

Halima Cassell: Eclectica

by Judith LeGrove

Halima Cassell is a ceramicist and sculptor of rare talent. Working with stoneware, marble, porcelain, concrete, bronze, and more recently iron, she shapes her materials with consummate skill and assurance.

The determination that saw Cassell to this point (she lost both parents while young) continues to sustain her work, compelling her to develop, to explore, to grow. Early ceramics demonstrated a tough geometry.

Carved by hand from stoneware, their surfaces were tessellated and regular, crystalline in their repetition of motif. Cassell was fascinated by the architectural heritage of Manchester, with its carved stone facades, terracotta work and Gothic elaboration. Yet pattern could be gleaned from humbler quarters, too. Mancunian Roofscapes (2005) derived its surface identity from terraced housing, eaves-to-eaves, in Greater Manchester. Its overall form was square, as a platter, filled with triangular solids. But is the pattern really regular? Already Cassell had departed from reality by placing each house at right angles, so that their roofs shadow one other. And looking closely, even these rows appear to curve infinitesimally; a human departure from geometry.

Nonetheless, there was a sense that such

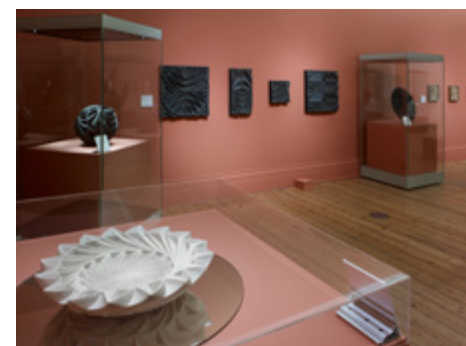
works were too rigid, and Cassell began to loosen her methods of working. A pivotal moment was the accidental shattering, while firing, of a commission scheduled for exhibition at the Hepworth Wakefield in 2008. Rather than discarding, Cassell decided to display the work, now named Torso, as it was – its sheared edges contrasting with the immaculate carving of the petalled centre.

Then, in 2006-7, Cassell visited Japan, where she used local clays and a potter's wheel (a radical departure from her usual method) to make vessels whose surfaces she subsequently carved. The resulting works are among her most spontaneous to date, embracing change and chance, and appropriately named after Japanese volcanoes. Markedly different in colour and finish – solid, variegated, two-tone, part-glazed – they also evince a beguiling, wayward asymmetry.

The implications of these experiences continue to ripple through Cassell's work. In Japan, on an earlier visit, Cassell became fascinated by kintsugi, the practice of repairing broken ceramics with lacquer dusted with gold; celebrating objects' histories, rather than concealing or discarding them. One of her earliest colour-glazed works, Blue Tapestry (1996–2019), was treated thus, acquiring a prominent slash of gold. The porcelain clay of Japonica (2018) cracked



*Ameoba Pool, 18inch Sq, Cast lead crystal glass - Edition 2of8
Photo by Simon Bruntell*



*REM (clay) and Phoenix (clay)
Photo by Michael Pollard*



Rubicon, Bronze, 23_H x 6_W, Edition 7of8 - Photo by Jonathan Keenan1

in Cassell's studio as temperatures fluctuated. This, too, was repaired using kintsugi, to leave a delicate scarring, gold against white.

Cassell possesses the enviable ability to visualise her ideas in three dimensions. Often these thoughts arise when asleep or dreaming (hence the title of REM (2006), referring to rapid eye-movement while sleeping). Waking, Cassell will note ideas in one of many sketchbooks she has kept since childhood. These are working drawings, to remind Cassell of forms, or to resolve problems of structure, although they make compelling studies in themselves. They provide Cassell with all the information she needs to begin working with clay. To realise her ideas three-dimensionally, Cassell takes heavily grogged clay (incorporating sand or ground stone to make it more resilient when firing) and shapes it by hand or by using a former. Having calculated the geometry of her design, she carves into the clay before firing. Each piece may take eighty to hundred and sixty hours to create, then several weeks to dry before firing.

Cassell responds sensitively to the potential of materials. Bronze can be finished to sharp edges, then patinated to emphasise contrast. In the vertical Rubicon (2019), the interior of each pierced hole is burnished gold, creating an object at once ritualistic and playful. Viewed obliquely, it glows numinously; head-on, the light disappears. The list of materials continues. Cassell's carving of marble, in Flow (2012), is seductively sinuous, evoking drapery. Jesmonite, a lightweight acrylic resin incorporating mineral particles, is perfect for wall reliefs; Cassell uses it in series, to suggest the elements, or for studies of flowers. Glass, which Cassell has long wanted to use, is represented by Amoeba Pool (2012), an ethereal essay in light, volume and absence.

Cassell's current exhibition at Manchester Art Gallery, 'Eclectica' (until January 2020), her largest to date, displays the breadth of this working practice and an impressive body of work spanning 25 years. Pieces range from the intimate to the monumental, displayed with sensitivity and sophistication. Watching and listening to visitors, it is clear that Cassell's work elicits a profound, instinctive response, drawing some to linger in front of certain pieces, others to share impromptu observations. Yet one work leaves the strongest memory: Virtues of Unity.

In 2009, Cassell began an ongoing project to make a vessel from the clay of each country of the world. So far she has completed 39, relying sometimes on friends to bring materials. The vessels have unique characters, derived from the nature of the clay, and are named after virtues: temperance, hope, dignity, and so on. Cassell conceived the idea through her own experience – being described, on occasion, as a 'foreigner' in both the UK and Pakistan. She acknowledges this dual heritage as essential to her identity. If, as seems clear, her desire is to create work uniting and expressing our shared humanity, regardless of nationality or creed, her contribution is vital indeed.