistan and Tuscany, where Halima gained experience in research and development, such as learning to work with Carrara marble. She was made a fellow of the Royal Society of Sculptors in 2016 and had a very successful major solo exhibition in Manchester in 2019.

"Seeing the response of people at my Manchester exhibition was overwhelming. It lifts you as an artist and makes you believe in what you are doing," she said.

Her public art can be seen in Leicester, Liverpool, Blackburn, the Forest of Bowland and on a sculpture trail in the Ribble Valley.

She undertakes high profile commissions, including works for New York interior designer Ronald Bricke and Queen Rania of Jordan and her pieces have been bought by major museums.

Developing her distinctive style has been a slow journey.

She was inspired by graphic artist and master of illusion M.C. Escher and English op art painter Bridget Riley to use mathematics in her art to create a sense of movement and illusion.

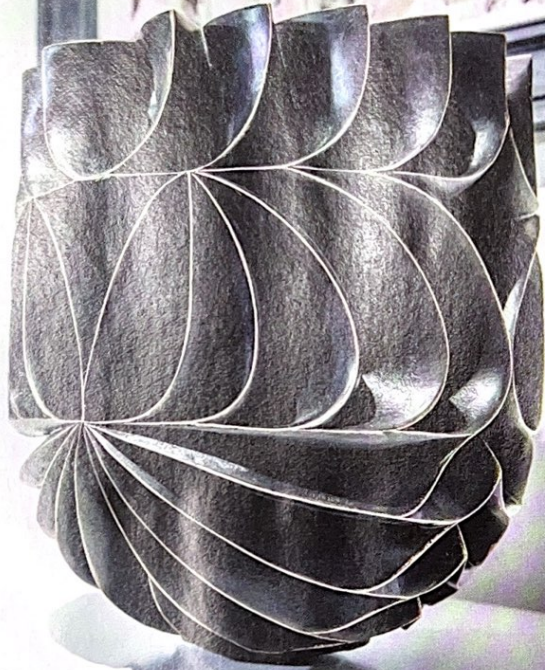
"I didn't consciously adopt this style," she explains. "I was inspired by Geometry and Architecture and my own cultural heritage. I have always followed my interests. I am quite heavily dyslexic and was never very academic but Maths and Art were the things I was good at. If I had thought about my style I don't think



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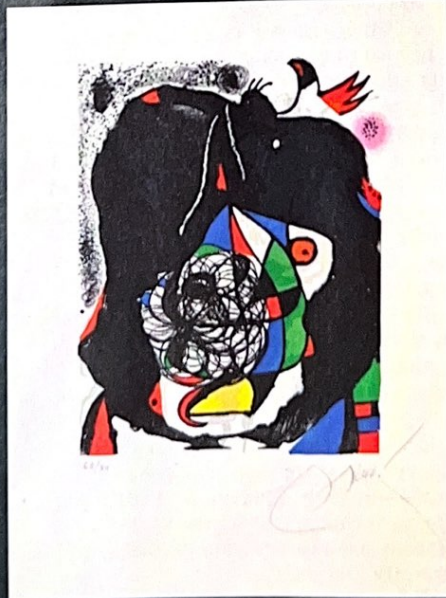
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HALIMA

JOAN MIRO
*Les Revolutions
scéniques du axe Siècle*
50.5x36cm
Lithograph
Signed
Edition of 80



SIR TERRY FROST
Untitled
29x60cm
Oil on board
Signed & Dated
Circa. 1959

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