



**TASLIM MARTIN**  
DISPARATE NATURE



## TASLIM MARTIN / DISPARATE NATURE / by Alison Britton



**T**en years ago I wrote a short introduction to Taslim Martin's first solo exhibition held at the Bracknell Gallery, South Hill Park

Arts Centre in Berkshire, where he had just completed a two year artist residency following his graduation from the MA course in Ceramics and Glass from the RCA. This was where I had met him first, as one of his tutors.

So what has changed since then?

As a student Taslim knew who he was to a greater extent than many, his thirteen years as a carpenter before going to college had made him focused and independent, seeking out the acquisition of

new skills in new media and the freedom to experiment. He worked with clay and plaster, as you would expect, but work also incorporated wood and metal, concrete and terrazzo. He resisted any kind of categoric expectation or pigeon-holing and made lots of different things.

His encounter with Eduardo Paolozzi, then a Visiting Professor in our department, was important on several counts. He worked for Eduardo as a model maker during his MA, he saw the breadth of that hugely established international practice from the studio end – the great commissions and exhibitions, the magpie-like amassing of small useful parts, the figurative carving of plaster, the replication of hundreds of mimetic elements that were assembled into more complex, often abstracted, sculptures or collages or prints.

Taslim also won the Paolozzi Travel Scholarship in the same year and travelled to Nigeria for the first time. His father is Nigerian, his mother is St Lucian. Taslim is British-born but with this double inheritance that includes, from both sides, the long history connecting West Africa, the West Indies, sugar plantations and the slave trade, and the opportunistic imposition of the British in that repugnant trade. Now, inevitably, diverse histories and political subtexts are woven into the core of

Taslim's work. On his trip to West Africa he sought out the sculpture of Benin and the Yoruba tradition, and he was strongly impressed by Ife portrait heads in bronze and terracotta, describing them as having an aesthetic power outside their time.

There are clear consistencies in the type of work that Taslim was engaged with in the early years of the last decade, and his work in the present, though his work has deepened in both actual and conceptual complexity and strength of content. He has found his relevant connections.

Comparisons between things feature in all the different strands of his work – kinds of material, ways of making, process captivates him and skill is of utmost importance to Taslim. He will make the same form in different media, paper, plaster, and terra cotta for instance, to understand their language.

His mind also runs on the inherent hierarchies, those that rank the media themselves, porcelain always more precious than earthenware, for instance, or the hierarchy in the chain of connection in who commissions, who sources, and who does the actual work that makes an artefact or object come into being.

His exhibitions have all included drawings on the wall, which have depicted many

things. Some are satiric, some are a paeon of praise, all are a message about what moves him, what he is thinking about now. The walls 'frame' the objects in the exhibition and are ghostly and large scale, achieved by drawing in liquid latex, then a thin wash of red clay, or 'common earth' as he has called it, is applied to the wall. He then unpicks the latex resist so the drawing is revealed as an absence of clay on a white wall.

The first drawing I saw like this showed a design classic, a 1970s teapot called *Drop*, designed for Rosenthal by Luigi Colani, a super-inventive 'organic' designer who has also worked through the past half century on furniture, spectacle frames, aerodynamics, futuristic visions and trucks, cars, and planes. Colani is one of Taslim's benchmarks, defying categorisation, an artist and a designer, a man who works across a broad and inspiring range as did Paolozzi and Isamu Noguchi, another hero. Colani always stresses the importance of nature in his thinking and Taslim would echo this:

“ ..... we should simply bear in mind just how amazingly superior a spider's web is to any load-bearing structure man has made – and then derive from this insight that we should look to the superiority of nature for the solutions. If we want to

tackle a new task in the studio, then it's best to go outside first and look at what millennia-old answers there may already be to the problem."

(website [www.colani.ch](http://www.colani.ch))

More recent drawings on the wall are not iconic or homages to an admirably broad approach; they are caustic, thought provoking, political/historical, nagging reminders. A loose drawing of the British Royal Crest has slipped across the picture plane, to leave more of the mythical unicorn than the actual lion; or one of Charles II, famous not just for re-establishing the British monarchy after Cromwell, but for endorsing British commitment to the slave trade with a Royal Charter and private financial investment in the Royal Adventurers Company in 1660. This company was given a monopoly of the trade for 1000 years, but did not last more than a few exclusive decades.

If the drawings set the scene, the characters are sculpture and furniture. Taslim will consistently throw art and design together, but it all relates to the person and the body, representationally as drawing and sculpture, or abstractly as furniture. Ten years ago I asked in my introduction 'Is it peculiar to want to make portraits as well as furniture?', 'Not if you're Taslim' is the answer still – he

thrives on the complementary aspects within his practice of these disparate natures, different modes. The modelling and casting of the small scale heads and figures return him to an artistic baseline. The sequence of human sculptures is an ongoing contemplative study, an expressive activity in which there is no compromise or hiding or smoothing over. A human likeness is the goal, and nothing less will do. 'No mystique', he says and 'looking more than working'.

In some of Taslim's work figuration and furniture have been brought together. His *Kyoko* stool made in 1998 as he was leaving the RCA was memorable because it was both a portrait head, of a Japanese fellow student, and a seat, neither aspect was subsumed by the other intention. It was a true hybrid.

The metal stool *Secret Dovetail* Taslim made in 2005, now in the collection of the British Museum, was first shown in *Mixed Belongings*, an exhibition curated by Raimi Gbadamosi for the Crafts Council as part of the *Africa 05* festival. You could see it as an abstracted contemporary portrait of an African heritage, its shape based on the carved wooden stools made by Ashanti and Yoruba peoples of West Africa, and made of material, and with the kind of finish, associated with the craft of coach-building

for the car industry. It is another bi-partisan object, two sinuous metal legs locked together under the sleek perforated form of the seat with a secret (wooden) dovetail, and fabricated from sand-cast aluminium parts. It is polished to a high sheen like a mirror with which to reflect a combined identity. Working, I would argue, as both sculpture and furniture.

Taslim's furniture has been concerned mostly with seating, though a daybed was part of a solo exhibition in 2007 called *Contemporary Primitive* at the 198 Gallery in Herne Hill, London. The daybed was upholstered in a bright chequered fabric that coalesced hybrid references to Enid Marx's design for London Transport moquette for train seats in the 1930s, and traditional West African Kente cloth. This piece is conspicuous in the body of his work as most of his things are self-coloured; materials speaking for themselves, red clay as powder and as fired brick, white plaster, rusty metal or shiny silver reflecting metal.

Numerous public commissions achieved in the past decade have involved benches in open spaces, places to meet and talk. In some locations large sculptural forms have resided in the same space, like the two enormous scaled up Roman pot forms, made in brickwork, called *Twins*.

These were part of a long-running project for Kingsmead, Milton Keynes that began in 2003. The forms echo a local discovery of a coin forger's hoard kept in small conical clay pots and buried in the ground, and the giant sculptures are partly buried in the ground in reference to these third century origins.

Taslim's scope in the studio is notable, his verve for working big, devising his own way of tackling something like these huge precise curvaceous pot forms built out of mortared bricks, set round a cast core. His skill in sledging plaster is key to the origination of his forms. A stretch of continuous curve that arcs through space but follows a consistent profile, (imagine a section of elaborate ceiling moulding for a non-rectangular room) creates a module to repeat. His bravado in three-dimensional thinking leads Taslim to the creation of highly complex forms like the helix sculpture planned for the exhibition, that need to be worked in 3D to understand them. He is embarking now on doing his own steam bending, to make a bench out of curved sections of green oak, based on the shape of a sweet tamarind fruit.

This exhibition will reveal new experiments across his diverse territory; furniture, clay wall drawings, portraits in cast iron including Raimi Gbadamosi, a

doorstop of the Royal Crest, bas-reliefs that compare materials like paper and plaster and terra cotta, the figure of a running woman reiterated in another implied hierarchy of materials, and a large abstract spiralling sculpture. Underpinning it all is his consciousness of the indivisibility of art and design, and the intersection of Black history and British history, all of it *his* history.

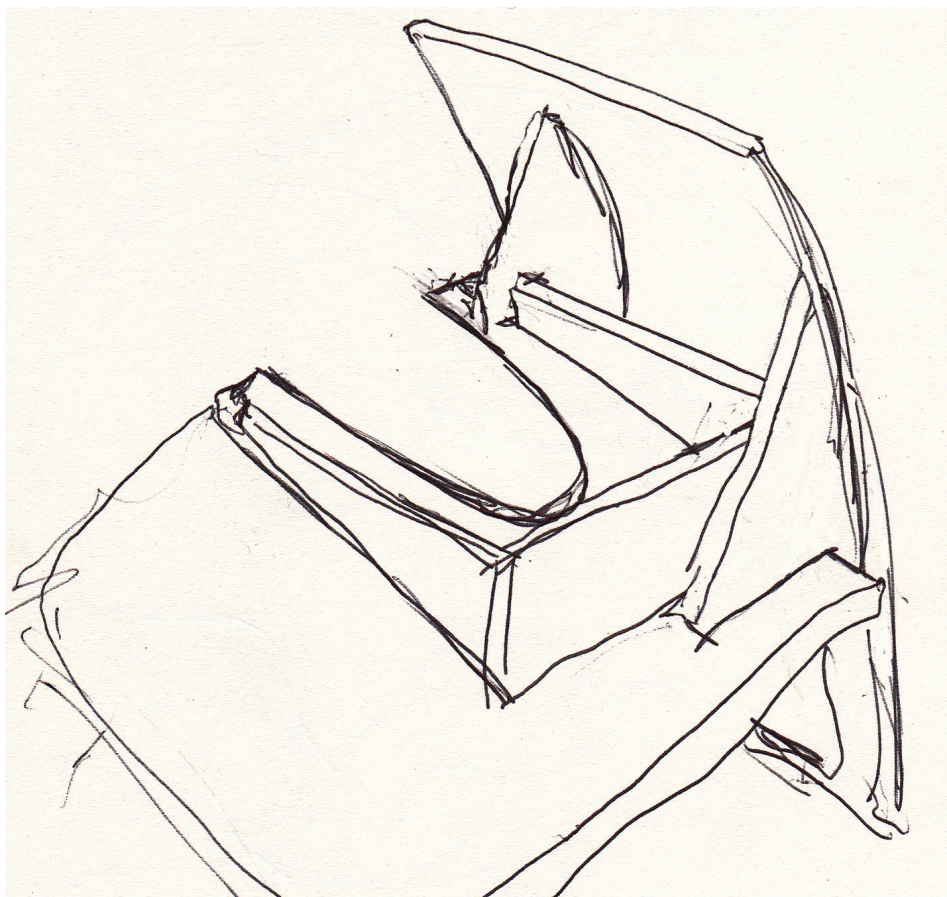
The title Taslim has chosen for this exhibition hints too at an organic basis for shape, a Darwinian delight in biodiversity, nature and human nature, inspiring and disappointing. Disparate means *essentially different in kind*: all sorts. He is a polymath artist stubbornly untrammelled; his love of pure geometric form and modular systems is interspersed with the urge to return again and again to replicating the human form with all its narrative potential and its non-predictability. Perhaps in Taslim's exhibition we will see freshly the shape of *all sorts* of things?

For years now I have owned a turquoise blue terrazzo stool, one of a series called *AO Modular*, shaped like three sides of a fleshed-out rectangle, that Taslim made shortly after leaving college. It is almost too heavy to lift, but has a calm abstract simplicity that suits a static role in my living room. It works well as both a table and

a seat. Its top surface is *almost* flat, but dished enough to be comfortable to sit on. The underside of the horizontal has a slight swelling belly that is anthropomorphic, a sculptural extra. My granddaughter's small plastic sixties GLC chair is now tucked under it – for her the stool is a cool solid playing surface where things don't fall over. It is a fixture in my life.

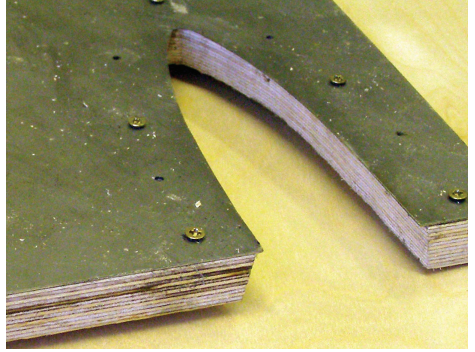
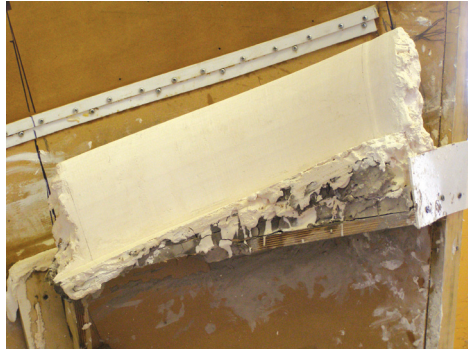
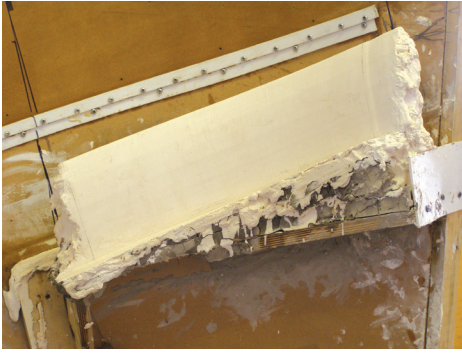
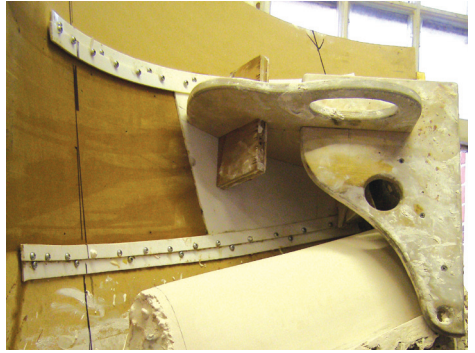
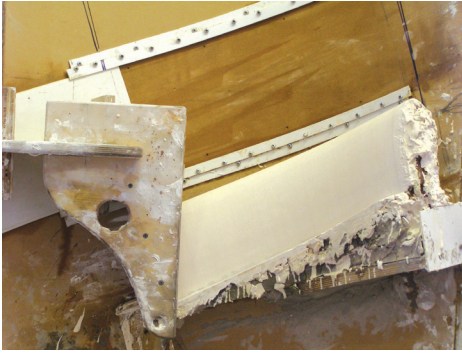
### **Alison Britton**

Alison Britton is a ceramic artist and writer. She is a Senior Tutor in the Ceramics and Glass Department at the Royal College of Art.





Helix Form, plaster modular construction, slogging process, work in progress





Helix Form, plaster modular construction, sledging process, work in progress



## THE SHAPE OF THINGS / A COLLABORATIVE APPROACH

**T**he *shape of things* is, inherently, a programme exploring diversity. It involves artists from a range of cultural backgrounds and aims to seek out new audiences to engage with and to prick the interest of a broader range of collectors. Touchstones Rochdale has a history of exhibiting work by black and Asian artists and in the past has shown work by Magdalene Odundo, Chris Ofili and Lorna Simpson<sup>1</sup>. More recently emerging artists such as Zarah Hussain, Nafisa Mallu and Alpa Mistry amongst others have exhibited.<sup>2</sup>

In the recent past public galleries have sought to develop new and more diverse audiences by exhibiting the work of artists whose cultural identity is reflected in the surrounding communities and vice versa. Whilst diversifying audiences should always be encouraged, this approach is now regarded as too narrow; an individual artist should not be placed in a position where he or she is supposed to 'represent' a particular community. Far better that galleries embed diversity in its broadest sense within their exhibition programmes and that showing work by artists from a whole range of cultural and social backgrounds is regarded as the norm. It is not about 'otherness', but about an inclusive outlook which offers audiences the chance

to see the breadth of work being produced by artists in the UK and internationally, which often in itself defies categorisation.

*The shape of things* provides a platform for artists, but crucially it is about the work they make. Innovative, challenging and rooted in the skill of the artist, their processes and their exploration of materials; the work is key. This programme has always set out to support the highest quality in contemporary craft alongside enabling artists to develop their practice through new ways of thinking, exploring new processes, working with different materials and having the opportunity to experiment.

At the *shape of things* launch event for the current phase of the programme in 2009, chair Bonnie Greer asked about the role of the curator.<sup>3</sup> The programme has paired two artists with each of the four venues<sup>4</sup>, to enable the new work each artist makes through their bursary to be exhibited; clearly there is an important role here for curatorial staff. This role should very much be regarded as a collaboration between curator and artist, continuing the discursive nature of *the shape of things*. The role of the curator is as a conduit, a means of translating the artist's new work from the studio to the gallery, where it moves from the privacy and safety

of the artist's space to a public space to be shared with an audience for the first time. The curator attempts to make this transition as smooth as possible, not only in terms of the practicalities of exhibitions such as transporting works and overseeing their layout in the gallery, but in enabling audiences to discuss, debate and contemplate them. The curator brings a range of skills to these tasks, primarily an ability to organise and project manage whilst at the same time being creative and having an 'eye' for display along with an understanding of likely audiences.

The curator must gain their own understanding of the artist's practice in order to play out this role of mediator between artist and audience. They are there to listen, observe and support, only occasionally reigning things in when necessary. There is a real sense of privilege to this role; it is not something the vast majority of people would ever have the opportunity to do. When the artist and venue pairings were agreed in spring 2009, Taslim Martin came to visit Touchstones Rochdale for the first time. The process of discussion and collaboration really began at this point; sharing ideas, getting to know more about each other and finding out more about Martin's current work and plans for *the shape of things*. This dialogue has been ongoing ever since. The most effective way

of gaining a real sense of an artist's work is to visit their studio. Exploring where they work and what artists surround themselves with is fascinating. You have the opportunity to examine pieces close up, see work in progress and discuss techniques and making processes. It is an invaluable part of the process of bringing the exhibition together and fulfilling the curator's role as a conduit between artist and audience.

Martin's studio is in a unit which has been converted into artists' studios on an industrial estate in Camberwell. It is a pared back brick and concrete shell, only animated by Martin's lively conversation and his work in progress. On each visit more materials and equipment for various making processes accumulated. A series of photographs of a woman's head taken from different angles are pinned to the wall waiting to be transformed into three dimensions by Martin's hand. A steam machine and sections of industrial pipe are on the floor and planks of oak are stacked on a trolley waiting for Martin's steam bending experiments to begin. There is a small hand-made model of the intended design, based on a sweet tamarind. Martin takes down a wooden construction from the wall and explains its use in the process of sledging fibrous plaster which he intends to use to create a helicoidal sculpture.

Seeing Martin at work and talking at length about his practice and his influences is compelling. These are experiences which as a curator, you want to pass on the essence of to audiences through the presentation and interpretation of the work in the gallery. It is unusual to have the opportunity to work with an artist from the very start of them embarking on making a new body of work and to witness the process firsthand. Martin's new body of work will go on to have a lifespan beyond the exhibition here, being exhibited elsewhere and adding to his growing reputation. Knowing as a curator that you played a small part from the inception of this work and brought it to audiences for this first time is an immensely rewarding experience.

**Yvonne Hardman**

Art Gallery Officer  
Touchstones Rochdale

<sup>1</sup> Magdalene Odundo exhibited in *Columbus Drowning*, 1992; Chris Ofili exhibited in *Borderless Print*, 1993; Lorna Simpson exhibited in *The Fortune Teller*, 1992.

<sup>2</sup> Zarah Hussain's solo show *The Beauty of Abstraction* (a touring exhibition organised by Bradford Museums, Galleries & Heritage) was exhibited 2008/09; Nafisa Mallu's exhibition *A Thousand Mangoes*, part of Shisha's *Parampara* programme, was shown in 2005; Alpa Mistry featured in contemporary textiles show *Eye of the Needle* in 2007.

<sup>3</sup> *The shape of things* programme was launched at the Royal Society of Arts, London on 10 November 2009.

<sup>4</sup> In the first phase of *the shape of things* programme artist Rezia Wahid exhibited at the Crafts Study Centre in 2007.

Portrait Head, Raimi, cast iron with rust patination



## THE SHAPE OF THINGS / PROGRAMME

**T**he *shape of things* is a contemporary craft initiative that is taking place over five years. Providing bursaries to artists to make new craftwork it explores the distinctive contribution artists make to influence or reflect national identity, the intercultural nature of British society and its connection with global cultures through a series of exhibitions, installations and events between 2006 and 2011.

The origins of *the shape of things* are in a report to Arts Council England South West into the potential for creating a contemporary crafts exhibition as part of Decibel, Arts Council England's national initiative to promote diversity in the arts. The report recognised a relative under-representation of black, Asian and minority ethnic craft practitioners and audiences for contemporary crafts and recommended that exhibition should be used strategically to explore diversity within contemporary craft practice.

As a consequence, with the financial support and partnership of the Arts Council and in partnership with Bristol's Museums, Galleries & Archives, the ceramicist Takeshi Yasuda, jeweller Vannetta Seecharran and weaver Rezia Wahid were invited to make new exploratory works and in the process

to consider the role of personal cultural identity within their practice.

The artists presented the new commissions at a symposium organised by the Museum in Bristol in 2006 where discussion took place with invited delegates chaired by ceramicist Magdalene Odundo.

The success of this with further encouragement and invaluable financial support from Arts Council England enabled us to move forward. *The shape of things* is now working nationally and has received guidance from organisations engaged with the crafts including the Contemporary Arts Society, National Society for Education in Art and Design, Craftspace, SHISHA, Crafts Study Centre, Crafts Council and Audiences Central.

*The shape of things* is privileged to be working with an exceptional group of artists and venues. Our first bursary was to Rezia Wahid who coincidentally had been awarded an MBE. Rezia's response to the initial commission was an important influence on the potential of *the shape of things*. The exhibition took place in 2007 at the Crafts Study Centre and enabled a test of the bursary-exhibition model.

In 2009 eight bursaries were awarded to artists working with craft media to partner



with curators to create new work for exhibition in public spaces.

The ambition and scale of each artist's work is realised through their relationship with the curators of the public museums and galleries taking part.

Exhibitions in 2010 present the work of Alinah Azadeh and Rosa Nguyen at Bristol Museum and Art Gallery, Halima Cassell and Seiko Kinoshita at Bilston Craft Gallery, Tanvi Kant and Taslim Martin at Touchstones Rochdale and in 2011 Maggie Scott and Chien-Wei Chang at The City Gallery Leicester.

Work by all these artists will be available to buy in a group exhibition at Flow Gallery, London in autumn 2010. The participation of a privately run gallery in a joint initiative with public museums is unusual and indicative of the strategic aim of *the shape of things* to connect the work of artists with collectors.

These exhibitions give curators from our museum and gallery partners a rare opportunity to work closely with an artist from the inception of the artist's work through to its presentation to their audiences and communities. Through its support of artists, exhibition partnerships with museums and galleries and a series of discussions, workshops and events

*the shape of things* aims to encourage a practice, audience and market for contemporary crafts representative of the society we live in today. Best described in the words of the author and playwright Bonnie Greer who chaired a debate at the launch of *the shape of things* programme in November 2009: 'This is some of the most intelligent and articulate explanations of diversity in art that I have ever heard ... This initiative, this collection of people is important now ... This is a movement, this is the beginning'.

**David Kay**

Director, *the shape of things*



Portrait Head, Ashley, work in progress



# TASLIM MARTIN / CURRICULUM VITAE

**[www.taslimmartin.co.uk](http://www.taslimmartin.co.uk)**

## **Training**

- 1996–98 Royal College of Art  
1992–95 Cardiff Institute of Higher Education

## **Selected exhibitions**

- 2010 *The Global Africa Project*, Museum of Art and Design, New York  
*The shape of things* at Flow, London  
*Disparate Nature*, Touchstones Rochdale (solo show)  
*Pan African Craft Exhibition*, South Africa  
*Jerwood Contemporary Makers*, London
- 2009 *Made in Africa: portrait of an Ife ruler*, The Manchester Museum
- 2008 *Mark of Action*, the Art House, Lewisham, London
- 2007 *Contemporary Primitive*, 198 Gallery, London (solo show)
- 2005 *Mixed Belongings*, Crafts Council
- 2000 *The Power to Name*, South Hill Park Arts Centre, Bracknell, Berkshire (solo show)
- 1998 *International Biennial Design Festival*, Saint-Etienne
- 1998 *Fish & Chips*, British Art and Design Festival, Hamburg
- 1997 *Student Showcase*, Museum of Mankind, London

## **Professional experience**

- 2010 Visiting lecturer on Curating Contemporary Design MA, The Design Museum and Kingston University
- 2007 Part-time lecturer, Public Art MA, Bolton University
- 2005–06 Senior lecturer, 3D Design, University for the Creative Arts at Farnham

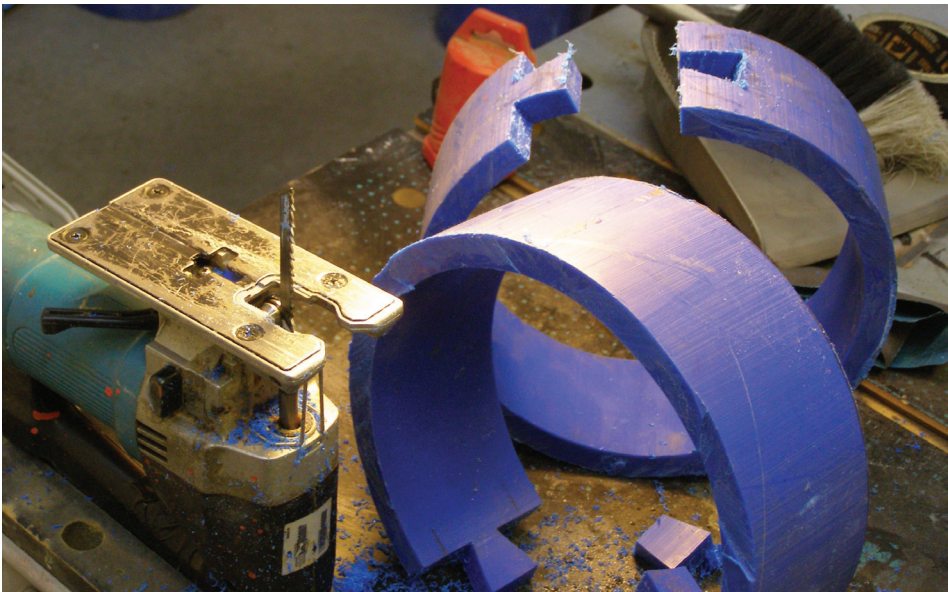
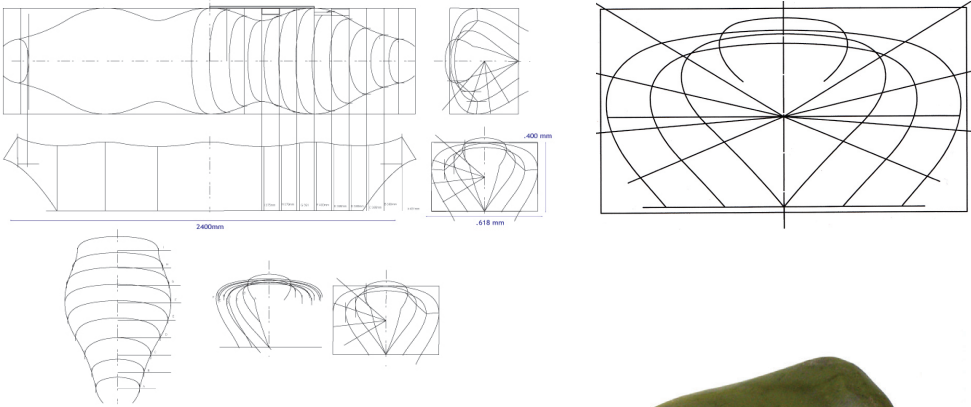
- 2005 Part-time lecturer, Roehampton University
- 2003–04 Artist in residence at Wysing Arts Centre, Cambridgeshire
- 2003 Visiting lecturer the Royal College of Art, Manchester College of Art & Technology and The College of North East London
- 1998–2000 Artist in residence at South Hill Park Arts Centre, Bracknell, Berkshire
- 1998 Teaching at Camberwell School of Art
- 1997 Model maker for Sir Eduardo Paolozzi

### **Commissions**

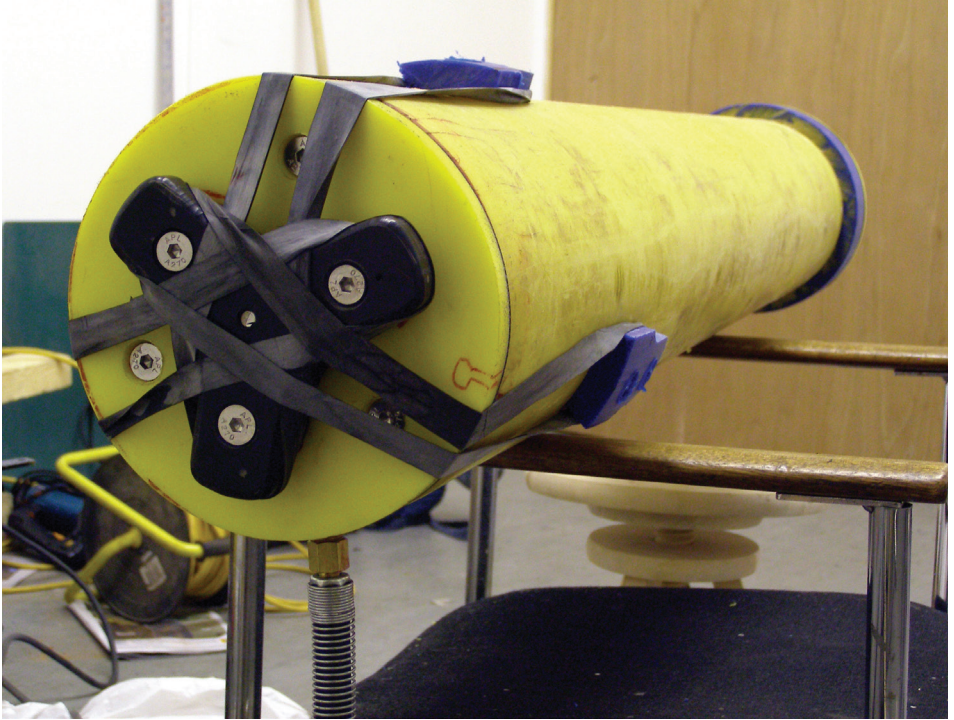
- 2010 British Museum *Rock Art* commission for South Africa Landscape
- 2009 British Museum commission *Made in Africa: Portrait of an Ife Ruler*
- 2008 Brixton public art sculpture commission London
- 2007 *Blue Earth 1807–2007*, bicentenary sculpture commission, Horniman Museum, London
- 2006–07 *To Be Continued*, sculpture commission, Aston Hall, Birmingham
- 2002–07 Public art sculpture and outdoor space commission, Milton Keynes Council
- 2003–04 Public art sculpture, Cambourne Business Park, Cambridgeshire
- 2001 Public art sculpture and seating, Bracknell town centre

### **Awards**

- 2010 Jerwood Contemporary Makers
- 2009 *The shape of things* bursary
- 1998 Parallel Prize, Parallel Media Group PLC
- 1997 Sir Eduardo Paolozzi Travel Scholarship



ST Bench, steam bent oak, work in progress





Raimi, red clay drawing applied directly to the gallery wall, work in progress



## DISPARATE NATURE / ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

### **The shape of things**

#### **Taslim Martin: Disparate Nature**

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### **The shape of things**

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Gibb Street, Birmingham B9 4AA

[www.theshapeofthings.org.uk](http://www.theshapeofthings.org.uk)

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**The shape of things** provides bursaries to artists to make new craftwork. It explores the distinctive contribution artists make to influence or reflect national identity, the intercultural nature of British society and its connection with global cultures through a series of exhibitions, installations and events from 2010 to 2011.

**The shape of things** is a not for profit company limited by guarantee and registered in England, No 6534926. Craftspace is the managing agency, David Kay is the Director and a formal

steering group comprises specialists and stakeholders able to advise on development and implementation.

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**Touchstones**  
Rochdale

**Link4Life**

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## The exhibition programme

Rezia Wahid MBE

Crafts Study Centre, Farnham

25 September 2007 – 5 January 2008

Alinah Azadeh / Rosa Nguyen

Bristol's City Museum and Art Gallery

6 February – 18 April 2010

Halima Cassell / Seiko Kinoshita

Bilston Crafts Gallery, Wolverhampton

1 May – 10 July 2010

Tanvi Kant / Taslim Martin

Touchstones Rochdale

17 July – 3 October 2010

Work by all the artists

Flow Gallery, London

9 September – 6 November 2010

Chien-Wei Chang / Maggie Scott

The City Gallery, Leicester

2011



