

# CRAFTS

THE MAGAZINE FOR CONTEMPORARY CRAFT

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**GARTH CLARK  
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**COLLECT  
2017  
SPECIAL  
ISSUE**



**PLUS: PETER VOULKOS, SILVIA WEIDENBACH, LOUIS THOMPSON,  
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## Halima Cassell Tracing identity through clay



'I love seeing how the inside and the outside of a building work together, like in a cathedral'

HALIMA CASSELL

Opposite: Halima Cassell holds a piece from *Virtues of Unity* that uses clay from the Mississippi river; Above: *Sun Catcher*, carved oak, 2014; Right: *Lamina*, 2014, hand-carved unglazed stoneware

For Halima Cassell no material, it would appear, is out of bounds. Her graceful, flowing forms have sprung from wood, glass, marble, bronze, concrete and countless clays, with the sculptor slipping from one to the next with enviable ease. 'When you work with a new material,' she says, 'it makes you think differently.'

She has also worked in almost every scale, translating her designs from domestic vessel forms through to towering, totemic sculptures. As we talk, she shows me one of her design books and falls on some recent drawings for jewellery she's been making, crafting pendants and cufflinks in the breaks between carving a large-scale piece in wood. 'On weekdays I was working with a chainsaw, on the weekends, with a magnifying glass,' she says, chuckling at the incongruity of her tools.

Born in Kashmir, Pakistan, in the 1970s, Cassell arrived in the north of England with her family when she was only a year old. 'Growing up, you see yourself as a foreigner from Pakistan,' she tells me, 'but when I went back [in 2009, for a research residency] they introduced me there as a foreigner from England.' Questions about identity and migration, combined with a longstanding love of mathematics and art first kindled at school, have had a profound influence on the sculptor.

Yet while many have praised her sinuous rephrasing of Islamic architectural patterning, and the intricacies of African surface design, she prefers to leave things open to interpretation. 'People say to me "Oh, that's North African, or North American, or Persian" and they see things I would never have seen... Pattern is a universal language,' she reflects, 'but people all read them differently.'

While clearly animated by the essential quality of pattern, how it transcends the boundaries we use to delineate history and geography, she also enthuses about the way in which clay remains firmly rooted in place, in the land from which it has come. She has become a collector of sorts, sourcing clay on her travels and asking friends to bring her back bags from their trips. 'When I was in Switzerland I got some lovely Emmentaler clay from a farm; it's a very refined clay,' she says. 'And a friend brought me some Cuban clay with bits of donkey hair and all sorts in it. I thought it would definitely

blow up.' Luckily, no such drama occurred, and you imagine little is left to the mercy of chance under the knowledgeable ceramist's watch. 'With some clays you do feel each piece is both a test piece and final piece - hours spent carving it and you're not sure it will work.'

Despite these occupational hazards, she has spent several years turning these different clays into an installation, *Virtues of Unity*, that explores both the distinct properties of the clays she sourced and their underlying similarities. Later this year, when it travels to the Yale Center for British Art, Connecticut, for *Things of Beauty Growing*, its major survey of British ceramics, it will number 36 pieces with clay from 28 countries, ranging from dark hues of black and brown to creamy yellows and white. 'The idea is that it will always grow. When it started, it was about identity and where we belong. I wanted to say we are all the same, we just differ in texture and colour, like the clays.'

It's a profound statement, and one that fits with Cassell's wider

preoccupation with questions of harmony and equilibrium. For *Collect*, she will explore this notion of balance through a pair of forms, one in a charcoal grey clay and the other a pale, white blend of porcelain and stoneware. Together, they will represent masculinity and femininity, not through the patterns she carves into their surfaces, but their stance, the ways in which they activate and answer one another when shown side by side.

Like all her work, there is a precise, poetic logic. 'I love seeing how the inside and the outside of a building work together,' she reflects, 'like in a cathedral, where beautiful structures inside are there for the purposes of strength outside. When I'm carving, the inside and the outside have to work together too... The whole design has got to work.'

Imogen Greenhalgh  
Showing with *Joanna Bird Contemporary Collections*

*Collect* is at the Saatchi Gallery, King's Road, London SW3 4JY, 2-6 February 2017. [www.collect17.org.uk](http://www.collect17.org.uk)

