



Clockwise from main: *Cheese & Cake*, gold-plated base metal, silver, wood and bamboo vessels. Ever since his graduation from the London Guildhall University MA in Silversmithing and Jewellery Allied Crafts degree course in 2002, his one-off domestic pieces – bowls, ladles, scoops and jars – have caught the eyes of collectors and museum curators, winning him a Jerwood Contemporary Makers' Prize in 2010, solo and group exhibitions, and gallery representation at *COLLECT*. Expressing the translation of his Chinese heritage into a distinctive, western-inflected idiom, his pieces have always done equal work as exquisite objects and questions in an ongoing interrogation of cultural identity. As he expresses it on his website: 'Each piece of my work depicts the different phases of my journey as a foreign artist living in London and has its own story to tell.'

# CRAFT AND COUNTRY

As 'the shape of things', a three-year scheme celebrating the many facets of British identity, draws to a conclusion, Emma Crichton Miller meets silversmith Chien-Wei Chang and assesses the project's impact

Chien-Wei Chang, a Taiwanese artist of Chinese descent, is known for his strikingly beautiful silver, wood and bamboo vessels. Ever since his graduation from the London Guildhall University MA in Silversmithing and Jewellery Allied Crafts degree course in 2002, his one-off domestic pieces – bowls, ladles, scoops and jars – have caught the eyes of collectors and museum curators, winning him a Jerwood Contemporary Makers' Prize in 2010, solo and group exhibitions, and gallery representation at *COLLECT*. Expressing the translation of his Chinese heritage into a distinctive, western-inflected idiom, his pieces have always done equal work as exquisite objects and questions in an ongoing interrogation of cultural identity. As he expresses it on his website: 'Each piece of my work depicts the different phases of my journey as a foreign artist living in London and has its own story to tell.'

This spring he opens a solo show at New Walk Museum and Art Gallery in Leicester. The invitation to exhibit in a public gallery has inspired a radical break with his earlier work. As he explains: 'The vessel form dominates in the market, where people focus on skill. Now I wanted to break with that market and take the opportunity to express

TOOL AND BROKEN PHOTOS: ANDRA NELKI

my sense of the world.' While the first room will contain the kinds of vessel in silver and bamboo we've become familiar with, which draw deeply on his cultural background, two further rooms show how he has taken flight creatively over the last two years. The second will hold an assemblage of sculptural pieces in silver, steel and other non-precious metals – 'Some are still eastern, but a considerable part is also western; some use my traditional silver skills, but there is one large-scale sculptural piece where I had to collaborate with welders.'

In a departure into new territory, Chien-Wei will install in the third room an entire structure, an enclosed space or 'cellar'. There hundreds of glass bottles he has collected, holding exquisite tiny hand-made or found objects, will evoke the seed-like thoughts, memories and dreams which, protected and nurtured in the fertile dark of our subconscious, inspire our waking creative lives. As he explains to me: 'I chose glass because of its transparency, which allows people to look at what is inside rather than at the surface material.'

This bold exhibition forms the penultimate stage in *the shape of things*, an ambitious project funded by Arts Council England, which set out

over six years ago to encourage to exhibit, in public museums and galleries, craft by makers from diverse cultural backgrounds, enabling a richer experience of and debate about national identity for both makers and audiences. Under the directorship of David Kay, but with the vocal contribution of many different curators, museum directors, academics and Arts Council and Crafts Council enablers, three years of research and development led to the articulation of a multilayered list of interrelated aims.

The initiative would offer bursaries to artists to make craft-based work that would reflect the multicultural nature of British society – a prism, as Deirdre Figueiredo of Birmingham-based Craftspace, host organisation for the project, puts it, 'through which to look at contemporary culture'. It would allow high-profile public galleries around the country to work with artists whom perhaps they had not encountered previously, to realise large-scale installations, which maybe neither the artists nor the curators had been given the opportunity to do before. The curators and artists would then be supported to make that work available to as diverse an audience as possible, to publish a catalogue, make films and to run

talks and debates teasing out the questions raised by the whole enterprise.

Finally, it was hoped that new and culturally diverse audiences and even new collectors might be drawn to the work of these artists in particular but also to craft in general, and that people from all kinds of ethnically diverse backgrounds might be inspired to take craft seriously both as an art form and a potential career. For, as Kay, director of the project through most of its life, emphasises, there was a strong desire to test the thesis that 'people who work with craft have a particular capacity to speak to the concerns and cultural backgrounds of a diverse audience because of the way the work draws on their own life story.'

It was with these high hopes and good intentions that the invitation to apply was sent out to both artists and galleries nationwide. As Jackie Lee, the Arts Council England representative who helped frame the project, explains, it was essential that there was no explicit diversity theme: 'There were no bounds to the brief, creatively and artistically, but the artists had to be prepared to be involved in a dialogue about how their background had fed into their creative practice.' The developmental phase of the project had already led to the



creation of new work by woven textiles artist Rezia Wahid, who exhibited at the Crafts Study Centre in Farnham between September 2007 – January 2008. While there is always a danger that projects of this kind generate more academic papers than craft objects, and are valued more for ticking certain politically acceptable boxes than for the quality of the work, the achievement of the main phase of *the shape of things* has been the creation of five significant exhibitions of work by nine artists.

While there have been variations in both the intellectual ambition and the eventual impact and accomplishment of the different contributions, overall these bursaries have unleashed outstanding work.

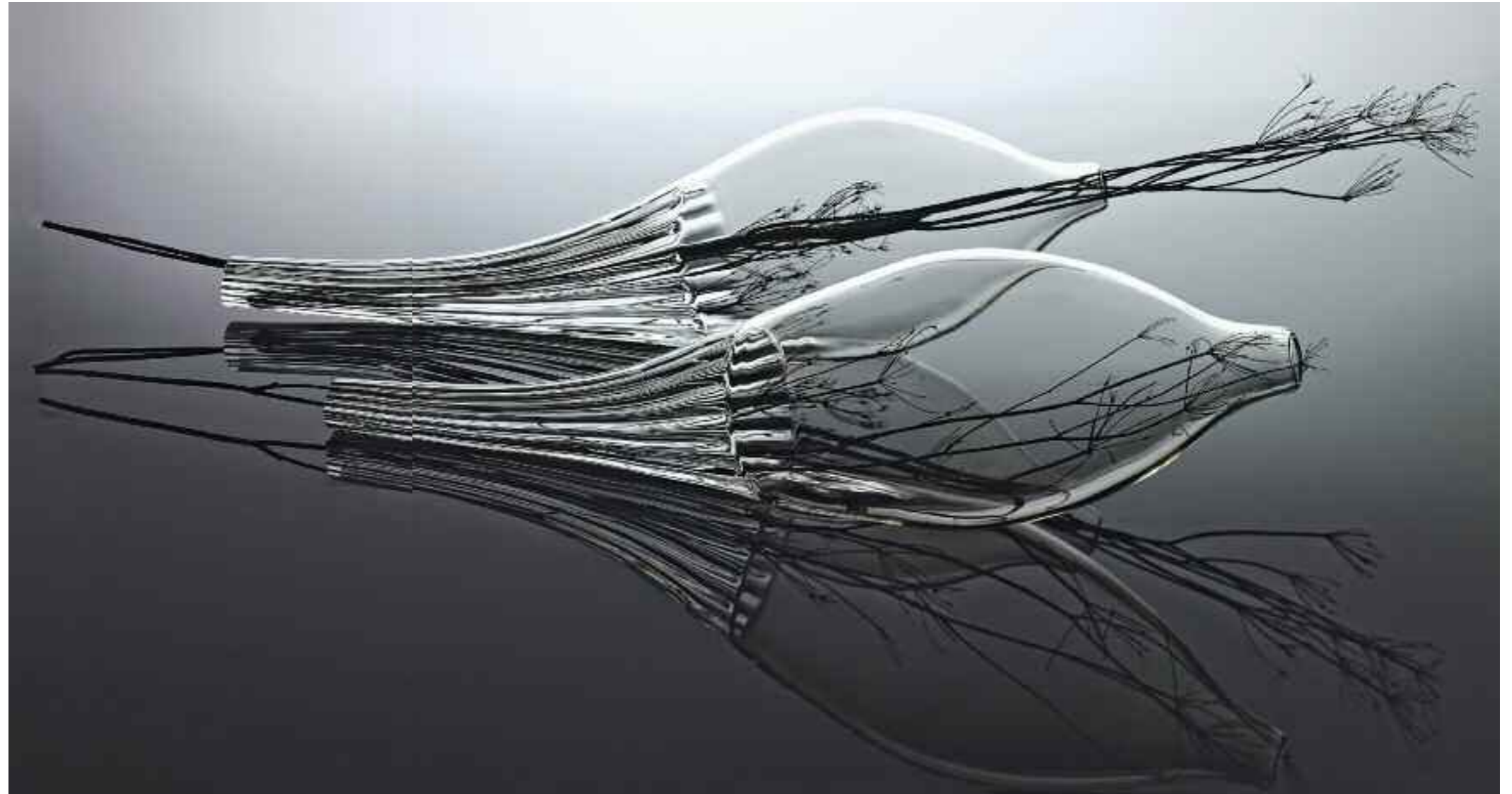
At Bristol's City Museum and Art Gallery in early 2010 the vividly contrasting but also complementary work of textile artist Alinah Azadeh and ceramist/glass artist Rosa Nguyen created an impressive, moving exhibition. In Bilston Craft Gallery and then later Touchstones Rochdale, ceramic artist Halima Cassell and textile artist Seiko Kinoshita created the double show, *earth|atmosphere*. Also at Touchstones Rochdale, Tanvi Kant, inspired by her Indian Gujarati cultural heritage, created an installation of intensely coloured textile jewellery, *cut, stitch, adorn*, while sculptor Taslim Martin was able to demonstrate his creative virtuosity across materials as diverse as

plaster, steam bent wood, cast iron and clay (see *Crafts* No.226 September/October 2010). Large-scale wall drawings in clay stood behind cast iron portrait heads, while members of the public were invited to participate in the on-going construction of a helix-shaped sculpture in plaster. As Martin explained, besides his overt themes of slavery and colonialism, and the questioning of hierarchies of value: 'A lot of my work is about process; a lot of the experience is the journey to the finished work, so it was nice to be able to communicate and share that.'

Two exhibitions at Flow Gallery and the Crafts Study Centre displayed a succinct compilation of work from all shows. While not much work sold at Flow, the exhibition at Farnham, where it had more space to breathe, in that more academic setting, generated considerable critical interest. The two final schemes are Chien-Wei Chang's and then, later, a show of Maggie Scott's large scale 2D felted panels, both at the New Walk Museum.

As far as the participants – curators, museums, and artists – are concerned, the three-year initiative has been a resounding success. For Jackie Lee: 'I think that the range and quality of the work produced has been impressive, and the different relationships generated between the artists and the curators have led to a more intelligent understanding and communication of how the work is made.'

Certainly Nguyen and Azadeh were able to take their work to a new level. Azadeh wrapped 99 objects, bequeathed to her by her Iranian mother, in brightly coloured yarns and fabrics, before inviting the public to donate 999 more mementoes and then participate in the wrapping ritual before hanging the whole. As she puts it: 'The seed of the idea I had had seven years before, but I knew I needed a relationship with a large-scale institution to realise it.' Nguyen, who created a wall-based installation and an 'altar' of ceramics and glass, seized on the opportunity to work with Bristol's significant collections of Chinese ceramics, landscapes, drawings and glass: 'The whole atmosphere of glass cabinets,



**Clockwise from main:** Glass forms for *Lunar Tank*, Rosa Nguyen, 2010; *Pink and Lime Green Bandhani*, Tanvi Kant, 2010; *A Walk in the Rain* (detail), Seiko Kinoshita, 2010; *Mother Tongue*, Alinah Azadeh, 2009; *Sun Set in Snow 2*, Rezia Wahid, 2007; *Virtues of Unity*, Halima Cassell, unfired clay from the UK, 2010. All work produced for *the shape of things* exhibition programme.



KINOSHITA PHOTO: CHRIS SMART OF SILVA PRODUCTIONS | NGUYEN AND AZADEH PHOTOS: XAVIER YOUNG

and looking at glass through glass, led me very quickly to feel that a poetic interpretation of glass was ultimately the basis for all my work.' The new glass pieces she created have subsequently been bought by Anthony Shaw to form part of his donation of British Studio Ceramics to York Museum.

Halima Cassell, an artist born in Pakistan, brought up in Manchester, now living in Blackburn, carves heavy clay into powerfully animate geometrical forms, inspired by African patterns and architecture. Her show in Bilston was a thoughtful installation of pieces made from clays from 20 countries around the world, named for the virtues held high in every religion and every culture: honesty, charity, prudence: 'I had never worked with some of the clays, so it was risky, and I had never done a series or pieces with a linked theme before,' she says. She exhibited with Seiko Kinoshita, who found invaluable the opportunity to 'meet, discuss and share ideas with other artists'. At Touchstones Rochdale, a local dance group was invited to interact with the exhibition, 'which brought many people to our private view and gave me a new idea for my future work.'

The only tentative disappointment expressed by everybody is that after all this release of creative

ambition, there still seem too few collectors, from any cultural background, prepared to buy or commission such work. This may be because there is always going to be a difficult transition between a site-specific installation in a public museum and more marketable domestic scale one-off pieces.

While it takes one kind of courage and curiosity to enter a museum, it is quite another thing to brave a commercial gallery. But as Figueiredo wisely reflects: 'It takes a very long time to nurture new collectors.' In this light, however, it is perhaps ironic that the most spectacular legacy of the project, just announced, has been Chien-Wei's achievement of British Nationality. It was this forthcoming show, very precisely a demonstration that his work has artistic independence and cultural value apart from the collector market on which he was so dependent previously, that has sealed his destiny. As he sums it up: 'It has been a very emotional process, becoming a citizen. One thing I love about Britain is the acceptance of my contribution.' *Chien-Wei Chang's 'Don't Look Back! I Told You So' is at New Walk Museum and Art Gallery, Leicester, from 11 February – 25 March 2012. For details, see Crafts Guide. theshapeofthings.org.uk, www.chienweichang.co.uk*

