

## The Shape of Things

Flow, London

9 September – 6 November 2010

'The Shape of Things' project, of which this show is just the tip of the iceberg, was set up by Arts Council England in response to a report citing the under-representation of black, Asian and minority ethnic craft makers in the UK. The exhibition, the report suggested, was the way to explore diversity within contemporary craft, and to that end eight makers – some native to Britain, some not – were awarded bursaries to create individual exhibitions, and invited to work closely with one of four regional museums where the resulting shows would be held.

Most of these makers have now shown their new bodies of work in the museums, and so far they have been excellent; bold, often surprising installations that have proved just how creative and experimental craft can be when commercial concerns can be put to one side, at least for a while. This exhibition at Flow – a private contemporary applied art gallery in Notting Hill – marks the stage of the project at which those concerns come back into focus. It's a high quality show for which all eight artists have made saleable work; for some, more of a challenge than the open brief of the museum stage, which encouraged experimentation in materials and scale, and for others perhaps more accustomed to showing in galleries, a chance to hone tried and tested forms and ideas.

Flow was specifically designed to show objects. Daylight, softened by special blinds in the pitched glass roof, floods the space. It's a stunning gallery that easily does justice to the work on display here. But what the gallery and the exhibited work can't do is communicate the real significance of 'The Shape of Things' as a project. The same goes for the catalogue introduction in which words and phrases such as "multi-cultural", "intercultural competency", "minority ethnic" and "global cultures" proliferate but are never really explained. What does it really mean to be a "conscious intercultural platform...in which to debate, contest, configure and re-imagine the shifting territory of identity, nationality and the role of craft within culture and society"?

More importantly, what does a project like this mean for the artists themselves?

"I don't feel like a minority ethnic practitioner," says jeweller Tanvi Kant, whose necklaces made from Indian fabrics are pinned to the wall at Flow. "I was born in Bolton and brought up in Leicester. I didn't look consciously at my own heritage. It wasn't something that came from within me, it came later because of the questions that I was constantly asked about where I was from." 'The Shape of Things' bursary enabled Tanvi to explore her own sense of "Indian-ness" through Indian textiles and traditional making processes, and although she feels she has benefited hugely from the bursary – her ceiling-hung installations at Touchstones Rochdale represented "a new way of thinking and making" – she's also worried that her ethnic background favours her at selection panels: "I want the work to be recognised as good because it is".

Conversely, metal artist Chien-Wei Chang, who immigrated to the UK from China in 2000, feels he is very much defined as a minority ethnic maker, and believes that his background has worked against him here. "I've been treated differently", he says, and maintains that he has been rejected by selection panels for exhibitions and awards because of his nationality. Throughout the lengthy process to get permanent residency in the UK, Chien-Wei has been subject to immigration rules on employment, meaning that he has had to be commercially successful to survive as a maker. And though he has established himself within his field, his career opportunities have been limited. "It restricts my activity in Europe and I do a lot of exhibitions there now. Because of visa difficulties I have to tell them I can't come over." For Chien-Wei, being selected for the bursary has marked a crucial turning point in his career. It has given him the critical recognition he has waited so long for, as well as a breathing space outside his normal commercial pressures in which new ideas are flourishing.

All the artists have their own stories to tell, and this exhibition at Flow is only one chapter. Accomplished, resolved and confident, the work here deserves success. But it is the journey here, through the experience offered by 'The Shape of Things' project as a whole, which will really determine these makers' futures.

Emma Maiden is an artist and freelance writer.



1 Taslim Martin, *Portrait Head, Raimi*, cast iron with rust patination, 2010. Photo: Taslim Martin

2 Halima Cassell, carved work, lightly burnished, unfired, clay from Belgium, 2010. Photo: Chris Smart of Silva Productions

3 Chien-Wei Chang, *Untitled*, base metal (gold plated), silver, gold coin (1989, China), silver coin (1991, Taiwan), 2009. Photo: Stephen Brayne