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VIRTUES OF UNITY BY HALIMA CASSELL: ARTWORK REVIEW

Published [April 28, 2019](#) by [cottononmcr](#) in [Exhibition Review](#)
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HALIMA CASSELL 'VIRTUES OF UNITY' PART OF HER EXHIBITION AT MANCHESTER ART GALLERY 'ECLECTICA-GLOBAL INSPIRATIONS'

Although this work focuses on our commonalities, uniting the human race as a whole, I also think it tells us about our differences too. It seems like in today's society, talking about our differences is frowned upon. We are so driven to include everyone and all be equals – this sounds like I'm leading up to some EDL type of protest, my god I'm not! What I am trying to say is, yes everyone should be treated as equal, not matter their race, gender, sexual preferences etc. However, we should actually all embrace our differences. Every culture is different, every skin colour is different, everyone's backgrounds are different. It seems like in the strive to create equality, we have perhaps hidden the fact that we are all actually very different.



Halima Cassell's work at Manchester Art Gallery, 'Virtues of Unity' explores commonalities in our world. Using clay sourced from each country, Cassell creates ceramic 'bowls'. The aim is to create 195 bowls, one to represent every country in the world (she has created 39 so far so has a long way to go).

I have dabbled in the odd bit of sculpture. I did a 6 week course after graduating Uni – yes it as only a small dabble – but enough for me to understand the hard and pain-staking work that Cassell has put into these forms. They are full of contrasts, heavy yet delicate, rough and smooth, beautiful yet full of political meaning, soft yet sharp.... the conjunctions go on.

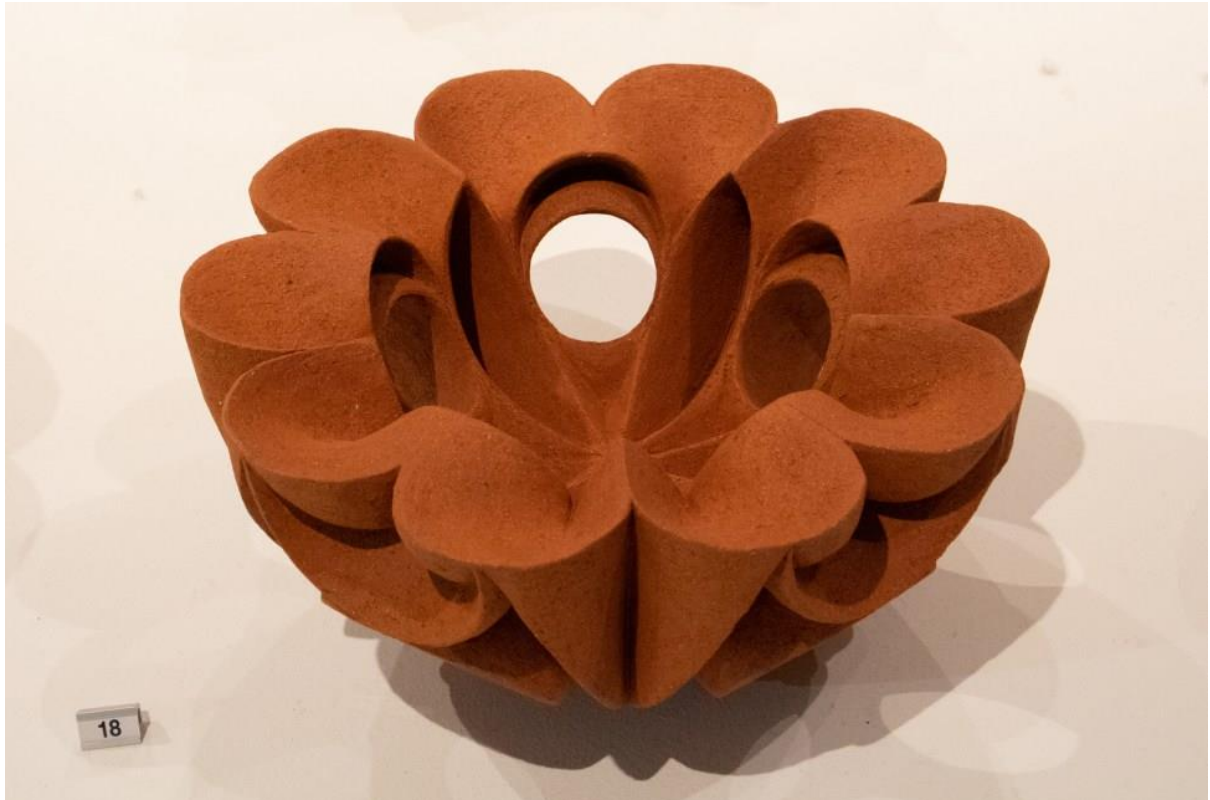


I guess that links me nicely back to my intro. Yes this piece aims to show more of our commonalities than our differences, and it definitely does that. But I can't help but notice how it draws us to think of our differences too! This is the first time the artwork has been displayed in a circle. The idea of a circle represents the world, unity, all part of the same human family. Yet, the sculptures seem to be displayed in a light-to-dark format. It looks like the make-up shelves of Selfridges, browsing the foundation counter to find the right colour for your skin. Each piece has its own unique pattern and design, yet they are all the same overall uniform shape – same height, same bowl-like shape etc.



Let's talk about some of my favourite individual pieces. First being number 8. Greece, named 'Modesty'. This one caught my eye for the deepest of cuts (is that a song title?). I liked how this piece had positive and negative shapes and lines. Deep valleys in the clay then created lovely, smooth, sphere like shapes. It was beautiful.

Number 15. Germany 'Dignity'. This stood out as the darkest of the clays. If I was to guess I would have said this piece was from Japan, not because of the colour of the clay, but because of its form and shape. It was like an origami piece, with sharp, crisp edges. It looked futuristic and modern, just like Japan.



Number 18. Indonesia 'Purity' was the prettiest I thought of all the forms. It was like a delicate flower, repetitive in its pattern, it looked like an open tulip, searching for the sunshine.

10. Spain 'Awe' was the most textured/rough surface clay in the bunch. It looked rugged, heavy. I think because of this, the overall sculpture was less intricate, less detailed. It lets the texture of the clay be part of the pattern, of its identity.



I could continue to discuss each piece but this article would then be a novel. They were all so beautiful and carefully crafted. When I think about what this series will look like when it's completed, when all 195 sculptures are created, I can't wait! I can imagine the room, full of these forms, it will be overwhelming! I need to know where this will be and when! Halima Cassell, reach out and tell me!

The exhibition statement explains – The artist was born in Kashmir, but grew up in Manchester. In the UK she was labelled as a 'foreigner', and when she travelled to Pakistan, she was labelled as a 'foreigner from England.' This idea of being an outsider in both countries led to the artist to question her identity and her culture. This was the basis of 'Virtues of Unity.'



There is a whole other room at Manchester Art Gallery of more of Cassell's work. The exhibition is full of vase-like shapes, abstract sculptures, wall pieces and more. But it was 'Virtues of Unity' which really got me thinking. I think this work 100% makes you question our world. It shows unity in art, in sculpture, in clay, in countries. It links to the root (or ground if you will) of every country being the same. But in the process of looking at what unites us, I don't think it is a terrible thing to think about what divides us also. Divide perhaps is a strong word, but looking at what makes us different because difference is a good thing! You wouldn't want to go on holiday and it be exactly like Manchester? Well, some people might (with the addition of better weather) but how boring would life be? Let's talk about our differences! Let's start a conversation about culture and race. We have to pussy-foot around calling a black person black, a gay person gay. It's got a little crazy in recent times and everyone is scared of being different. But that's because not enough people *talk* about it. As soon as you start a conversation with those people, you will see that yes they are different, and no they aren't offended by you saying that, and at the end of the day, our differences is what makes our planet work!

Great piece! Go see it! Very thought provoking and beautiful.

[‘Eclectica–global inspirations’](#) by Halima Cassell is on
at [Manchester Art Gallery](#) from 2nd February – January 2020.