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JULY 12 - 18 2004 NO. 525

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THE BIG ISSUE

NORTH

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and Monica Young**
Going against the grain

**David
Hempleman-Adams**
On his next big adventure

New TV Guide
Your weekly section

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Going Out and Staying In

Spiderman 2
New blockbuster
reviewed

Thunderbirds
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The Big Issue in the North Trust and its parent company The Big Life Company raise funds to provide services for homeless vendors of this magazine.



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PEAS IN A POT

Artists Monica Young and Halima Cassell explain to **Rob Haynes** why their work is a reflection of their separate personal struggles against convention

"When I was studying, people got cross because I wasn't quoting the right influences," says Cassell. "You'd have to relate your work to a certain discipline or artists or era, and I didn't do that. I just picked up on a few names and used them. I like to create movement in my art, so I chose Bridget Riley and Escher – they're more painters and graphic designers, but it was just to keep the lecturers happy. Someone wrote a piece on my work, relating me to these different artists and I'd never heard of them."

Young laughs in agreement.

"I'd exhibit locally and be asked by various groups to come and give a lecture," she adds, "and I'd think, 'well what am I going to say?' Several critics said my work clearly showed the influence of Brancusi (early 20th century Romanian sculptor), so now I say, 'Oh my influence is Brancusi'." She chuckles throatily at the memory.

"The only thing I could think of is that my mother collected pewter pots and one of my jobs was to clean them, and a lot of them were

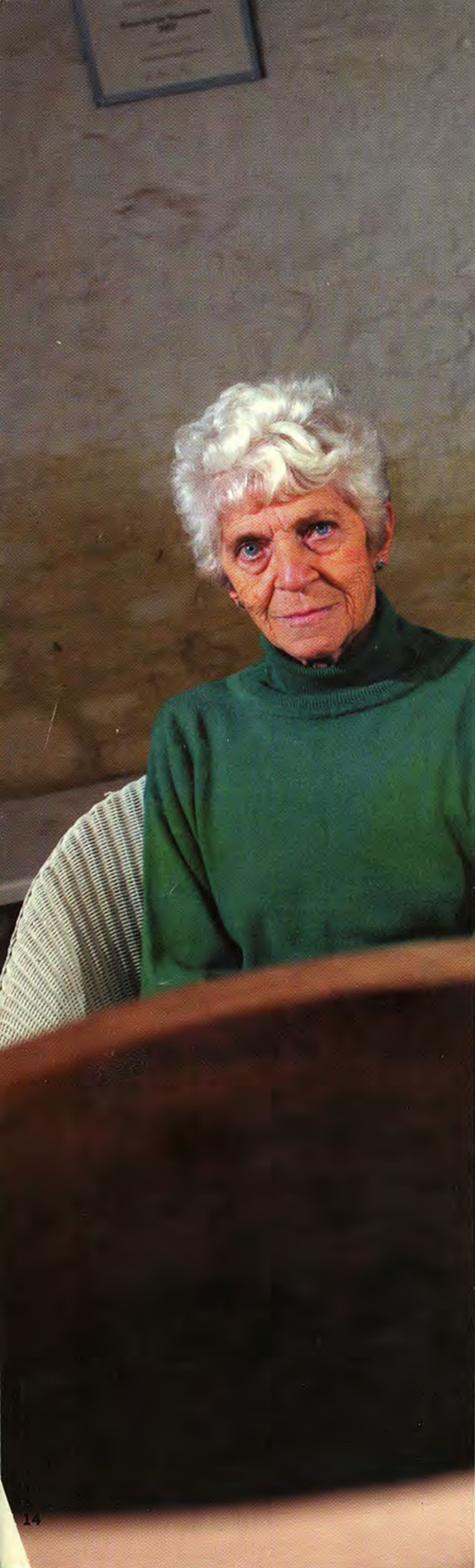
art nouveau, and whether these curves influenced me...I don't know," she shrugs inconclusively.

A good thing about coming fresh to a discipline, I suggest, is that you can invent your own rules...

"I broke nearly all the rules," agrees Young. "Not out of defiance, but out of ignorance."

"I've never seen work like hers," she adds, indicating Cassell with deep approval. "I think she has a very great future."

At Maiden Bridge Arts Centre until 1 August



The finest art often comes from outside a tradition, where the creator doesn't realise what rules are there to be obeyed and instead forges their own vision. An exhibition at the Maiden Bridge Arts Centre near Lancaster features two such talents, both from different generations and backgrounds yet with a common thread of independent vision.

Monica Young lives in the small Yorkshire Dales village of Reeth, but was born and raised in France. A distinct and charming spoken accent remains, and, on the day I travel to meet her, she even wears an obligingly Gallic beret.

Her huge, near sculptural pottery is the result of half a lifetime in the stubborn pursuit of a vision, one which kept her on the brink of poverty for many years but which has now been recognised with international success - last year she won the Gold medal award at Munich's International Craft Exhibition.

By contrast Halima Cassell was born in Pakistan but brought up in Manchester. At the age of 29 she is at the beginning of her career but is already beginning to exhibit internationally, and has already forged a distinctive reputation with her ceramics - large, hypnotic vortices of geometry.

Each artist has a fascinating and unconventional story. Now aged 75, Young, for instance, didn't start working with pottery until she was in her forties.

"When I first went to art school I wanted to be a sculptor," she recalls "but the antiquated teaching in the art school said 'no, only boys do sculpture', so I was trained as and worked as a painter. I also did two days teaching, and one day my colleague was away so I took his class, and they came with a board and a lump of clay and they began to coil it. So I began to imitate them and it was the beginning of what you might call the madness. Three months later I gave my notice in and moved to Sussex with eight bags of clay. I'd never been taught or anything. Not for clay.

"The first pots I made all collapsed," she laughs ruefully. "But still, after one year they stood up."

Literally learning as she went along, Young bought a second-hand kiln and after a few years was made a member of the Craft Potters Association. Emboldened by this acceptance, she moved up to her current workshop in North Yorkshire - previously she had been working in a milking shed - but found her struggle was just beginning.

"When I came up here I made a living by cleaning hotel rooms," she explains. "I didn't really earn a penny (from ceramics) for 10 years. I would sell a pot for the price of a firing so I could fire the next pot. But I didn't mind, because I was learning, refining the shapes. I made a few boo-boos, but little by little by little I got known by picking good exhibitions. I got written up in the Sunday press, and it grew."

Halima Cassell also made her reputation via sheer hard work and self-belief.

"As I was growing up, due to my cultural background I wasn't allowed to do art because of the restriction on recreating anything that Allah had created," she explains. "Then at the age of 16 I applied for art college and I got in and it followed through from that. My parents had both passed away, which is why I was allowed to do it. I loved drawing the human figure and landscapes, but then subconsciously, without trying, I actually reverted - my work now has nothing organic related or figurative at all."

Each woman had to work away from established convention. For example, neither uses glazes on their work - apparently the height of controversy in ceramics.

"I got told off at university because I didn't want to use glazes," says Cassell. "It's like a condition - it's not ceramics if it's not glazed, so I did some really botched up glazes just to make them happy...but one of the things I loved about Monica's work was she didn't use glazes."

Young nods in agreement. "You need a lifetime in glazes for the scale I work in," she explains.

Each also encountered difficulty in creating from a personal agenda rather than an establishment approved one.