

1,2 *Earth/Atmosphere* (exhibition view), Touchstones Rochdale (Photo: Ed Chadwick) 3 Halima Cassell – part of *Virtues of Unity*, carved work, lightly burnished, unfired clay, 2010, Ø31cm (Photo: Ed Chadwick)

**Exhibition** *Earth/Atmosphere*, Touchstones Rochdale, 9 July–10 September 2011

**The Shape of Things** is an ambitious three-year development initiative for the contemporary crafts

**Web** [www.link4life.org/touchstones](http://www.link4life.org/touchstones)  
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## THE SHAPE OF THINGS

EMMA MAIDEN REPORTS ON A DISCUSSION ABOUT AUDIENCE DEVELOPMENT AT TOUCHSTONES ROCSDALE, 1 SEPTEMBER 2011.

Seiko Kinoshita's blue and white threads drop from the ceiling like fine rain. Arriving in England from her native Japan, Seiko says, she was struck by the way people's mood reflected the weather – how on a sunny day they have all the time in the world for you, and when it's grey and wet how they scurry by, heads bent, barely aware of anyone else. The twenty of us gathered here at Touchstones, Rochdale, where textile artist Seiko and ceramist Halima Cassell are showing new work made with bursaries awarded by *The Shape of Things* project, are all looking at Seiko's *A Walk in the Rain* but we're far from glum. We're here to discuss some of the themes and ideas that have emerged from *The Shape of Things* so far, and to see whether they might be developed further with a view to attracting wider and more diverse audiences to contemporary craft. As an informal introduction to the discussion, this installation seems particularly apposite. Although it alludes to much more than rain – Japanese interiors, family life, cultural and craft history are all evoked – it is immediate and accessible: thread, colour, and form we can all relate to, and what could be more universal than the British obsession with the weather?

Seiko is one of nine craft practitioners working in the UK who have been selected to create exhibitions for *The Shape of Things*, which was set up in response to an Arts Council report highlighting the under-representation of black, Asian, and minority ethnic crafts makers and audiences for contemporary craft. Today's discussion group comprises of people from the key organisations, museums, and venues involved in the Arts Council-funded project, as well as some of the participating artists, and is being led by audience development consultant, Caroline Griffin. She has offered various starting points, such as the pressure on artists 'to deliver on

audience development objectives when that's not what their work is about'; the need to capitalise 'on the way that contemporary craft tells us something unique about Britishness' (and does it?); and the idea of showcasing a more diverse range of crafts to attract more diverse audiences. There are many more thought-provoking topics on the list, and sadly not enough time to explore more than a couple, but it is interesting to see that once people are talking, the focus seems to naturally settle on the essence of craft itself, and its potential to communicate ideas and bring people together. The universality of making, and the way materials and processes cross historical, cultural, and geographical boundaries are seen as one of craft's enduring strengths. And of course, craft is deeply rooted in community; it is by nature – in its making, uses, and symbolism –

highly convivial. Deirdre Figueiredo, director of Craftspace, expands the theme of conviviality to include the recent proliferation of collective enterprises within contemporary craft, whereby college-leavers opt to join forces rather than operate as sole traders, thereby establishing dialogues and collaborations, a collective 'thinking through making' from which new forms of work, and new audiences, can emerge. In fostering closer relationships between artists, curators, museums, and the public for its programme of bold and innovative exhibitions, *The Shape of Things* has demonstrated that collaboration and inclusiveness work; indeed, that they are fundamental to the future of craft and the ways in which it is presented and received. With two shows still to go, the project – and the conversation – is far from over. ☐

