

Glazed *expressions*

The Magazine of TACS, the Tiles and Architectural Ceramics Society



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Halima Cassell, Clay Sculptor

Lynn Pearson

When Halima Cassell carves clay, it stays carved (Figure 1). Using her knowledge of geometry and working with either hand, she typically transforms hemispherical bowls of clay into a bewildering variety of patterned, sometimes openwork, shapes. The results are a tactile delight, as shown in her latest exhibition *Earth: Atmosphere* at Touchstones Rochdale (Figure 2). At the gallery entrance is a notice warning visitors not to touch the sculptures - a good tip is to clasp your hands behind your back, as you will truly want to get your hands on this series of clay pieces, their colours varying between pale fawn through rich reds to a gritty, deep grey. And what, you may be asking, is the connection with tiles? The clay, for a start - sourced from all over the world in this case - but in fact Cassell also makes wall tiles and public art installations, a modern take on ceramic murals (Figure 3).

Her multicultural background is directly reflected in her work. She was born in Pakistan in 1975, brought up in Manchester, and now lives and works in Blackburn; her home studio boasts the largest kiln it is possible to run in a normal domestic environment. She studied at the University of Central Lancashire, gaining a BA in three-dimensional design in 1997 and going on to take a Master's in design in 2002. She was sponsored by Shaws of Darwen during 2000-5, and is no stranger to the technical difficulties of working with large forms. Several of her substantial commissioned sculptures of plant life, carried out for the Ribble Valley Sculpture Trail near Clitheroe, were rather taller than the artist herself. Cassell says she derives much pleasure from the physical side of clay sculpting, and indeed is now branching out into working with stone, although still basing her designs on her deep appreciation of differing traditions of pattern.



Fig. 2 - Cassell's work in 'Earth: Atmosphere, the shape of things' at Touchstones Rochdale (Photo: Lynn Pearson)

Cassell is an intriguing artist, not only because of the mathematical ideas that she turns into sculptures, but in the way that she works, deftly carving geometric forms into the clay. Fortunately, you don't have to visit a gallery to see examples of her pattern-making forms, as Cassell is also capable of working on the large scale often demanded by public art projects. In her home town of Blackburn, her two commissions include the *Blossom Way* wall sculpture (2009) in Northgate (Figure 4), while her wall tile relief (2008) decorates the National Wildflower Centre in Liverpool. Despite being on daily view to thousands, her public artworks have been less well reported than her gallery work, reflecting the continuing problem the art world has in valuing 'unmarketable' art. Let's hope this true artist in clay continues to make ceramic works for the public realm, alongside those wonderful untouchable shapes for the art galleries.



Fig. 4 - 'Blossom Way' wall sculpture, Blackburn (Photo: Halima Cassell)



Fig. 1 - Halima Cassell (Photo: Chris Smart of Silva Productions)

Since 2003, when she exhibited in Barcelona, Cassell has shown works not only in Britain, but around the world, from Chicago and Tokyo to Munich and Brussels. A highlight was her 2008 twelve-week residency at the 20-21 Visual Arts Centre in Scunthorpe (formerly the late 19th century St John's Church) which allowed her to diversify in terms of materials and forms, the results being recorded in the beautifully produced little book-cum-catalogue *Dreams Made Manifest: Halima Cassell*. It is full of superb photographs of clay (and other) forms at all stages from design to final outcome, and includes an interview with the artist as well as several thought-provoking essays from well known ceramicists, curators and sculptors.

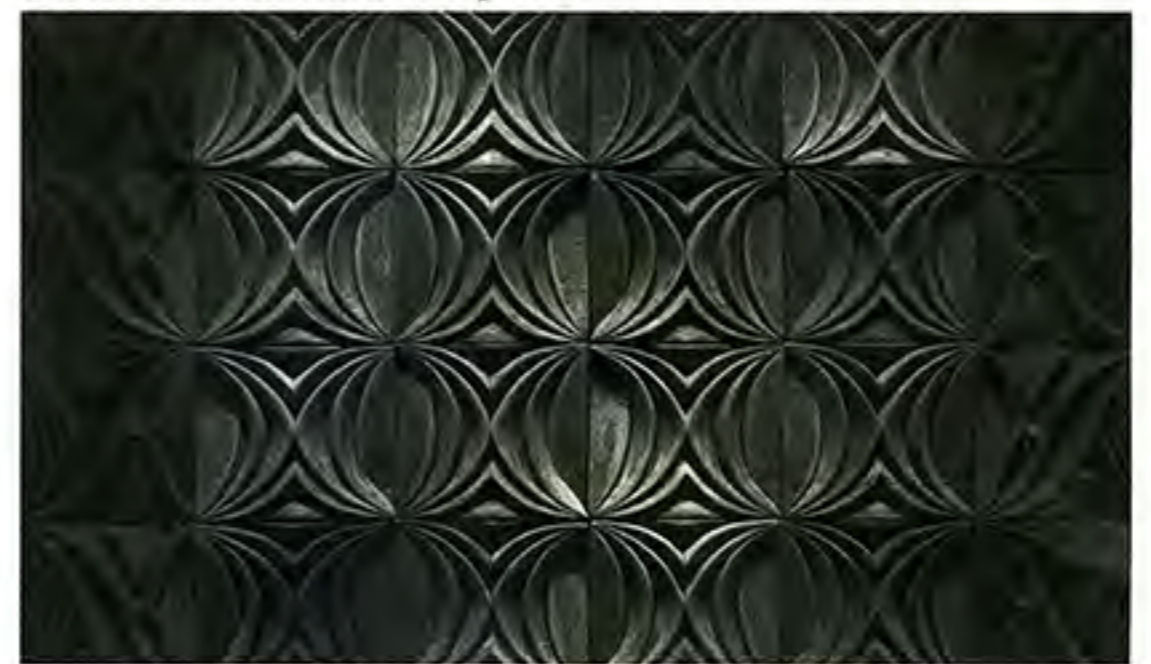


Fig. 3 - 'Eclipse', hand carved clay wall frieze (Photo: Halima Cassell)

The book and exhibition catalogue *Dreams Made Manifest: Halima Cassell*, including articles by Edmund de Waal, Peter Randall-Page and others, was published by North Lincolnshire Council in 2009. Obtainable for about £12 plus P&P from the 20-21 Visual Arts Centre, St John's Church, Church Square, Scunthorpe DN15 6TB (01724 297080).

Halima Cassell's website is at www.halimacassell.co.uk and the exhibition *Earth: Atmosphere, the shape of things* is showing at Touchstones Rochdale until 10 September 2011.