

# Ceramic Review

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FREE INSIDE  
GALLERY MAP

## PROFILES

Pippin Drysdale  
Edward King  
Claire West  
Angela Mellor  
Joanna Still

## PRACTICE

Jonathan Keep  
Michael Eden  
Glaze Surprises  
Setting Out



**Halima Cassell**



# Remix

**PROFILE** – The sculptural ceramics of Halima Cassell bring together different strands of Islamic art, as **EMMANUEL COOPER** discovers.

PHOTOGRAPHY – DANIEL WALMSLEY / SEQUENCE – LEE BAXTER



'Remix' is one of those useful terms, coined by the music industry, to describe the way that ideas in songs and music can be reformulated to create new but recognisable forms. Such an analogy is useful for looking at the carved sculptural work of Halima Cassell, which brings together different cultural ideas to create visually intriguing and lively pieces. Using traditional high-firing clays, moulded and pressed into such conventional shapes as bowls and cylinders, Cassell transforms them into objects with relief surfaces made up of interlacing patterns and designs that are derived from the geometry that is central to Islamic art.

## BEGINNINGS

Cassell was born in a small village in Pakistan, one of seven children. The close-knit family returned to Manchester when Cassell was a year old, and she was brought up conventionally. While her brothers were encouraged to develop careers, she and her sisters were taught cooking and sewing with the clear expectation that they would marry and have children. Following the unfortunate death of both her parents, Cassell was placed in care from the age of twelve until sixteen. During this period she attended Queens Park High in Blackburn, where her work in art classes caught the attention of teacher John Costello, who introduced her to clay. The material was a revelation, and Cassell was immediately smitten. 'My forms were very organic, veering towards nature – in other words, human and animal representation. This was the curious and adventurous side of me'.

Interested in pursuing the life of an artist, Cassell, at this point, had no idea where it would lead. At sixteen she enrolled

on the two-year BTEC in Art and Design at Blackburn College, again finding herself in her element. She not only worked with clay, learning all the basic processes, but did life drawing and fine art as well as experimenting with any other material that seemed appropriate, including textiles and paper.

## ART SCHOOL

Now convinced that her future lay with art, she was accepted at the University of Central Lancashire (UCL) at Preston for the Three-Dimensional Design course, deciding to focus on ceramics. Under the direction of David Harper and David Binns, Cassell relished the freedom, feeling both challenged and excited. In the second year two different projects seemed to bring together different aspects of her life. One was concerned with surface patterns for tableware. Fascinated by the ceramics of north Africa, Cassell noticed that some of the most successful were those that repeated a single motif to form an interrelating pattern in which the original motif disappeared. The other was to create an object that in some sense represented a situation, such as a celebration or ritual. Inspired by her personal journey, the outcome was the creation of one object, made in two parts, consisting of a male and female piece, with the male larger and more commanding than the pear-shaped female. Research brought a new awareness of her cultural background, leading her to

THIS PAGE INSET: Halima Cassell ■ MAIN IMAGE: *Celestial Star*, W48cm ■  
OPPOSITE PAGE FROM TOP: *Tsunami*, Ø30.5cm ■ *Metamorphosis*, W48cm ■  
*Alhambra*, W48cm.



look at Islamic architecture, at stone carving and the way mathematics were used to great visual effect.

Some of these elements were brought together in a dish, some forty-two centimetres square, with a low relief design of a simple diamond shape carved into the surface. At the end of a successful three years and feeling that she wanted to study in greater depth, Cassell moved on to the MA at the university. Studying part-time, she worked in care homes to eke out a living.

While at UCL useful contacts were made with local brick companies, such as Marshalls Clay Products of Accrington and Shaws of Darwen, best known for the production of sinks, but adept at welcoming and collaborating with artists. At these factories Cassell was later able to work with professional mould and model makers and try out the different clay bodies they produced. With a clear focus of where her interests lay, but still unsure of exactly how to develop them, Cassell graduated with a strong portfolio of work and a compelling determination to pursue her ideas in clay.

#### CONSOLIDATION

Like any artist building a composition, Cassell plans and plots, sketching and drawing possible ideas in well-used and much consulted sketchbooks. Working on forms such

as semi-spheres, cylinders or flattened dishes, the possible permutations are put onto paper, some making use of angles and intersecting lines, others more flowing and organic in feel. The idea is then marked out on a form, such as a thick-walled semi-sphere, some six to seven centimetres thick. Days may be spent measuring and drawing to ensure symmetry before starting to carve. Working mostly with 'naked clay', that is without the use of glaze or slip, Cassell first carefully carves and then smooths and burnishes to remove any blemishes, leaving the form crisp and pure. The surfaces of the low dish forms, both rounded and square, are carved with repeating patterns of triangles, lozenge shapes and squares, the clay rubbed with pigments such as red iron oxide or manganese dioxide to heighten the effect of depth and shadow. Shapes, such as triangles, hexagons and stars, all of which are used in Cassell's forms, can be seen in traditional Islamic art.

The evolution of a geometrical shape carved in relief into an undulating surface is at once deceptively simple yet the result is highly intricate and full of infinite possibilities. Similar to some artists inspired by Islamic art, Cassell creates abstract forms and surface patternings that draw on mathematical and geometrical concepts. Such art can be seen as expressing the logic and order inherent in the Islamic vision of the universe. The study of geometry also

## Halima Cassell – In Practice



USING A FORMER: Clay is placed in plaster mould | Beating the clay to fill the mould | After levelling surface with metal kidney, depth of clay is measured with scribe.



feeds an ardent preoccupation with the stars and astronomy. The cultivation of mathematical analysis, in particular, can be seen as having a harmonising effect, with many seeing within geometry the unifying intermediary between the material and the spiritual world. Equally, the development of infinitely repeating patterns could be seen to represent the unchanging laws of God.

#### IN PRACTICE

Without necessarily being conscious of such historical and religious beliefs, Cassell's sketchbook is full of permutations of such designs, many of which seem to have crystal-like structures that appear to have grown following some sort of inner order. Some of these ideas have been worked in clay, taking on an individual life of their own. In *Off-centred Flower*, a flattened dish form, the simplified motif, more star than flower, sets up its own dynamic. Equally, *Reverberating Segments* takes one's gaze from the centre in a rhythmic pattern that both leads and disrupts the eye.

*Blackburn on the Hill* brings together a concern with landscape – Cassell's flat looks across the city rooftops – and geometrical shapes. On this semi-spherical pot, the zigzag on the inside merges visually with the 'rooftops' on the exterior. It is a piece that can be appreciated as a hollow container or

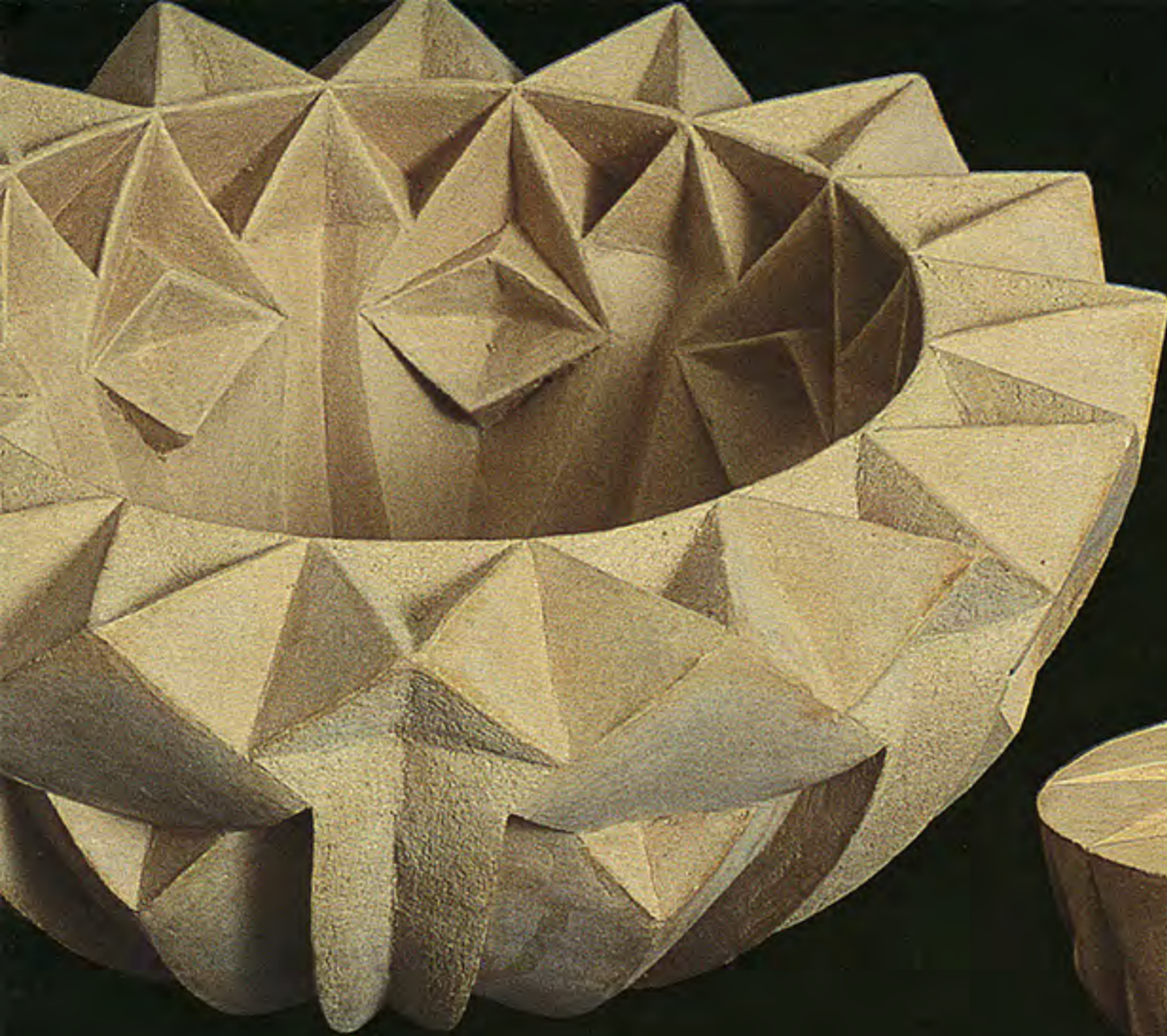
as a more abstract dome. *Blackburn on the Hill*, like *Diamond Projection*, *Maltese Cross* and *Interlocking V's*, makes use of the line of the rim, like a delicate horizon, to give a perspective, an edge of focus; a line that, like the stroke of the pencil, roots us to the piece. Other objects are more anarchic in breaking down this edge, cutting and carving it away until the outer and inner become one.

Cassell's water pieces make use of the sound and look of rippling water flowing over and optically distorting the form to create a pleasing combination of art and nature. Many pieces, such as *Conical Pyramid*, with a triangular pattern carved on the surface, are finished with a pale blue matt glaze, one of the few excursions into the use of this finish, though generally more familiar on the water pieces.

CLOCKWISE FROM OPPOSITE PAGE: *Diamond Projection*, Ø51cm ■ *Off-centred Flower*, Ø61cm ■ *Terracotta Flower*, Ø46cm ■ *Reverberating Segments*, Ø61cm.



MARKING THE DESIGN: Water keeps surface of clay damp ■ Measuring circumference of bowl with tape measure ■ Using callipers and scribe to mark reference points.



*Poppy Head* and *Three Tier* are also glazed, the wetting action of the water transforming the pale blue into succulent ultramarines and azures. By contrast *Terracotta Spiral*, standing over three metres high, highlights the natural orange brown of the clay for its effect. Constructed as a series of repeating semi-circles set off-centre, *Terracotta Spiral* is a *tour de force*, both in concept and execution.

Future plans for Cassell are ambitious and wide-ranging, involving both process and concept. She is investigating the use of moulds to produce limited editions, and to look at paperclay as a means of facilitating strength and lightness. In collaboration with Shaws of Darwen she has started to produce a series of tiles with interlocking relief patterns with glaze, suitable for architectural use. Following earlier interests in glass and stone, Cassell wants to pursue the possibilities of these materials. Recalling the way that crystal structures will multiply and grow, Halima Cassell's ideas, whether in panels, sculptural form or in as yet unexplored materials, bring a new and vibrant awareness of pattern and form. **OR**

This essay is an edited extract from the catalogue accompanying the *Carved Earth* exhibition, published by Shisha, £10.

Forthcoming exhibitions: *Carved Earth*, Bolton Museum and Art Gallery (a touring exhibition initiated by Shisha), Le Mans Crescent, Bolton, Lancashire BL1 1SE. January 27 – March 12, 2005. Tel 01204 332211 Website [www.boltonmuseums.org.uk](http://www.boltonmuseums.org.uk)  
The show tours to The Hub Centre, Sleaford, Lincolnshire. October 24 – December 4, 2005. Website [www.thehubcentre.org](http://www.thehubcentre.org)  
Cassell will be exhibiting at *Earth and Fire*, June 25-26, 2005.

Halima Cassell: Website [www.halimacassell.co.uk](http://www.halimacassell.co.uk)

THIS PAGE LEFT: *Rustic Arrows*, Ø30.5cm ■ TOP RIGHT: *Chain of Diamonds*, Ø30.5cm ■ BELOW RIGHT: *Blackburn on the Hill*, Ø30.5cm ■ OPPOSITE PAGE LEFT: *Terracotta Spiral*, H350cm ■ RIGHT: *Conical Pyramid*, H67cm.

## Halima Cassell – In Practice continued



CARVING THE FORM: *Fan Construction*, part-carved, showing reference points ■ Finishing carving the inside of *Marmor* bowl, with a saddler's tool, clay almost dry.



## Technical Notes

### CLAY BODY

I use heavily grogged clay that allows me to work on a large scale and utilise relatively thick surfaces to carve to my desired depth. I also concentrate on simple forms as the basis of my work in order to amplify the effect of the complex surface pattern combining with sharply contrasting contours.

### MAKING

Whilst creating my work, I go through different processes, each requiring a different mindset. I start by handbuilding, and/or

using a 'former' to create the basis of a shape for my structure. This follows on to the next phase, which involves exploring numerous possible design outcomes. At this juncture, I shut out all external stimuli; this enables my mind to run free. I do not allow myself to think about the inherent technical problems that may occur at the construction stage, as this may affect my freedom to think during this part of the creative process. Then I work out the mathematics of the pattern and the surface area of the form, so that they work

accurately and harmoniously together. Finally, I intuitively work out which way to carve each section of the design. Subsequently, this informs the remaining pattern on the overall form without having to work it out on paper.

Each piece can take up to eighty hours, or more, depending on size and the complexity of pattern. The work is slowly dried over several weeks to ensure a steady drying process. The pieces are fired up at variable temperatures depending on the clay body.



**OUTER SURFACE:** Carving and burnishing, neatening up and finishing before leaving to dry. A long, slow process, working systematically over the form.