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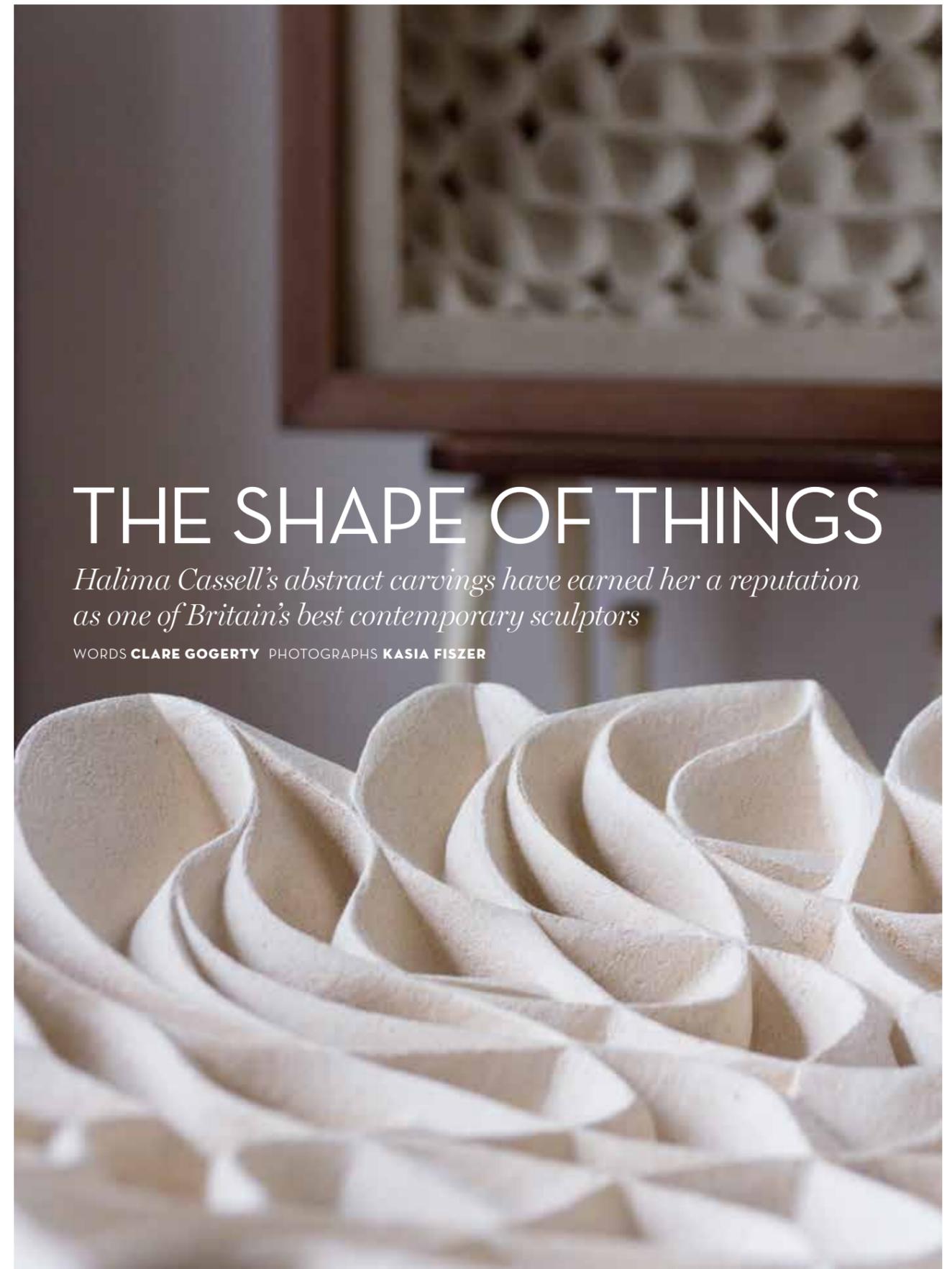
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THIS PAGE *Problematic Squares* and *Amoeba Pool* hang on the walls behind Halima while she sketches out a new design  
FACING PAGE *Sema*, one of Halima's deep-cut sculptural pieces



# THE SHAPE OF THINGS

*Halima Cassell's abstract carvings have earned her a reputation as one of Britain's best contemporary sculptors*

WORDS CLARE GOGERTY PHOTOGRAPHS KASIA FISZER

I shouldn't be working with clay in the house,' says ceramicist Halima Cassell as she navigates her way past maquettes, dust sheets, sketchbooks and tools that fill the living room of her home in Blackburn, Lancashire. 'The dust gets everywhere. I *could* work in my studio, it's only a seven-minute drive away but it does get cold at this time of the year. And, at the moment, my partner Martyn and our little one, Izak, are away, so I was able to stay up until three last night working on this.'

She gestures towards her latest piece, perched on sheets of foam in the centre of the room. It is instantly recognisable as her work: a simple clay shape carved deeply and precisely with sinuous, rhythmic curves that echo influences from African and Islamic cultures. 'All of my design ideas come from within,' she says. 'I absorb things visually, like architectural forms, cloud formations or ripples on water but I don't sketch from nature or anything like that. And I never do the same piece twice. I would get bored.'

The strength and originality of her work brought Halima acclaim early in her career with a well-received exhibition at Blackburn Museum & Art Gallery in 2004, when she was 28. Since then, her work has been bought by major museums – the V&A, the Jerwood Foundation, the Hepworth Wakefield and Birmingham Museum, among others – and she has been kept busy with a constant stream of exhibitions and commissions. 'I used to be able to have long weekends,' she says, 'but it's hard to say no to something that I want to do.'

Halima's first client was her art teacher at secondary school who, recognising her talent, bought a piece at full gallery price when she had just left university in 2002. He followed this with her first commission. An inspirational tutor, he proved formative in her early artistic life.



**FROM TOP** Amoeba Pool; Halima on her stairs in her home; Eclipse II  
**BELOW** Maquettes for various bronze and marble pieces line the shelves in Halima's home along with her collection of ornamental elephants



'I wanted to push boundaries and he let me,' she says. 'He also stayed after school to do his own work in clay, which he sold. I thought that was amazing: it made me see that art could be a potential career. I was dyslexic and not especially academic, so every lunchtime and after school, I'd be in the art department. The only two subjects I enjoyed were maths and art.' These turned out to be subjects that stood her in good stead when she went on to study for a BTEC diploma in art and design at Blackburn College, followed by a BA and an MA in 3D design at the University of Central Lancashire.

### QUESTIONS ABOUT IDENTITY

Halima was born in Kashmir, Pakistan, but came to live in Manchester when she was one. Questions about identity inevitably inform her work and she was able to address some of them during a six-week residency in Pakistan in 2009. 'I thought I would be more accepted there,' she says, 'but I was always introduced as a foreigner.' For many years she was fascinated by paisley patterns, particularly the teardrop and germinating mango. 'I had an obsession with the origins of paisley and found out that the earliest record of the paisley teardrop being used in design was in Kashmir, where I was born.'

Halima primarily works in clay, which she sees as a fitting metaphor: 'Like clay, we are all made from the same material but come in many different colours and textures and then return to the earth,' she says. She sources it from different parts of the world including Israel, Pakistan, Europe and the Mississippi River, relishing the difference of each.

Complex patterns are an important part of her work and, as well as her Pakistani roots, she draws on Islamic architecture and North African surface design for inspiration. 'Many African patterns are simple, geometrical motifs that are used in complicated ways. Patterns represent different cultures but can be understood by everyone. They are a universal language.'

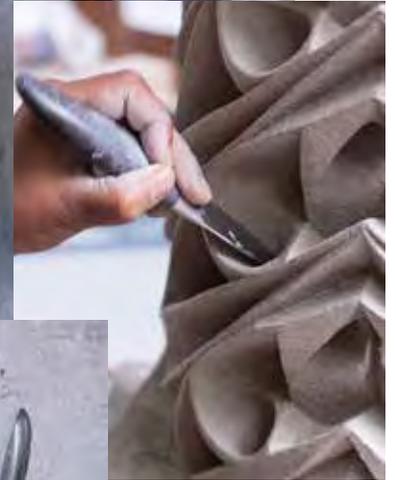
Each of Halima's pieces starts with a simple form – favourite shapes include spheres, columns and cubes. Taking this as her blank canvas, she then works out a design that complements it by sketching on paper. Once happy with the general design, she 'tidies it up' by mapping its



**FROM TOP** 'Inflorescence' wallpaper designed by Halima for Graham & Brown; measuring tools and sketchbooks; Halima puts the finishing touches to a sculptural piece; her Sema sculpture sits on the table in Halima's Blackburn studio



*'All of my design ideas come from within. I absorb things visually like architectural forms and ripples on water'*



**TOP** Halima works on an as-yet-untitled piece to be shown at an exhibition in New York; Deep hollows are a characteristic motif in much of Halima's work; a collection of Halima's sculpting tools

division and symmetry with meticulous measuring. This surface design is then transferred on to the three-dimensional form and then the carving can begin. 'Carving is my favourite part,' she says. 'I work out which way to carve beforehand so that I don't make any mistakes but, once that's done, it becomes a meditative process.'

Halima rarely uses glazes, relying instead on the colours and textures of the clay to provide colour. 'Glazing is very technical and requires measuring, which reminds me of cooking, which I don't enjoy,' she says. The final stage is firing, a high-risk business: she had worked on a couple of pieces, *Light Strings Through Zenith* and *Nadir*, commissioned for the Hepworth Wakefield gallery in 2007, for three months before they exploded in the kiln. (She remade the pieces the following year and used some of the fragments in other work.)

As well as clay, Halima works in a variety of other media: marble, wood, glass, bronze and, most recently, concrete. She has also designed friezes for a P&O cruise liner and a range of wallpaper for Graham & Brown – an affordable way to own a piece of her work. As Halima's reputation has grown, so has the demand for her work. One collector recently commissioned two pieces – one in marble, one in bronze – to join work he owns by Damien Hirst, Claude Monet and Lynn Chadwick.

Last year, Halima had a solo exhibition at the prestigious space at One Canada Square in Canary Wharf, London. Spanning her career so far, it displayed the range and quality of her work. She has also just finished an as-yet-untitled piece made from porcelain stoneware clay (pictured above) for an exhibition in New York. The work, which develops the themes of geometrical shapes inspired by nature and architecture, took her a month-and-a-half to complete, a fairly typical length of time.

'I never have a quiet patch,' she says. 'Things have been good and steady for me, which I appreciate. It's hard to say no to work, especially as I enjoy what I do. It would be like an actress turning down a really good role. They only thing missing is more time to spend with Martyn and Izak.' But you get the feeling that, like her beautiful, complicated sculpture, she will find a way to make that work. ■

*Halima's clay work costs from £1,500 to £12,000. 07817 053308; halimacassell.com. Her wallpaper is available for £11 per roll from grahambrown.com*

## COLLECTING HALIMA CASSELL

**ERIC KNOWLES, CERAMICS EXPERT**



'I first saw Halima's work in the Harris Museum in Preston 10 years ago. I had never seen anything like it: it had an immediacy that was very pleasing. It also looked as though it had been engineered when it was, in fact, precisely hand-carved. The geometry and the mathematics involved in Halima's work have the same effect on me as listening to Bach: she manages to get the same essential harmony of shape, form and detail. Her pieces are deeply fashioned, which is unusual in ceramics – normally it's more about surface decoration. There's something in her DNA that brings out the Islamic influences. I find her work uplifting, I would never consider buying it solely as an investment.'