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A Journey of Ideas

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CARVED EARTH

Poems in clay

By Fareda Khan

HERS HAS BEEN CALLED AN UNBRIDLED TALENT. HALIMA CASSELL, AUDACIOUS CERAMICIST, HAS BEEN WOWING INTERNATIONAL AUDIENCES WITH HER SCULPTURES. WITH SUCCESSFUL SHOWS AT ART VENUES IN SPAIN AND SWEDEN, HER EXHIBITION, ENTITLED 'CARVED EARTH', COMPRISING 30 NEWLY COMMISSIONED, REFRESHINGLY UNIQUE ARTWORKS HELD AT THE BOLTON MUSEUM AND ART GALLERY, MANCHESTER, IN JANUARY 2005, HAD VIEWERS ENTHRALLED.

Cassell has become an awe-inspiring role model who has overcome barriers in her personal and professional life, to pursue her artistic practice tirelessly. She has created a substantial body of work, ranging from water features and tiles, to columnar structures and hemispherical bowls. She has also experimented with shapes and forms, reaping her influences from African pattern and Islamic architecture. Her recent work illustrates a transitional development in form, from the circle to the square. In Islamic appraisal, the application of geometric surface pattern has profound resonance; "the square denotes the symbol of physical experience and the physical world—or materiality"¹. Cassell's use of repetitive and interlacing pattern with the application of colour, light, water and texture creates the illusion of different planes.

The inspiration for these quasi-architectural forms and Islamic geometric designs illustrates how mathematics plays a central role in the meticulous and complex ceramics of Cassell's work. She discloses that most of her ideas materialise from her dreams, which are subsequently hastily sketched into a corpus of detailed drawings, adding to the 300 illustrations waiting to be produced.

Dalu Jones writes that decoration is a major unifying factor in Islamic architecture and design. For 13 centuries, decoration has linked buildings and objects from all over the Islamic world — from Spain to China to Indonesia.² Halima Cassell's work effectively transports the viewer to distant and arid climes, from Alhambra, Granada to North Africa to the Middle East. This reference to Alhambra in Granada, the Islamic

HALIMA CASSELL

citadel built during the Nasrid dynasty by Ibn al-Ahmer, is an apposite description of Cassell's artworks, with its "varied repertoire of Moorish arched, columnar, and domical forms... captivated by the special combination of the slender columnar arcades, fountains, and light-reflecting water basins found in those courtyards — the Lion Court in particular; this combination is understood from inscriptions to be a physical realisation of descriptions of paradise in Islamic poetry."³

Halima Cassell's pieces, through the skilful play of light and intricacy of carving are dynamic, depicting intense movement, yet they also remain static and serene at the same time.

Islamic art is an art of repose, intellectual rather than emotional, where tensions are resolved. It is a conceptual art where questions and answers are finely balanced. Absence of tension is achieved mainly through subtlety of surface decoration, in which patterns are limited to well-defined areas, but are, at the same time, infinite in the sense that they have unlimited possibilities of extension. The principles are of repetition and the continuous permutation of motifs and designs. Like water itself, which plays such a unique role in Islamic architecture, the decoration continually reflects and multiplies patterns to provide a 'cool' refuge for the eye and mind, creating an art which is dynamic and yet unchanging.⁴

Carved Earth is an exhilarating exhibition that traverses new territories in the field of contemporary ceramics.



*"The hue of the clay
dramatise the tones and*

Where does my preoccupation with carved form spring from? What are the roots of my fascination with carved space? These all-embracing obsessions of bringing into being the poetry of faceted forms are my creations. They are buried in layers of forgotten history, like subcutaneous memories waiting to be plumbed; like the ocean deep they float in darkness, waiting to be revealed by the light. I carve out parts of my history, an exorcism of thought forms, a compulsion to make manifest the intangible, transmuting it into something hard and permanent. Like life, everything begins with the energy of a thought. My forms are energetic expressions of my psyche linking two cultures, like the left and right hemispheres of the brain; logic and reason married to irrationality in order to formulate a style of working. Like slightly shifting sands my work refuses to stand still. I want my work to be on the edge of reason yet speaking with an eloquence that is understood by the universal consciousness — altered states yet accessible tectonic plates in dialogue, setting up tensions, the ‘Ley Lines’ of my world made visible within the forms and folds of my beloved earth.

Artists in general create their own mood and feeling through the use of colour, line and texture in their work, I try to do the same through my pieces but through playfully manipulating the planes and facets of the pattern, one against the other. This juxtaposition helps me to create the maximum impact within the overall design. The most exciting moment for me is when my flat designs become dramatically transformed when charted over a structure, thus taking on a different life. The hue of the clay body is crucial because I rarely use glazes, I solely rely on the piece itself to dramatise the tones and textures through the effects of light, shadow and rain.

In my early work I was exploring the boundaries of my new found ‘modus operandi’, which was infused with Islamic influences drawn from heavily carved architecture. This led me to look to other examples of intricately carved and constructed buildings from all around the world. In addition, I was inspired by the repetitive motifs of pattern, derived from the influences of African surface design. My recent work has been influenced by the structures of past and contemporary building styles. I was intrigued by internal space and construction, which are articulated together on the external surface envelope. These relationships have informed my own work as I strive to unify not only internal and external forms but also the parts to the whole. In this respect, I am reminded of the Greek principle of the Golden Section, namely that, ‘the smaller is to the larger as the larger is to the whole’.

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observations and comments of visitors to my work. There appeared to be a distinct pattern of behaviour of the viewers emerging solely based on gender. In general, women gravitated towards the spherical forms whereas the square forms tended to elicit more interest from men. Drawing from these observations, my new work consists of the same design elements but with a novel emphasis on the balance between masculine and feminine forms.

—Halima Cassell

Notes:

1. <http://www.islamicarchitecture.org>
2. Jones, D; *The Elements of Decoration: Surface, Pattern and Light*, from *Architecture of the Islamic World: Its History and Social Meaning*, edited by George Michell, Thames and Hudson, London, 1978
3. Trachtenberg, M and Hyman, I; *Architecture: From Pre-history to Post-Modernism*, Abrams Art History, 2003, p.219
4. Jones, D; *The Elements of Decoration: Surface, Pattern and Light*, from *Architecture of the Islamic World: Its History and Social Meaning*, edited by George Michell, Thames and Hudson, London, 1978, chapter 5, p.162.

FAREDA KHAN is Deputy Director of Shisha, a pivotal cultural agency based in Manchester, UK, which promotes the work of South Asian artists and curators through exhibitions, residencies, networking and consultancy services.

Photographs courtesy: Shisha. Photography by Daniel Walmsley
www.islamicarchitecture.org



Above: *Tsunami*, 2004. 12" diameter

Right: Row 1, L-R: *Problematic Squares*, 2004, 19"x19". *Concertina*, 2004, 19"x19". *Moss Ripple*, 2000, 19"x19"

Row 2, L-R: *Interlocking V's*, 2003, 12" diameter. *Metamorphosis*, 2004, 19"x19". *Centripetal*, 2004, 12" diameter

Row 3, L-R: *Overlapping Petals*, 2003, 12" diameter. *Coliseum*, 2002, 18" Marmor, 2004, 12" dia

Row 4, L-R: *Reverberating Segments*, 2002, 24" diameter. *Mancunian Rooftops*, detail, 2004, 19"x49". *Off-Centred Flowers*, 2002, 24" diameter

