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Forms of WONDER

Renowned sculptor Halima Cassell MBE explains the passion and inspiration behind her remarkable creations

It is notoriously challenging to make a living as an artist, and, though art had been her passion from a very young age, sculptor and ceramicist Halima Cassell was under no illusion about pursuing art as a career.

But Halima, made an MBE last year for her services to art, had an art teacher at secondary school who offered a glimpse of what the future could be.

“He used to let me stay after school and he’d be making these beautiful pieces with Celtic motifs which he sold, and I think that’s when the first light came on to suggest that I *could* make a living from art.”

Halima, her husband Martyn and their eldest child moved to Shropshire seven years ago, the culmination of a long search for the perfect place in which to combine home and studio. “Initially I was looking for a studio next to a house because where we lived in Lancashire, that wasn’t the case.”

This meant that combining family life with the very long hours she works had become increasingly stressful: “I was only seeing my son for short periods, and I was desperate to live somewhere which would make it easier. Having the studio close to the house means that even when I am working, the children can be in the studio.

“We looked all over the country – from the Lakes to Cornwall to Derbyshire – then at least three different people mentioned Shropshire or Herefordshire.” This led them to the old goods yard in South Shropshire which they now call home. “I’d always wanted to be near a station, but I didn’t think it would be this close.

“There were lots of ticks on my list, including the fact that it’s all on one level, which is useful when you have a big sculpture to move, the house is attached and we’re in a small village.”

Halima is among the UK’s leading

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sculptors, with work in the Victoria & Albert Museum, the Hepworth Museum and the Walker Art Gallery and Museum in Liverpool among others – work that was made in a one-bedroom flat – and fulfilling commissions around the world. “In the early days I didn’t have a kiln and fired my pieces in places where I could bargain to use a kiln.”

Her work is instantly recognisable – strong geometric forms intricately carved to create dramatic pieces across which light plays to create a sense of movement. Her inspiration is pattern – from architecture, Islamic art, African surface pattern and geometry in nature – something that speaks to everyone and takes every viewer of the work to a different place. “Pattern is a link between all of us,” says Halima.

It’s a blindingly obvious and instantly undeniable truth, and explains the magnetic attraction of her work.

Her pieces also link us through the materials she uses – the clay she works with is sourced from around the world and is, at a fundamental level, she explains, the material from which we all come and to which we will all return.

The creation of these aesthetically and mathematically stunning pieces is extraordinarily labour intensive, with every step carried out by hand. All Halima’s work begins with a sketch – frequently involving the precise dissection of a circle into patterns based on repetitions.

“From that sketch,” she says, “I know roughly what material I will be working with.”

Once she has settled on a design, the ➔

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form into which she carves the pattern must be made, and made perfect, a process that can take days. Then her favourite part of the work can begin – the carving: “It’s a very meditative process,” she explains. To facilitate the flexibility she needs, Halima has taught herself to carve with both hands, allowing her to reach every part of a piece with precision.

“Taking it from a flat design to a 3-D object is a really exciting process,” she says. “I put a lot of myself into it to create facets of myself, and there will be weeks and weeks of work in a piece.”

“Someone said to me once that my work was now so recognisable that I didn’t need to do anything else, I could just make vessels with carved interiors and exteriors, and there would always be a market for it. And lots of potters do that, but for me I like to have a challenge, I like things that push me.

“The one thing that I do keep the same, though, is the concept of the way I carve.

After school, Halima went to art college in Blackburn before doing a degree at the University of Central Lancashire in Preston, where she also did an MA.

“I’ve recently completed a wall frieze for them, which was installed last summer.”

Having completed her MA, and believing she needed a Plan B, Halima was set to do her teacher training. “I always had this thing about being able to support myself financially, then an opportunity came up through Arts Council England where studio space became available for young graduates to use. I thought ‘what do I do?’

What she did was seize the opportunity, figuring: “I have been skint, I might as well be skint for another two years and see how it goes. I thought I could always go back to teaching – but I never did.” She does, however, now deliver some masterclasses.

Today, when she speaks to students about working in the arts, she passes on something she herself learned at university. “I was told that being able to make a proper living from your art takes 10 years and the lecturer who said that wasn’t far wrong – it was around that time before I made a half-decent wage. Ten years to be recognised and find the right staging for my work and get commission projects in.”

Renowned for her ceramics, Halima does



PHOTO BY CHRIS SMART

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PHOTOGRAPH BY STEVE RUSSELL



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not, however, limit herself to one medium – she makes work in stone, concrete, clay, wood, bronze and even glass.

“Each material has new restrictions or new possibilities. Concrete, for example, gives you a certain amount of time to work with it, with stone you can go back and forwards, with clay you have to carve it before it gets completely dry. But the principal of three dimensional carving into the material is always the same.”

Are there materials, I ask, that she has yet to try, but would like to?

“When I moved here, I had an inkling I wanted to work with iron and I have done that. Now I’d like to do some welding. One of the reasons for moving here was to work bigger, and the studio has allowed me to work on a much larger scale, so welding is really appealing,” she says. “And maybe plastic ...”

Before she embarks on welding, though, there are commissions to be completed.

“At the moment I am working on various commissions,” she explains. “They are all clay, whereas last year it was stone.”

Among last year’s commissions were new concrete pieces for Glyndebourne, where she

had her first major solo exhibition after being awarded an MBE in the 2021 New Year’s Honours List. The exhibition included four new site-specific pieces for the Glyndebourne gardens, all inspired by the organic forms she had observed on her first site visit in 2019.

Currently she is working on a commission in Reading, where she has visited the remains of the abbey built in 1121 and destroyed by Henry VIII. “Because it was so close to London it was utterly destroyed and hardly any artefacts are left, with just a few capitals and pillars in the museum and I am doing a piece in relation to that.

“I want to try and mimic the form of the capital (the crowning member of a column) and then look at the motifs and various things left on the artefacts and create a design from that,” she says.

“I have always observed things and when I am designing I can do it from what I have in my memory. My inspiration is nature and architecture, but basically I love even the way someone’s clothing or hair is flowing ...”

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