



CARVING A NICHE

Working in clay, stone, wood and glass, Halima Cassell draws on the universal language of pattern to sculpt monumental works with hypnotic geometry, currently dazzling audiences at Glyndebourne opera house. Debika Ray takes a closer look. Photography by Emli Bendixen

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Memento Mori photo Ben McKee

The day I stop learning is probably the day I give up,' says Halima Cassell. It's a sentiment many artists might express, but for the UK-based sculptor it seems particularly true – while she is best known for working with clay, she has also tackled stone, concrete, jesmonite, marble, wood, iron and bronze over the course of her career, learning from experts in each material, and producing highly acclaimed works across the spectrum. When we speak over a video call in June, she is preparing to have a crack at glass during a month-long residency at The Glass Foundry in Stroud. 'I've always been interested in the material – I've got a kiln that does both glass and ceramics,' she says. 'I might end up using it to cast clay models like I did with bronze, rather than the subtractive process I use with clay, or I might engrave it. What excites me is the idea of developing my work while keeping the thread of my style throughout.'

Cassell's affinity with materials is remarkable, observes Joanna Bird, whose London-based gallery has represented her for the past decade. 'Halima can harness the necessary forces to transform a lump of clay, a 20-foot piece of wood or a wheelbarrow of concrete into a sublime hand-carved artefact,' she says. 'Her perspicacity and artistic interpretation are at work

constantly, making every curve in her pieces meaningful.' Regardless of medium, these curves are instantly recognisable: simple in form and colour, Cassell's weighty sculptures are adorned with complex, hypnotic shapes that lure the eye towards them. Nine of her towering works are currently installed in the gardens of Glyndebourne opera house in East Sussex (until 31 October), including four site-specific pieces inspired by their rural and built surroundings. Their organic shapes and natural materials are both in harmony with the bucolic landscape and stand out from it – a cast-iron pair of works called *Memento Mori*, for example, resembles a cross between seed-pods and flames; *Hurricane*, in jesmonite and fibreglass, reflects the colour of the white lilies that overlook the lake; while *Primavera*, made from Carrera marble, echoes the shapes of nearby roses. 'Halima is a pioneer,' says Glyndebourne's curator Nerissa Taysom. 'I've always been fascinated by her ability to transform pattern into something three-dimensional, and the relationship in her work between nature and architecture.'

For Cassell, nature is now ever-present: her studio – which is attached to the home she has shared with her family since 2014 – looks out over idyllic views of the rolling



Shropshire countryside. Working in this voluminous, open-plan space has allowed her to create increasingly large pieces. 'I've always wanted to work on a monumental scale,' she says, recalling her time studying at the University of Central Lancashire – first a BA in 3D Design and then an MA in Design – where she began working with clay, taking advantage of the department's ample space to make work with generous proportions. Throwing on the wheel never appealed to her – she found that carving the material allowed her to achieve the effect she wanted, giving geometrical and natural patterns a voluptuous, physical presence.

When she graduated in 2002, however, Cassell's lofty college studio was swapped for a corner of her one-bedroom flat, which forced her to scale down her output. Within these constraints, though, she continued to experiment with shapes, techniques and materials. In 2003, she completed a course at Manchester City College, geared at designers and makers who wanted to make better use of technology. It had the contrary effect, reinforcing her desire to work more directly with her hands. 'None of the machines could do what I needed them to do because they are designed to work on flat planes and angles, rather than convex and concave surfaces,' she explains. Hand-carving and feeling a material physically transform between her fingers is central to her process. 'When you're sculpting with your hands, you're almost seeing through them,' she says.

Over time she has embraced chances to push her practice. During a ceramics residency in Japan in 2007, she found

Above: forms created through Cassell's research while in Pakistan, based around the shape of a mango. Right: Cassell with *Blue Tapestry*, marble, blue glazed with *kintsugi* (24ct gold)





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herself forced to throw on a wheel, which challenged her mathematically inclined brain to think more intuitively about clay. 'I created all these organic, distorted forms,' she says. 'Previously all my work had been about the design shaping the form, but now the form started to shape the design.' The works she produced there abandoned her usual structured precision and rigidity, instead appearing softly warped or gently collapsing. A similar spirit of flexibility fed into what she considers to be her most memorable work that emerged from a project for The Hepworth Wakefield, produced the same year. When the pieces she had carved blew up in the kiln, she had to remake the work, *Light Strings through Zenith and Nadir* (2008). Cassell later enlarged one of the discarded fragments to create a new 183cm sculpture, *Makonde*, which was cast in bronze by the foundry Pangolin Editions in Stroud, for an exhibition at the 20-21 Gallery in Scunthorpe.

Cassell's earliest works were colourfully glazed, but this soon gave way to material-driven natural tones. 'The clay was beautiful on its own – the glazes undermined the sharp lines and angles and softened the dramatic play of shadows,' she observes. Although she has experimented with pigmentation since – including on her works for Glyndebourne – they remain in subtle, naturalistic hues. This is perhaps why people have often remarked that her clay sculptures look like stone. It's an observation that, in 2008, encouraged her to spend two weeks learning from stone sculptor Peter Randall-Page. 'It was basically the same concept as the way I work with clay, subtracting away from material,' she says. In 2011, she received a scholarship to spend several months at Studio Sem in Tuscany, a workshop set up in the 1950s that has collaborated with the likes of Henry Moore and Damien Hirst. 'A lot of the other artists were getting their heads around the three-dimensional spacing within stone, but to me that was second nature so I spent more time developing my skill with pneumatics and high-powered air tools, lathes and three-point triangulation, the ancient form of enlargement,' she recalls.

She took to wood less well than she expected – at least until she started cutting into it with a chainsaw. One resulting work was an oak sculpture, 427cm in height with four concrete seats, called *Light Catcher* (2014), which sat for more than a year in the Forest of Bowland, an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty in Lancashire. She began carving concrete while working under a scholarship in Knowsley (2013-14), inspired by the city's built environment. Whenever faced with materials she couldn't carve – cast iron or bronze – she has approached them by creating models in her

Photo: John W Thornton

Left: *Light Catcher*, 2014, oak, 427cm high with four concrete seats, in the Forest of Bowland, Lancashire



characteristic geometric style to be cast by foundries.

Despite the mathematical complexity of her forms, Cassell's process remains resolutely analogue. It always starts with drawing – as we talk, she shows me some of the thick sketchbooks she has kept since her student days, in which she draws patterns by hand and then extrapolates them into repeated motifs. To give these ideas three-dimensional form, she imposes a grid onto the surface of a solid block of her chosen material – most often heavily grogged clay – and uses this as a guide to precisely map out her designs using compasses, rulers and other tools. She then carves into it, finishing off by finessing and emphasising the lines, curves and edges before each piece is complete. Her process is meticulous and time-intensive.

Architecture is a heavy influence on the Pakistan-born artist, who grew up in Lancashire. She takes cues from the hand-carved decorative elements of many Islamic buildings in South Asia and North Africa, as well as the intricate detailing found in 19th- and 20th-century historical structures in Manchester and Liverpool. You can also spot something of the parametric swoops and curves of architect Zaha Hadid in her work, whom she names as an influence. Cassell has also been inspired by her heritage: her first visit to Pakistan as an adult in 2009 sparked *Virtues of Unity*, an ongoing body of work reflecting on the sense of otherness she experiences both as a child of immigrants in the UK and a British person in her country of birth. She plans to create a carved ceramic vessel to represent each of the world's 195

countries, using clay from each nation, as a metaphor for our shared humanity – from white clay from Israel to black clay from Germany.

Pattern, she believes, lends itself particularly well to this endeavour to find common ground. 'It's a universal language, understood by all of us in our own ways,' she says. 'It is repeatedly appropriated and re-interpreted. While one viewer might 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.'

This year is shaping up to be a major one for Cassell. She was awarded an MBE for her outstanding contribution to the arts in the New Year Honours list, and she is working on a book – *Halima Cassell: 25 Years of Carving* – due to be published this year. As well as sculpting a piece in marble, she has also turned her attention back to her first love, clay – making vessels for a two-person exhibition at the Bluecoat Display Centre in Liverpool alongside fellow sculptor Emma Rodgers (1 October – 13 November). At the time of writing, she was due to unveil a truly monumental work: a wall frieze and granite seating at her former university. It's a fitting project for the place that stimulated her ambitions to work on an architecture scale. halimacassell.com

Opposite: *Bow Wave*, Statuario marble, height 87cm.
Top left: tools for carving, and top right: one of Cassell's sketchbooks used to explore repeated patterns