

# HALIMA CASSELL

## *Virtues of Unity*

### INSPIRATION AND SCOPE

With this body of work, I aim to reflect on the shared nature of humanity by using the metaphor of a clay vessel. The individual, hand-carved ceramic pieces share a similar curvilinear approach, which incorporates a soft, rounded look, unlike my usual work which tends to have sharper edges and burnished surfaces. They also feature holes, which pierce each piece and allow light to form a penetrative connecting link through from one carving to the next. The clay for each hand-carved vessel originates from a different country and demonstrates a broad spectrum of hues, textures and behaviours. When these clays are fashioned into essentially similar forms and displayed in hue order from dark to light, they resonate together. By adopt-

ing a similar style of working throughout the installation, my intention is to implicitly link the individual works in order to embody and reinforce the idea of humanity as a single species within a shared world.

As someone of South Asian origin, who is perceived in England as being of Pakistani origin, or labelled, a “foreigner” or “second generation immigrant”, I am keenly aware of issues of identity.

However, in 2009, whilst visiting Pakistan for the first time as an adult, I was jolted into questioning my own identity and belonging more deeply than I had done before. Although born in Pakistan, I found

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Virtues of Unity at Yale Centre of British Art *Photo: Richard Caspol*



VU - Fidelity, Belgium *Photo: Jon Stokes*



VU - Serenity, Ireland *Photo: Jon Stokes*

VU - Unity, Belgium *Photo: Jon Stokes*



VU - Hope, Germany *Photo: Jon Stokes*



Virtues of Unity *Photo: Jon Stokes*

that I was described as a “British Asian”, or more frequently as “a foreigner from England”. It was through this sense of double displacement that I conceived this work which might speak to anyone who has ever felt displaced or uprooted.

After my trip to Pakistan in 2009, I found myself increasingly asking, “Can we really define who we are, or where our common roots lie? How do we imagine our shared humanity?” This installation is my extended response to these questions. The differently coloured and contrastingly textured clays, hewn from countries around the world, are intended to stand for our common humanity, despite our apparent differences. The installation is intentionally designed to highlight the elementary reality that we are all alike, coming from the clay of the earth and eventually all returning to that same elemental clay, it is my passionate hope that this basic concept will resonate with those who engage with my installation.

This project is an ongoing journey for me. My intention is to gather many different types of clay from across the globe. I aim to present their exciting diversity through the countries’ geology and climate, while celebrating the exploration of each one’s own distinctive character and identity.

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### THE CONNECTING HOLE

During the initial conception of Virtues of Unity, I was pregnant with my first child. It was one of the most important, memorable and enlightening experiences of my life. Like motherhood, the process of making each clay piece is hugely labour intensive, yet also intensely pleasurable in its undertaking.

One of the main reasons I included the holes in the already earthly spherical vessel forms was to resonate with the idea of the womb and birth canal, in connection with Mother Earth or Gaia, the name we planned to call our first child if he had been a girl. Each one of us comes from our mother’s womb and returns to the “womb of the earth”. The hole is also intended to represent the inside connecting with the outside, like a mother with child, the spherical vessel forms are intended to resemble



the earth, a container, a form which is dominant in my work as a whole. Their curvilinear qualities are earthly, motherly even. In addition, the deeply incised patterns and voids have been carved in a way which reflects femininity and fertility within the overall form, as if they have swirled themselves into existence like the petals of a flower opening, to be pollinated and fertilised.

## PATTERN

As a species, we draw meaning from the patterns we discern in our world. Pattern is a universal language, interpreted and understood by all of us in our own ways. The diversity of pattern derives from a history of appropriation and re-interpretation. Pattern is based on a series of common principles and through playing with pattern; it may be possible to discern basic forms and rhythms. These rhythms suggest that cultures and communities are part of a "world art", which underpins my personal vision of unity in multiplicity. Such themes resonate through pattern, much of which also derives from simple, universal geometry.

I hope viewers will be able to project themselves into the work. Whilst one viewer might easily see interlacing Celtic knots or Neo-Gothic elements, another might see Moorish art, and yet another may detect African patterns. In this respect, pattern can say as much about the viewer as the maker.

## PROCESS

I work with the exciting notion and awareness that clay changes its properties through the firing process, becoming a permanent form, giving its existence a unique imprint on the world, resembling each and every one of us.

The vessel is an important and exciting form for me. This is especially so when a flat design is mapped over the convex or concave form, giving a new dimension to the design. The process of creating each clay piece is hugely labour intensive and at various stages high risk in the making. The four consecutive stages of making the vessel are:

The first stage is hitting out the basic form by hand. It is important at this stage to handle the clay with great caution. Failure to do so can cause air bubbles to form, particularly with such thick walled forms, which may result in the work exploding in the kiln.

The second stage, I call the "shorthand" of my thoughts, in which I conceive and develop the various design ideas and possibilities and record them in my notebook.

The third stage is where I mathematically divide the surface area of the form in order to map out the chosen design onto the clay.

The final stage is the carving. For me this is a meditative and yet immensely physical process, from which I derive much pleasure. Such enjoyment is possible because, by this stage I have carefully and fully planned the direction of every plane, to the extent that I am able to identify which direction to carve the entire piece.

For more information please visit [www.halimacassell.com](http://www.halimacassell.com)

I would be delighted, whilst on your travels, if you were able to help me source clay. If so, please contact me by email: [info@halimacassell.com](mailto:info@halimacassell.com). Quantity needed of wet clay 10 - 16 kg or dry clay 7 - 12kg.



VU - Vitalty, Israel Photo: Jon Stokes

The installation 'Virtues of Unity' will be part of solo show in Manchester City Art Gallery, title Eclectica, which will run from 2 February 2019 – 24 January 2020

**Halima Cassell** was born 1975 in Kashmir, Pakistan and grew up in north-west of England, now she is living in Shropshire. She studied at the University of Central Lancashire with B.A. (hons) in 3D Design in 1997 and 2002 with the M.A. in Design. 2003 she received a PHQ in New Technology for Designer Makers at the Manchester City College. A fusion of cultural environments has shaped her identity and underpins her practice. Halima's work is characterised by the interaction of bold, simple forms overlaid with intricate surfaces, stemming from a fascination with the symbolism of repetitive motifs. Geometry is the starting point for her designs and she manipulate this to create illusions of movement and enhance the interplay of light and shadow. In this way her work engages the viewer, inviting further exploration. Clay was Halima's first love and her work has naturally evolved to include marble, wood, concrete, bronze and glass, each offering different challenges of mutability and scale. Halima Cassell's work has won numerous awards and is held in public and private collections worldwide. [www.halimacassell.com](http://www.halimacassell.com)

