

Halima Cassell
Catching the Light: sculpture
and sculptural ceramics

Halima Cassell has a particular way of working with clay that almost denies its inherent plasticity when wet and therefore malleable. Instead she carves it when past leather-hard – hard enough to cut precisely. Her imagery is founded in her Islamic roots and developed through her immersion and interest in western, Asian and African art and architecture.

Light is important to her and she carves in order to capture it as an integral aspect of her art, as did the designers and builders of both Islamic and African architecture. The vessel is a recurrent theme in her work although she regularly develops other forms that she



Germination 2012 photo: Martyn Eastwood

endows with the same principles of faceted, deeply formed and repeated pattern. Pattern may be geometric or organic, the shape of the object having a crisp profile catching the light.

In 2006 Cassell cast her first pieces in bronze, working with the Pangolin foundry. She has continued to make bronze sculptures alongside her ceramic pieces, as the strength of bronze and the way in which casts are made allows her to work on a scale difficult to achieve with clay. However,

not all her bronze sculptures are large, many carry the same principles of her carved clay spheres and vessels. However, the bronzes are editioned – an economic principle – and also may be patinated in a range of hue and texture for variety within an edition.



Bow Wave 2012 (detail) photo: Martyn Eastwood

Always developing new skills, in 2011 Cassell was awarded funds from the Fondazione Sem and the Brian Mercer Charitable Trust through the Royal British Society of Sculptors to take up a residency in Studio Sem in Pietrasanta, Italy, close to the marble quarries of Carrara where for centuries sculptors have used the stone for its white purity, Michelangelo (1475–1564), Henry Moore



Flo-ra I and II 2012 photo: Jonathan Keenan

(1898–1986) and Barbara Hepworth (1903–1975) among their number; more recently Marc Quinn (b. 1964). In Pietrasanta Cassell worked for three months in the studio, where she was taught and assisted by the artisans. She created a number of successful carvings, including **Germination**, **Bow Wave**, **Inclining Form** and **Nautilus**; all are of 2012 and feature in this exhibition.

Although celebrated as a potter or ceramicist, Halima Cassell's early ambition was to work with glass, and sometimes she does so. A fine piece cast in lead crystal, **Amoeba Pool** 2012,

is exhibited here. The clarity of lead crystal shows very clearly the three-dimensionality of the original carving used to create the mould, causing the forms in the glass to catch the light, both scattering and reflecting it within the form and on surrounding surfaces.



Inclining Form 2012 photo: Martyn Eastwood

Focusing now on her ceramics, deeply carved spheres and hemispheres mostly made in clays of differing colour and texture: all reveal the inherent nature of the clay itself and remain unadorned, as Cassell uses neither glazes nor slips. The characteristics of a piece come from the way it is carved and her response to the type of clay she is using. Her approach is particularly clear in **Virtues of Unity** 2010–13 a collection of thirty hemispherical pieces that she has worked on since 2010, having added twelve to their

number especially for this exhibition. The clays used in this multi-element installation come from some fifteen different countries and the pieces are arranged tonally from black to white and through a range



Virtues of Unity 2010–13 photo: John Costello

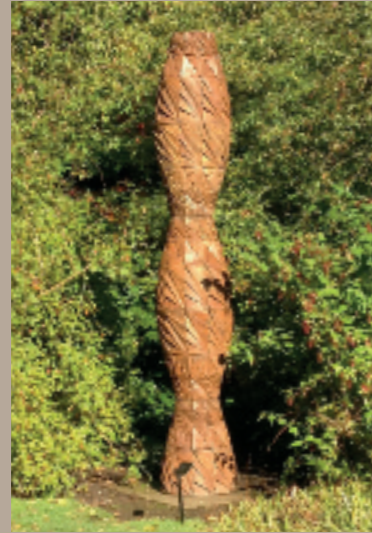
of colour. Shards from the carvings are shown separately; these were also fired and arranged in the same colour/tonal sequence. The installation speaks of unity and difference and its parallels in mankind.

Diverting from the sphere and hemisphere, Cassell has carved two white clay sculptures **Flo-ra I and II** 2012, both circular at the base, soaring to a pinnacle. These are partner pieces, reflecting architectural elements carved with motifs garnered from nature. In the exhibition are

other columns: **Fan Structure** 2005, **Voyage** 2009–13, **Crystalline Tower** 2010, **Makonde** 2010, **Rubicon** 2012 and **Unfurling** 2013.

Fan Structure, the earliest piece in the exhibition, is also the largest, standing over 6 meters high. It is made from iron and fibreglass, which is coloured with oxide to produce a rusted hue. Cassell is not afraid to experiment, as this leads her into new areas of expression and creativity. A one-off, **Fan Structure** may not be typical, but it is recognisably hers.

Voyage carved in Black Walnut and **Unfurling** in Lime, made some six years apart, suggests that wood is a material Cassell uses only occasionally. This is a brave departure, like her recent foray into carving marble, and one that requires particular sets of skills and sensitivity to the



Fan Structure 2005 photo: Martyn Eastwood

demands that wood makes on the carver. Wood, resistant to the knife or chisel to a degree, much less than marble but more than clay, is not easy work. The nature of grain, knots and medullary rays, which are areas in a tree from where branches once grew, have to be negotiated or used to effect.

Crystalline Tower, **Makonde** and **Rubicon** are cast in bronze. This succession shows how Cassell's concepts for working in bronze have developed over a short period. **Crystalline Tower** is made from repeated, similar elements, as was *The Endless Column* 1938 by Constantin Brancusi (1876–1957). Although Cassell's sculpture is just three elements high, the principle of suggested infinity remains a common characteristic.

The title **Makonde** for her largest bronze to date is given for the Makonde people who live in south-east Tanzania and northern Mozambique. They traditionally carved objects and spirit-figures from African Blackwood. Cassell says, 'A friend of mine, Zachary Kingdon, was studying the art of the Makonde sculptors, visiting and working with them in Tanzania. He learnt their carving techniques as part of his research for the book he was writing, which I found very interesting and which influenced my naming of this bronze'. Cassell's **Makonde** has the dimensions of a tall figure leaning forward, suggesting motion. Cast in bronze the deeply formed peaks and folds in the sculpture suggest drapes and without being entirely specific, a human presence.

Rubicon according to the Oxford English Dictionary is 'a boundary which once crossed betokens irrevocable

commitment; a point of no return'. Cassell's title may be read literally in this sculpture, as three highly polished round holes pierced through the decorative pod give visual access to space beyond. Is this piece speaking of her commitment to working in bronze, or indeed of the wider sense of being a sculptor; something that cannot be rescinded?

A unique presence in the exhibition is the five-pieced **Terpsichore (Dance)** 2012 made in porcelain. Terpsichore in Greek mythology was one of nine muses ruling over dance and the dramatic chorus. Her name is the basis of *terpsichorean*, of or relating to dance. The association is clear in the five porcelain figures, carved in different attitudes akin to movements in dance.

Whatever her means of expression, Halima Cassell's constant aim in her sculpture is summed up by the poet and art critic, Andrew Lambirth in his essay *Garlanded with Light* in the catalogue for her exhibition *Light Structures Halima Cassell at Blackwell* 2012. He concluded, 'Her main preoccupation and sculptural impulse is to penetrate beneath the skin of the form to reveal the structure within – the crystalline seed of the



Makonde 2010 photo: John Holt



Terpsichore (Dance) 2012 photo: Jonathan Keenan

stone, or the skeleton-like armature she perceives within the clay. She does not carve exteriors – the folded, abstract inner landscapes are her singular and highly imaginative vision.' Taking Lambirth's conclusion further, I suggest that her search for new means of expression also feeds her innate preoccupation and impulse as an artist.

Ann Elliott June 2013

Halima Cassell was born in Pakistan in 1975. She was brought up in Manchester and her further education, very interestingly, was based in both art and technology. Between the years 1994 and 2003 she successively studied art and design at Blackburn College; three-dimensional design at the University of Central Lancashire, where she graduated with BA and MA qualifications; and a PDQ course on technology for designer makers at Manchester College.

Cassell has exhibited widely, with her first solo exhibition at Blackburn Museum in 2004. Her work has been included in numerous group shows internationally since 2003, when her work was included in *Placa de l'Angel*, Barcelona. Two notable residencies, the first in Pietrasanta, Italy, a renowned centre for carving Carrara marble and the second at Blackwell The Arts and Crafts House, Cumbria, have both had a profound effect on her work. Her carving skills developed and her imagery became softer, more fluid and organic as a result of studying the work of artists and craftsmen of the Arts and Crafts movement.

Her work may be found in many public collections throughout Britain, including the V&A Museum London; Leeds Museums and Art Gallery; Bolton Museum and Art Gallery; Harris Museum and Art Gallery, Preston; Gallery Oldham; Dundee Art Gallery and Museum; Blackburn Museum and Art Gallery; The Hepworth, Wakefield; Jerwood Foundation Trust; Peter Scott Gallery Trust; Higham Hall, Cockermouth; Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool; Shipley Gallery, Gateshead. She has also undertaken public art commissions, mainly in the North of England. Cassell's most recent accolade is a purchase prize, funded by the Art Fund, through which Birmingham Museums Trust acquired one of her sculptures exhibited by Joanna Bird at the Crafts Council's exhibition *Collect* at the Saatchi Gallery, London, in May 2013. A second piece was acquired by the National Trust for Antony House, Cornwall.

For further information see www.halimacassell.com

EVENT Tuesday 30 July 1.15pm

Curator Ann Elliott tours the exhibition with the artist

Meeting place Lobby, One Canada Square

Tickets are free but please contact Canary Wharf Public Art Office at visualart@canarywharf.com to reserve a place

Most of the works are for sale

Contact Canary Wharf Public Art Office at visualart@canarywharf.com

LIST OF WORKS

H: height W: width
D: diameter

Crystalline Tower 2010 Bronze H 101.5 cm	Flo-ra I and II 2012 Clay, hand carved Each, H 91.5 cm
Fan Structure 2005 Iron and fibreglass H 641 cm	Germination 2012 Marble H 51 cm
Pod 2005 Resin H 61 cm	Bow Wave 2012 Marble H 86.5 cm
Corn Maiden 2007 Brick clay H 40 cm	Wu-Li (Pattern of Organic Energy) 2012 Stoneware H 30.5 cm
Coyote II 2007 Brick clay H 20 cm	Nautilus 2012 Carrara marble H 54.5 cm Private Collection
Staccato 2007 Bronze, edition 7 of 8, cast 2012 D 30.5 cm	Rubicon 2012 Bronze, edition 1 of 8 H 76 cm
Interlocking Vs 2009 Bronze, edition 2 of 8, cast 2012 D 30.5 cm	Unfurling 2013 Lime wood H 182 cm
Nexus 2009 Bronze, edition 1 of 8, cast 2009 D 30.5 cm	Dancing White Shadows 2013 Clay D 44.5 cm
Horizon I and II 2009 Clay Each, W 38 cm	Quatrain 2013 Clay D 48 cm
Voyage 2009–13 Black Walnut H 100 cm	Noir Rhythm 2013 Clay D 61 cm
Flame 2011 Clay D 30.5 cm	
Amoeba Pool 2012 Cast lead crystal glass W 46 cm	
Terpsichore (Dance) 2012 Porcelain Five elements, tallest H 46 cm	
Inclining Form 2012 Marble H 71 cm	

front: Crystalline Tower 2010 photo: Steve Russell Designed by Tim Harvey Printed by Jamm Print & Production



Sculpture at Work

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Curated by Ann Elliott for Canary Wharf Group

LOBBY, ONE CANADA SQUARE
Canary Wharf, London E14 5AB

1 July – 30 August 2013

Lobby, One Canada Square
Monday to Friday 5.30am-midnight
Saturday & Sunday 7am-11.30pm

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