



### LIGHT STRUCTURES: HALIMA CASSELL AT BLACKWELL

BLACKWELL, THE ARTS AND CRAFTS HOUSE,  
BOWNESS-ON-WINDERMERE, CUMBRIA  
25 JULY-7 OCTOBER 2012

There is, as the William Morris dictum states, nothing in the exemplary Arts and Crafts house, Blackwell, that isn't known to be useful or believed to be beautiful. With this in mind, the handsome sculptural forms of Halima Cassell, the latest in a string of contemporary artists to show here, would appear to be the perfect match.

Robust yet intricate, Cassell's work shares many features with the house itself. Both have a distinct and powerful presence emanating from a combination of complexity – present in the house in the form of Arts and Crafts detailing, wall coverings, and mouldings – coupled with calming symmetry, organic geometry, and elegant restraint of design.

The exhibition includes a staggering eighty-six works, ranging from Cassell's instantly recognisable unglazed ceramic bowl forms to a large body of new work directly inspired by the traditional decorations and designs prevalent in MH Baille Scott's vernacular architecture. For the latter Cassell has been admirably ambitious and experimental with materials, translating her high-relief carving techniques into marble, glass, bronze, porcelain, and even a range of low-relief wallpaper designs.

Unfortunately, these new departures are less uniformly successful and it seems ironic that it is Cassell's established ceramic work, not directly inspired by the house, that dovetails so well with the space.

Baille Scott's carefully considered architectural use of light animates the complex faceted quality of Cassell's unglazed, grogged, and partially burnished surfaces perfectly, providing subtle tonal qualities to dramatising effect. It is within the Main Hall, with its interior and exterior windows providing a uniquely subtle and shifting light, and on various light-drenched windowsills around

the house, that Cassell's work and the building are most symbiotic.

The exhibition takes on a different feel, however, on entering the White Drawing Room, a similarly light-filled and airy space with picturesque views of Lake Windermere, which is as calm and meditative as its name suggests. This room houses new pieces by Cassell made over the last year in direct response to the building, most notably two large hand-carved marble forms *Folded Teardrop* and *Nautilus*, which, although admirable for their scale and ambition alone, overpower the room and fail to exude the energy or warmth required by the surroundings.

Two upstairs gallery spaces singularly dedicated to Cassell's work are more successful, though here too the earlier ceramic work stands out as having an integral quality and confidence not present in the more recent pieces. There is far too much of this most recent work jostling for air in a small space, the spare restraint of her unique approach almost being lost in repetition and over-zealous exploration of material at the cost of form. An annex apparently explaining Cassell's creative process is another frustrating and unnecessary addition. The drawings here actively diminish her talent rather than celebrate it.

Cassell is an artist of impressive imagination, evident technical ability, and palpable love and appreciation of the environment she is showing within. She should have the courage of her convictions. Work capable of being this elegant, resolved and demanding of attention, must be allowed to breathe. It would have served Cassell to have remembered another equally important dictum: less, in this case, would certainly have been more.

#### Mella Shaw

Mella Shaw is an MA student in Ceramics and Glass at the RCA and former Head of Exhibitions at Dulwich Picture Gallery, London