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Destiny, A Sculpture by Bruce Beasley 2009, 75 x 75 ft, Oiled steel, Monterey, Mexico

Halima Cassell: Carver

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Introduction

When I first saw all the work credited to Halima Cassell, I thought there were at least three Halima Cassells as in Figures 1 (a), (b), and (c). It turns out there is only one very prolific Halima Cassell. She was born in Pakistan in 1975 and moved with her family to Manchester, England when she was one year old, where she was brought up. She obtained an undergraduate degree in art in 1997 and an MA in 2002. She now lives in Blackburn, Lancashire. Her work has been aptly described as “a fusion of her Asian roots with a fascination for African pattern work and a passion for architectural geometry.”



(a) Clay



(b) Marble



(c) Wood

Figure 1. One Halima Cassell carving (a) Clay, (b) Marble (c) Wood.

A new technique for ceramic sculpture

Sculpture is generally modeled in clay, carved in wood, stone, or plaster, welded or cast in metal. Halima Cassell introduced an original technique of first modelling an initial clay form, such as a thick bowl, and then carving into the surface when it is between leather hard and completely dry. An initial bowl shape already provides a circular hollowed out form on which to carve a design that is initially a two-dimensional drawing on the concave surface. Moreover, she also draws a two-dimensional design on the outer convex surface and then carves into the outer surface. The result is a completely three-dimensional carving all around the bowl shape on both the inner and outer surfaces. There is no front or back and the inside and outside are equally interesting. In particular, there are strong light and shadow effects resulting from the carving process which consists of separate strokes of a knife. The basic circular form thus results in a sculpture that invites one to move around with no one preferred viewpoint. Rather there is a continuously changing 360 degree range of images that have no beginning and no end. It is totally three-dimensional. Examples are shown in Figure 2 (a) and (b).



Figure 2. (a) *Harlequin Shifts*, 2005, 12 in. diameter, unglazed clay.



Figure 2. (b) *Tsuami*, 2004, 12 in. diameter, unglazed clay.

The pieces displayed below are an installation of sculptures. The individual clay bodies are acquired from different parts of the globe and differ in color and texture, as shown in Figure 3.



Figure 3. *Virtues of Unity*, 30 pieces, 2010-2013, Solo show at Canary Wharf, London, UK.

This original technique of preparatory modeling followed by the main work of carving has resulted in a very widely recognized body of work.



Figure 4 (a) *Bowsprit*, 2009, h 600 x dia 150 approx cm.



Figure 4 (b) *Great Burnet*, 2009, h 6 ft x 2 ft square.



Figure 5. *Aphrodite*, 2009, h 35 x w 44 x d 3 in.

Halima Cassell has really opened the gates to a whole new world of stoneware sculpture. For example, in Figures 4 (a) and (b) she is shown working on vertical sculptures. In Figure 5, she is working on a large relief sculpture. Additional reliefs are shown in Figure 6.



Figure 6. Reliefs, row 1: *Tide, Anemones, Fan*. row 2: *Basalt, Wave, Aphrodite*, 2005-2010.

Stone Sculpture

We note that a very talented stone carver might attempt to carve a Cassell bowl sculpture directly in stone. This may or may not be possible since carving both sides without fracturing is very difficult. In any case, Cassell first carves the sculpture in nearly dried clay with a knife and then fires the clay to obtain a stoneware sculpture. Thus she carves the clay and then turns the clay into stone.

Having said that, eventually Halima Cassell was inspired to carve directly in stone. In this case she carves the outer surface of the stone block using a pneumatic chisel, as in Figure 7(a). This is an intermediate stage in the carving of the sculpture Calliope shown in the three views in Figures 7 (b-d). In Calliope, we see that when carving in stone, Cassell can carve quite deeply into the stone so that she is carving deep spaces and the corresponding light shadow effects are very strong. The sculpture is truly a composition of form, space, light, and shadow. In Figure 7(b) we can even see a little opening at the top where Cassell has carved through the stone. As in most of the bowl forms, the sculpture is completely three-dimensional and changes dramatically as one's viewpoint changes. Calliope is discussed in detail in an enlightening interview with Halima Cassell at [1]. A general interview is at [2].



(a)



(b)



(c)



(d)

Figure 7 (b-d). *Calliope*, 2011, Carrara marble, h 60 x w 28 centimeters.



Figure 8. (a)

Figure 8. (a) *Bow Wave*, 2012, Carrara marble, h 34 x w 24 in.

(b) *Nautilus*, 2012, Carrara marble, 21 in. diameter, d 12 in.



Figure 8. (b)

An impressive marble carving in process is shown in Figure 8(a). Here we see the surface pattern that guides the carving. Another beautiful marble carving is shown in Figure 8(b).

Wood Sculpture.

As shown in Figure 1 (c), Cassell also carves wood sculptures using traditional hand tools. This sculpture *Navel* is shown in Figure 9(a). However, for the sculpture *Unfurling* shown in Figure 9(b), a chain saw was used. Here Cassell was not concerned with surface patterns but rather with a composition of strong vertical forms



Figure 9. (a) **Figure 9. (b)**
Figure 9. (a) *Navel*, 2009-2013,
 Sheesham Wood, h 4.5 ft. x w 10 in.
(b) *Unfurling*, 2013, Limewood, h 71 x
 w 37 x d 24 in.



Figure 10. (a) **Figure 10. (b)**
Figure 10. (a) *Fan Construction*, 2010-2013, h 21 ft, Iron
 and resin, Cartwright Hall, Bradford, UK.

Iron and Resin Sculpture

A tall iron and resin sculpture *Fan Construction* is shown outdoors in Figure 10(a) and an indoor detailed view is shown in Figure 10(b). *Fan Construction* was originally carved in clay and a mold was made from the clay sculpture. The location is Cartwright Hall, Bradford, UK.

Bronze Sculptures

Halima Cassell has also had a selection of sculptures cast in bronze. The sculptures are first carved in an initial material such as clay or plaster and then a mold is made in order to make a bronze casting. Two bronze sculptures are shown in Figure 11.

The large impressive bronze sculpture *Makonde* in Figure 12(b) was originally carved in plaster, as shown in Figure 12(a). The mold for the bronze sculpture was then made in silicon and a hard case shell. *Makonde* is activated by a certain figurative lean. As in *Calliope* in Figure 7, *Makonde* consists of a composition of deeply cut spaces resulting in a variety of form space light shadow relationships

that change as one moves around the sculpture. Cassell's general abstract sculptural style emerges strongly in *Calliope* and *Makonde*.



(a)



(b)

Figure 11. (a) *Crystalline*, 2008, 12 in. diameter (b) *Staccato*, 2012, 12 in. diameter.



(a)



(b)

Figure 12 (a) Carving *Makonde* in plaster for bronze casting (b) *Makonde*, 2013, h 78 x w 30 in.

Cast Lead Crystal Sculpture

Cast lead crystal sculptures can be made in the same way that bronze sculptures are made from a mold of an original. A beautiful crystal bowl is shown in Figure 14. The mirror image is a perfect enhancement.

Conclusion

We have now presented a small selection of works by Halima Cassell in clay, stone, wood, and bronze. This should convince you that she is "A vital force to be reckoned with". Her website

<http://www.halimacassell.com> is a very extensive source of information on her work. There are two books corresponding to exhibits of her work

[3] and [4] with informative texts. In conclusion, we wish to express our gratitude to Halima Cassell, for allowing the insertion of the images in this article.

References

[1] Interview. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gexW9ceOTSE>

[2] Interview. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pDqW9GROV3Y>

[3] Halima Cassell, *Carved Earth*, 2005, Shisha, ISBN: 0-9545563-4-8. Texts by Jonathan Harris and Emmanuel Cooper. Exhibit: Carved Earth: Sculptural Ceramics by Halima Cassell, at Bolton Museum and Art Gallery, England.

[4] Halima Cassell, *Dreams Made Manifest*, 2009, North Lincolnshire Council, ISBN. 978-0-9539636-4-5. Texts by Andrew Lambirth, Peter Randall-Page, Alan Grieve, Oliver Ulmer, Edmund de Wall, Helen Joseph, and conversation with Dominic Mason. Exhibit: Dreams Made Manifest, a 20-21 Visual Arts Center touring exhibition, North Lincolnshire, England.



Figure 13. *Amoeba Pool*, 2012, 12 in. square, Cast lead crystal glass.