



Nina Johnson

Woody De Othello: *Coming to Light*
November 20th - January 30th, 2021

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COMING TO LIGHT

Nina Johnson is proud to present *Coming to Light*, an exhibition of new works by Woody De Othello, opening on November 20th and remaining on view through January 30th, 2021. The exhibition is a homecoming for the Miami native, who lives and works in Oakland. Comprising figurative paintings and anthropomorphic ceramic vessels, *Coming to Light* uses contorted and mutated human forms to express the alienation and anxiety of our current moment.

The exhibition embodies the dual consciousness of the public and private selves. Othello pulls from Carl Jung's notion of the shadow self and the Yoruba concept of ejiwapo (twoness) in order to illuminate the fissures of contemporary personhood. The subjects of these paintings are bent over in frustrated grief. Stuck within domestic interiors of the shower and bedroom, they are forced to confront themselves. In each, Othello employs two complementary color schemes, contributing to the overall feeling of division between the personal sphere and the world at large.

While the paintings are vibrantly colored, the ceramic sculptures placed throughout the gallery are glazed with cool, forlorn shades. These works spring from the paintings, and engage the art historical metaphor of body as vessel. That said, the forms they represent are fractured. A bust, a hand—these are portrayed wrapped around everyday items like combs or bottles. Scaled up and cartoonishly rendered, these consumer objects begin to take on personalities of their own.

The works in *Coming to Light* explore the moments of transformation and reflection brought about by this chaotic year. The show swims through the loneliness and uncertainty of quarantine, but also revels in the small sparks of beauty which come from confronting oneself. They are an urgent reflection on how it feels to be alive today.



ABOUT WOODY DE OHELLO

Woody De Othello (b. 1991 Miami, FL) completed his MFA at the California College of Arts in San Francisco in 2017. He received his BFA from Florida Atlantic University with a concentration in Ceramics. In 2020, he completed a residency at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center in Sheboygan, WI. Othello has exhibited widely in group exhibitions, including FRONT International: Cleveland Triennial (2018), the 33rd Ljubljana Biennial in Slovenia (2019), and "Sleight of Hand" at the Center for Craft in Asheville, NC (2020). In 2018, Othello's work was commissioned by the San Francisco Arts Commission to be permanently installed at The San Francisco International Terminal. Othello opened his first solo museum show at the San Jose Museum of Art in November 2019. He is represented by Jessica Silverman in San Francisco and KARMA in New York. Othello lives and works in Oakland, CA..



ABOUT NINA JOHNSON

Nina Johnson is a contemporary art space in Miami, Florida. Opened as Gallery Diet in 2007, the gallery has produced exhibitions by emerging and established artists from around the world, including Terry Allen, Anna Betbeze, Judy Chicago, Ann Craven, Jim Drain, Awol Erizku, Derek Fordjour, Nicola L., Nicolas Lobo, Nevine Mahmoud, Jonas Mekas, Emmett Moore, Cassi Namoda, Eamon Ore-Giron, Genesis Breyer P-Orridge, Jamilah Sabur, Peter Shire, Katie Stout, and Betty Woodman. The gallery is located at 6315 NW 2nd Avenue Miami in the Little Haiti district.

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Self Containment, 2020
Ceramic and glaze
Overall dimensions: 47 x 18 x 17 in.
Sculpture: 23 x 18 x 17 in. Base: 21 x 14 x 14 in.
\$20,000



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Mourning Day and Night, 2020
Oil on canvas
41.5 x 36 x 2.5 in.
\$20,000





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Hanging Light 2, 2020
Ceramic, glaze and light bulb
8 x 12 x 10 in.
\$6,000

Nina Johnson



When Under Pressure, Relax Pose, 2020
Ceramic and glaze on tiled pedestal
Overall dimensions: 49 x 33 x 26 in.
Sculpture: 23 x 18 x 19 in. Base: 21 x 14 x 14 in. Pedestal: 5 x 33 x 26 in.
\$20,000







Nina Johnson



Support for Growth, 2020
Ceramic, glaze, enamel and plant on tiled pedestal
Overall dimensions: 53 x 32 x 26 in.
Chair: 38 x 19 x 16 in. Pot: 10 x 15 x 15 in. Pedestal: 5 x 32 x 26 in.
\$24,000





Nina Johnson



Self-Imposed Balancing Act, 2020
Ceramic and glaze on tiled pedestal
Overall dimensions: 49.5 x 31 x 24 in.
Sculpture: 21 x 19 x 19 in. Base: 23.5 x 16.5 x 17 in. Pedestal: 5 x 32 x 26 in.
\$22,000





Nina Johnson



In Thought Picking Which One to Mask, 2020
Ceramic and glaze on tiled pedestal
Overall dimensions: 48 x 32 x 25 in.
Sculpture: 19 x 20 x 18 in. Base: 24 x 14 x 14 in. Pedestal: 5 x 32 x 25 in.
\$20,000





Nina Johnson



Wishing Well, 2020
Ceramic and glaze
Overall dimensions: 14 x 26 x 37 in.
Sculpture: 9 x 26 x 29 in. Base: 5 x 26 x 37 in.
\$20,000





Nina Johnson



Hanging Light 1, 2020
Ceramic, glaze, and light bulb
7.5 x 10 x 10.5 in.
\$6,000

Nina Johnson



Private Moment, 2020
Oil on canvas
38.5 x 30.5 x 2.5 in.
\$18,000

Nina Johnson



Alone again but not so blue, 2020
Acrylic on paper
30.5 x 22.5 in.
\$12,000

Nina Johnson



Before you go, 2020
Acrylic on paper
30.5 x 22.5 in.
\$12,000

WOODY DE OHELLO

b. 1991, Miami, FL
Lives and works in Oakland, CA

EDUCATION

- 2017 Masters of Fine Arts, California College of Arts, San Francisco, CA
2013 Bachelor of Fine Arts, Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton, FL

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2021 John Michael Kohler Arts Center, Sheboygan, WI (forthcoming)
2020 Coming to Light, Nina Johnson Gallery, Miami, FL
The Box, Pippy Houldsworth Gallery, London, England
2019 Woody De Othello, Karma, New York, NY
Woody De Othello: Breathing Room, San Jose Museum of Art, San Jose, California
Meridians, Art Basel Miami Beach, Miami, Florida
2018 Living Room, Jessica Silverman Gallery, San Francisco, CA
2016 Lights Out Night Out, Quality, Oakland, CA
Real Life Still Life, Old New England, Berkeley, CA
Patty's Mashed Potatoes, UFO Gallery, Berkeley, CA
2015 It's Going To Be Okay, Unit 1, Lake Worth, FL

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2020 Close to Home: Creativity in Crisis, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, CA (forthcoming)
Matthew Brown Gallery, Los Angeles, CA
Sleight of Hand, Center for Craft, Asheville, NC
The Burdens of History, NCECA Conference, Richmond, VA
2019 Roommates, Shulamit Nazarian, Los Angeles, CA
33rd Ljubljana Biennial of Graphic Arts, Ljubljana, Slovenia
Blow Up, Friedman Benda Gallery, New York, NY
2018 Bay Area Now 8, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, CA
Horizon Lines, Jessica Silverman Gallery at 288 Pacific, San Francisco, CA
Kinship, Jessica Silverman Gallery, San Francisco, CA
FRONT International Cleveland Triennial For Contemporary Art, Cleveland, OH
From the Ground Up, Carrie Secrist Gallery, Chicago, IL
Kinder Gentler Nation, Karma, New York, NY
2017 Working TWO Scale: New Bay Area Ceramic Sculpture, Sonoma State University Art Gallery, Sonoma, CA
Matt Kleberg and Woody De Othello, Johansson Projects, Oakland, CA
Homo Mundus Minor, Gallery T293, Rome, Italy
30th Annual Barclay Simpson Master of Fine Arts Award Exhibition, Perry Family Event Center, San Francisco, CA
To Speak of Trees, Alter Space at Minnesota Street Projects, San Francisco, CA
2016 All College Honors, Hubbell Street Gallery, San Francisco, CA
Rocks and Socks, College Avenue Gallery, Oakland, CA
Ottawa Makers Market, The Rideau Curling Club, Ottawa, ON, Canada
Clay Bodies, 7264 N. Miami Ct, Miami, FL

- 2015 Grayscale, 5&J Gallery, Lubbock, TX
 Possessed, Fat Village Projects, Ft. Lauderdale, FL
 Resident Exit Show, Armory Arts Center, West Palm Beach, FL
- 2014 The Contenders, Unit 1, Lake Worth, FL
 Monstrous Strange, Fat Village Projects, Ft. Lauderdale, FL
 Acid Reflux, Fat Village Projects, Ft. Lauderdale, FL
 The Strange Ones, Unit 1, Lake Worth, FL
 Southern Exposure: New Work Now, Palm Beach Cultural Council, Lake Worth, FL
 Outside The Box 2, White Space Gallery, West Palm Beach, FL
 Fluidity, Artserve, Ft. Lauderdale, FL
 All Florida Ceramics Invitational, Nathan H. Wilson Center, Jacksonville, FL
- 2013 Small Wonders, World and Eye Arts Center, Ft. Lauderdale, FL
 Apex: Fall 2013 BFA Exhibition, Ritter Art Gallery, Boca Raton, FL
 Inferno, Armory Art Center, West Palm Beach, FL
 College of Arts & Letters Dean's Reception, Northern Trust Bank, Boca Raton, FL
 Red Eye Art, Artserve, Ft. Lauderdale, FL
 Lounge Series, Arts Council of Martin County, Stuart, FL
 Arts After Darks, Arts Council of Martin County, Stuart, FL
- 2012 23rd Annual University Juried Student Exhibition, Atlantic Center of The Arts, New Smyrna Beach, FL
 Four Minutes, Thirty Three Seconds, Legal Art, Miami, FL

AWARDS AND GRANTS

- 2018 SFO International Terminal Boarding Area G Outdoor Terrace Commission
- 2017 Toby Devan Lewis Award
- 2016 Barclay Simpson Award
 CCA Merit Scholarship
- 2015 CCA All College Honors
 CCA Merit Scholarship
- 2013 Claire V. Dorst Scholarship (FAU)
 Runner-up of Fine Art in Creative Quarterly
 John McCoy Scholarship (FAU)
 Rothenberger Endowed Scholarship for Humanities (FAU)
- 2012 Marvin and Eileen Reingold Contemporary Ceramics Collection
- 2011 Rothenberger Endowed Scholarship for Humanities: Printmaking (FAU)

RESIDENCIES

- 2020 John Michael Kohler Arts Center, Sheboygan, WI
- 2018 Liquitex Research Residency, Minnesota Street Project, San Francisco, CA
- 2016 Old New England, Berkeley, CA
- 2015 Pentaculum Resident, Arrowmont, Gatlinburg, TN
 Sculpture Artist in Residence, Armory Arts Center, West Palm Beach, FL (2014-2015)

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

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 Moiola, Chiara. "Gravity at Play: Woody de Othello," *Mousse Magazine*, January 16, 2020.
- 2019 Cohen, Alina. "The Artists Everyone Talked about during Art Basel in Miami Beach," *Artsy*, December 9, 2019.
 Rees, Lucy. "7 Standout Talents to Watch at Art Basel Miami Beach," *Galerie*, December 7, 2019.
 Cascone, Sarah. "See Highlights From Art Basel Miami Beach's New 'Meridians' Section, Where the Fair's Biggest (and Best) Artworks Shine," *ArtNet News*, December 4, 2019.
 Karp-Evans, Elizabeth. "Woody De Othello Mixes Playful with Political," *Cultured*. December 2019.
 Loos, Ted. "Thinking Bigger at Art Basel Miami Beach," *The New York Times*. December 3, 2019.
 Desmarais, Charles. "Bay Area ceramics scene fired up in news ways." *Datebook*. July 24, 2019.
 Desmarais, Charles. "6 ceramic sculpture exhibitions not to miss." *Datebook*. July 22, 2019.

- 2018 Gerrity, Jeanne. "Critic's Pick." Artforum. October 11, 2018.
Fancher, Lou. "Hope, danger, humor coexist in exhibit spotlighting top SF Bay Area artists." East Bay Times. September 20, 2018.
Desmarais, Charles. "Woody De Othello's clay bodies at Jessica Silverman Gallery" SF Chronicle, September 18, 2018.
Guadagnino, Kate. "Funky Ceramics Are Everywhere. Including in Galleries." T Magazine. June 14, 2018.
- 2017 De Othello, Woody. "Ceramics and Preservation in the Bay" The Brooklyn Rail. November 2, 2017.

COLLECTIONS

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, CA

San Jose Museum of Art, San Jose, CA

Rennie Collection, Vancouver, B.C.

How Woody De Othello Is Shaping the Future of Ceramics

The up-and-coming talent has embarked on a powerful new body of work at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center

BY LUCY REES
JULY 7, 2020



I have always been a creative person, but the second I touched clay, I just knew,” says Bay Area artist Woody De Othello. For the past few years, he’s been working with ceramics, constructing intentionally wonky, semi-anthropomorphized sculptures of everyday household objects. It’s a theme he began when studying at California College of the Arts, which counts pioneering ceramists like Peter Voulkos and Viola Frey as alumni. Since graduating, De Othello has shown equal promise, having already exhibited at the Front International: Cleveland Triennial for Contemporary Art, the 33rd Ljubljana Biennial of Graphic Arts in Slovenia, and the San José Museum of Art in California, which last year hosted his first solo museum show titled “Breathing Room.”

De Othello’s glossy, bright sculptures are full of whimsy, which belies their more serious message. “Humor is a part of my personality,” he says. “I really like what I do and that energy translates in the sculpture, but a lot of my sources of inspiration come from a deeper place.” Born in Miami to a family of Haitian descent, he uses mundane objects as metaphors for larger issues. Take the eight-foot-tall bronze fan titled *Cool Composition* with a concave center he made, which caused a stir at Jessica Silverman’s booth at Art Basel in Miami Beach last year. “I had been thinking about objects that circulate air and being aware of our breath, which is something we take for granted. You see the concave and also notice that there is some struggle there.” He has recently been pondering doors, thinking about what they symbolize around questions of accessibility. Who has the keys to enter and who is allowed in? “These domestic spaces hold the space to have larger political conversations without being overtly political.”

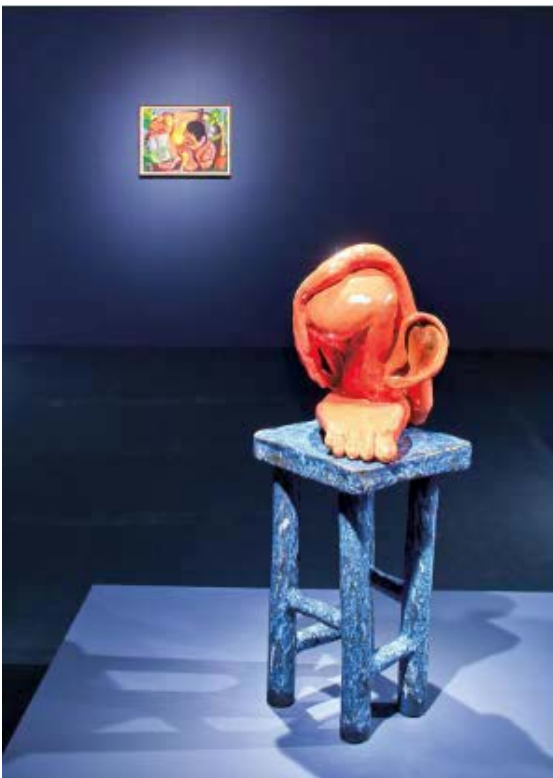
Earlier this year, as a resident at the highly selective John Michael Kohler Arts Center in Sheboygan, Wisconsin, De Othello embarked on an exciting new body of work before the Covid-19 pandemic hit. “The whole residency experience was so reviving. I felt like I was in collage again. I learnt all these new skills and I was just hitting this moment when things were clicking and was ready to start cranking it out!” Experimenting with mold making, he created vases featuring Surrealist-like ears and lips that explore notions of listening and being present but also being heard. “I was so captivated by this idea of the vessel being an analogy of the human body and a carrier of emotions.”

De Othello also began inscribing his works after recently reading about the enslaved South Carolina potter David Drake, who produced some 100,000 alkaline-glazed stoneware jugs between the 1820s and the 1870s. “As an illiterate man, the act of him writing his name on his pots was a radical political statement. I was going back to this notion of speaking up.” A solo exhibition of De Othello’s new works is slated to take place at the center in 2021. “We are thrilled to be supporting De Othello, whose work is expanding the voice and vision of contemporary ceramics,” says program director Faythe Levine.



Cool Composition by Woody De Othello at Art Basel in Miami Beach.
PHOTO: COURTESY OF JESSICA SILVERMAN

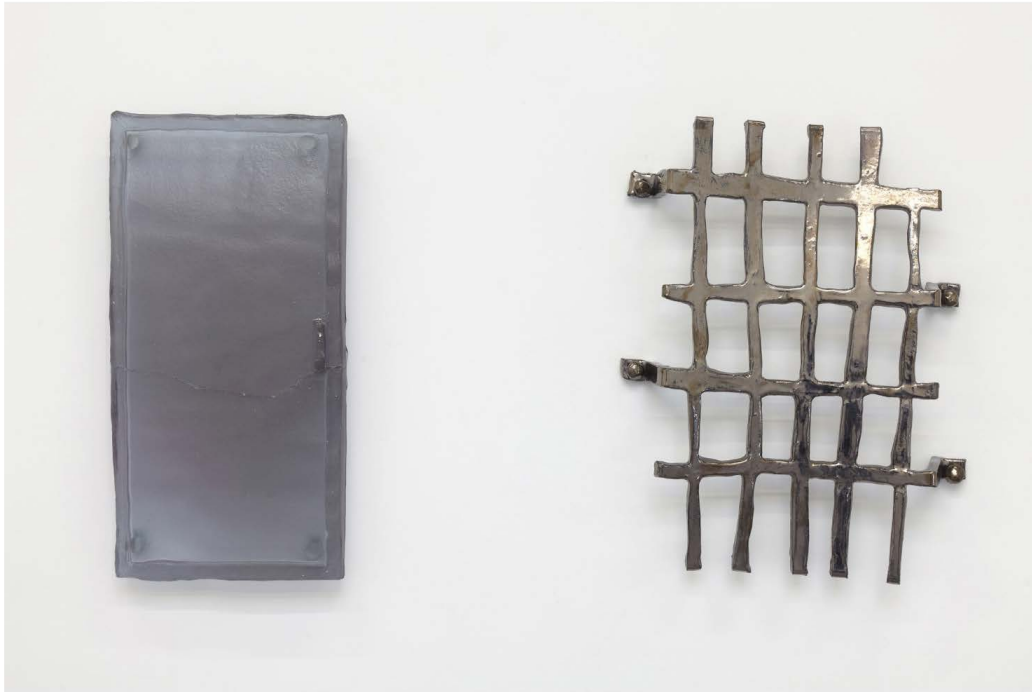
With a slew of planned exhibitions now on hold, De Othello has taken the opportunity to move into a much bigger studio in Richmond, California, and has been spending time writing, drawing, and reflecting. "I always tell people, ceramics taught me how to live life," he says. "You have to be prepared that things will not work out as planned. There's magic with ceramics, and I know what it does in my life, and I think that power just radiates out."



Installation view of De Othello's show "Breathing Room" at the San José Museum of Art.
PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND JESSICA SILVERMAN GALLERY, SAN FRANCISCO



Woody De Othello, Thinking Green, 2019.
PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND JESSICA SILVERMAN GALLERY, SAN FRANCISCO



Woody De Othello, *Opaqueness* [purple glass, shiny metal-colored bars], 2019. Ceramic, glaze, and glass, 23 x 16 x 4 in. Photo: Courtesy the artist and Karma, New York

Woody De Othello

March 4, 2020 by Christopher Hart Chambers

New York

Karma

Facing the street in the gallery's storefront window hung a grill that resembled a barred gate to keep people out and in, bolted over a cast resin, translucent blue portal—a door perhaps. The main room housed an assortment of objects, which eventually came together to spell out an emotionally charged narrative. Two oversize human/monster left feet (cut off neatly at the ankles) ascended a short, lumpy, gray staircase with a silver/bronze ankle bracelet draped over the lowest step. Or maybe it was a wristwatch, or perhaps a GPS monitoring device for house arrest. Nearby on the floor, a pair of clasped ceramic hands with mottled blue and gray glaze, set on a white pillow, looked like they were cut from the same owner as the feet. Other than a few monochromatic fabrics, all of these oversize, physically imposing works were done in glazed ceramic. Another pair of hands was joined together, palm to palm, praying on the vinyl seat cushion of a comically crude chair. A stool held a melted, Dalí-esque alarm clock.

Another, contorted hand grasped a wristwatch or belt, a pair of giant deadbolt locks hung on the wall to one side, and across the room, another gated window echoed the one seen from outside. A pentagon of five life-size doors surrounded a clumsily sculpted mirror barely visible through the cracks between them. Together, these simulated artifacts imbued a somber goofiness, like stills from a claymation drama. Around this time, I started wondering about the identity and experience of the artist. The themes of security, repression, and claustrophobic entrapment were making themselves felt.

Centrally placed in the rear gallery was a large, upright, clenched fist—the iconic symbol of the Black Power struggle during the 1960s. A broken chain that might have restrained a giant prisoner in a dungeon hung on one wall, and finally liberation—another gate and portal. This time, they were apart. The separation of these pieces ended Woody De Othello's narrative with a sense of release and freedom. No Way Up, the most damning work in "To live in hope," consisted of a ladder with almost all of its rungs missing and a coffee cup left behind on the bottom step, as if gulped down during a daring, albeit doomed attempt at escape.

De Othello employs a popularizing faux naiveté, deliberately handling sophisticated materials in a crude way, as if an expert had assisted a child. Here, the presentation mocked despair, weighed urban desolation with historical oppression, and ended on an uplifting note that was neither condemning nor angry. There was a general mood of gloomy melancholy, yet it was all done with a wry, serious humor, as if to say, "I don't even know who to blame nowadays but all of us."

Mousse Magazine

CONVERSATIONS

Gravity at Play: Woody De Othello

Share

Woody De Othello interviewed by Chiara Moioli

"In the vale that disguises
one flesh from the other
we were but reflections
of rooms that hold echoes
across the divide"

—Grouper, "Call Across Rooms," from *Ruins* (Chicago: kranky, 2014)



Woody De Othello: *Breathing Room* installation view at SJMA – San José Museum of Art, 2019-2020
Photo: JKA Photography

To his recall, Woody De Othello has always been a "creative type." Though, it was on his first encounter with ceramic that he experienced a revelation whereby his past and future clicked together, appointing clay as his chosen medium. After earning a BA in ceramics from the Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton, De Othello moved to the San Francisco Bay Area—renowned for its fertile heritage in ceramics—to complete an MFA at California College of the Arts. There he dipped his hands into both the history of the medium and literally the medium itself, thoroughly experimenting with clay's peculiarities—becoming glued to the material in all its potential for failure, learning, and problem solving. He started to eschew ceramic's usual association with delicacy by scaling objects out of their (and our) comfort zone, challenging gravity and seeking a more bodily experience in relation to the object. His sculptures merge the figurative, the cartoonish, the everyday, and an anthropomorphic element, disrupting any remaining functionality in favor of an eerie "otherness" that exudes a dark aura, an exhaustion of sorts.

In *Breathing Room*, De Othello's current show at the San José Museum of Art, organized by senior curator Lauren Schell Dickens, the artist reflects on his diasporic heritage through a new series of ceramic works linked to contemporary nkisi—a type of Central African object or container inhabited by a spirit—that embody his personal emotions around learning about his descent. *Breathing Room* is thus both literal and figurative—a space alive and full of energy, yet one that offers respite, leaving the artist with room to breathe.

Through these explorations and artworks, De Othello seems to corroborate the claim that "in today's information age the sensuous, tactile 'information' of craft media speaks of a direct connection to humanity that is perhaps endangered, or at the very least being rapidly reconfigured."¹ Yet he does not romanticize the "pastoral" perspective of craft traditions in age-old craft-versus-fine-art debate. To his eyes, "Everything is craft. Plus, it's 2020."

CHIARA MOIOLI: Since a child, you always drew and used aluminum foil to make "weird things."² Creating stuff with your hands seems to have been a staple in your life since always. Can you recall your first encounter with clay and ceramic? What drew you to this medium, and what continues to compel you about it?

WOODY DE OTHELLO: I'd like to think that I've always been a creative type. The first time I recall touching clay was in undergrad, in an elective ceramics course. I remember being overwhelmed by the possibilities. I initially was intrigued by clay because of the potential to draw and utilize printmaking techniques on its surface, something I've still yet to experiment with. Our first project in that class was a combined pinch pot where I made a little bust combining two pinch pots together. I experienced some sort of revelation, where my past and future kind of clicked together. I became glued to the material—regardless of how many pieces fell apart or even blew up during the firing process, and many undesirable glaze results. These are all regular occurrences with clay and are also what makes it compelling. All the failure, learning, problem solving, and humbling keeps me engaged with the material.

CM: In 2013 you earned a BA in ceramics from Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton, then in 2017 you got your MFA from California College of the Arts. The Bay Area is renowned for its fertile heritage in ceramics. A long lineage of artists in the 1960s and 1970s—Peter Voulkos, Robert Arneson, Viola Frey, John Mason, Richard Shaw, Ron Nagle, and Jim Melchert, to name a few—contributed to the twentieth-century U.S. art pottery movement, establishing it as a fine art. The Bay Area also boasts the radical legacy of the Free Speech Movement, which to my mind somehow relates to these artists' desire to elevate ceramics from the polite craft of "making tableware" to a proper art medium. California must have had a magnetic pull on you as a student. Would you talk about it, and your influences there, in relation to the evolution of your artistic practice?

WDO: The Bay Area has definitely played a role in the evolution of my art practice and growth as a person. I moved here specifically for graduate school. The ceramics program at CCA had an allure for me since undergrad, and I am stoked to be apart of the community. There is a lot of clay history here, from Voulkos's studio compound in Berkeley, working in CCA ceramics facilities in Oakland, to the sheer number of ceramic-centered shows here. These are experiences I don't think I could cultivate anywhere else. Its been fruitful and inspiring to see the numerous ways clay can be used and manipulated. Being immersed in the dialogue with clay here has helped me think in the medium much more broadly. Ceramic does not have to be small—artists such as Voulkos and Frey exude scale. John De Fazio, Maryam Yousif, and Nick MaKanna aren't afraid of style and color. Nathan Lynch embraces the lumpiness of clay. Arthur Gonzalez, Annabeth Rosen, Nicki Green and Robert Arneson show drawing alongside ceramic sculpture. Cathy Lu and Sahar Khoury use ceramics with found objects in ways that extend the material. These are all things I've absorbed here.

CM: By virtue of its delicacy, ceramic is commonly associated with petite-ness, daintiness. In your work, you seem to eschew this feature to retrieve the Pop art motif of "going bigger," scaling objects out of their (and our) comfort zone. The clay is built up until, overwhelmed by its own weight, it droops. Can you expand on this?

WDO: The scale thing is probably an attempt to have more bodily experience in relation to the objects. In my perspective, there's this thing with scale that makes you more aware of yourself. It's a heightened experience. The size, in conjunction with this droopiness, creates tension—a sense of precarity. There's a lot of anxious buildup when constructing some of the objects. At times I'm unsure if things will collapse under their own weight but as I'm working the clay starts to dry and solidify. It freezes that tension. Gravity is literally at play. The works being ceramics then having scale, weight, and this lumpiness to them creates anxiety that exists not only in a piece that but also then transfers into our physical bodies—or at least that's what I feel with them in the studio. That tension kind of summarizes a lot of how I personally think at times—this aura of things in a situation being stable but the always a lingering suspicion regarding how long.

CM: Your sculptures merge the figurative, the cartoonish, and the everyday object, while adding an anthropomorphic element that disrupts any remaining functionality in favor of an eerie "otherness." Could you give an account of how you choose your subjects, and what interests you in morphing humanoid features into inanimate household objects?

WDO: The objects mimic actions that humans perform; they're extensions of our own actions. We use phones to speak and to listen, clocks to tell time, vessels to hold things, and our bodies are indicators of all of those, as mentioned earlier. We communicate and listen; our bodies are indicators of time passing; and we hold things both actually and metaphorically, whether it's an emotion, a memory, or a feeling. Morphing humanoid feature combinations just kind of makes sense to me. I could see how there is this eerie otherness, but I'd like to think of it as uncanny similarities. I choose objects that are already very human in this regard.

CM: Despite the funky and irreverent humor that may surface at first glance, your works exude a dark, painful aura, an exhaustion of sorts. Starting right from its title, a piece like *Defeated, Depleted* (2018), on view in *Breathing Room* at the San José Museum of Art, recalls African vessels and reflects your research into your diasporic heritage. These new sculptures are linked to contemporary nkisi—a type of Central African object or container inhabited by a spirit. Each work is therefore metaphorically "alive" and a carrier of a story.

WDO: I'm not sure if the show addresses the African vessels explicitly in a formally representative way or talks about my heritage specifically. What these works do offer are my personal emotions around learning about my diaspora. I've always thought about it, but recently I've been feeling it. There's a lot of joy and enlightening feelings around this investigation, but some stories and accounts are tragic, unjust, and heart-wrenching. In this show, there is an attempt to breathe. The works are in a state of deep contemplation, sometimes maybe entanglement. I learned about nkisi recently and was intrigued by their multifaceted uses through chants, prayer, and ceremonial rituals to aid in healing and protection. I created these works having this in mind as a way to learn more about precolonial, pre-slavery African histories and customs and to embody some of the emotions I was feeling. So maybe objects can be carriers of some of this emotion as well.

CM: *Breathing Room* is all about creating a space to, tautologically, breathe. A lot is at stake in the show: you investigate your Haitian ancestry; you draw from postcolonial theorist Frantz Fanon's study of the psychological impact of racism on black bodies; and you expose the physical and emotional fatigue still experienced by many African Americans in the United States today. Could you retrace the genesis of the show, how it came about, and the narrative behind it?

WDO: I was captivated to read Fanon after watching a screening of Isaac Julien's *Black Skin, White Mask* (1997) at the Pacific Film Archive in Berkeley. It had a profound impact on me and I went on a kick of trying to absorb as much information as I could. Reading texts such as *Black Skin White Mask*, *Flash of the Spirit*, *Playing in the Dark*, *Poetics of Relation*, and *Tell my Horse* provided me with vocabulary to articulate things I've always felt but could not necessarily explain. It gave me an immense quantity of questions I'd never thought to ask. Even though these newly found texts enlightened me in many ways and brought me incredible warmth, they also brought gut-wrenching realities. Learning these histories didn't help to console some of these emotional knots. The works and the genesis of the show came about in an attempt to illustrate some of these feelings.

CM: Along with the sculptures, four new paintings complete the installation. How do they dialogue with the vessels? What do they unfold?

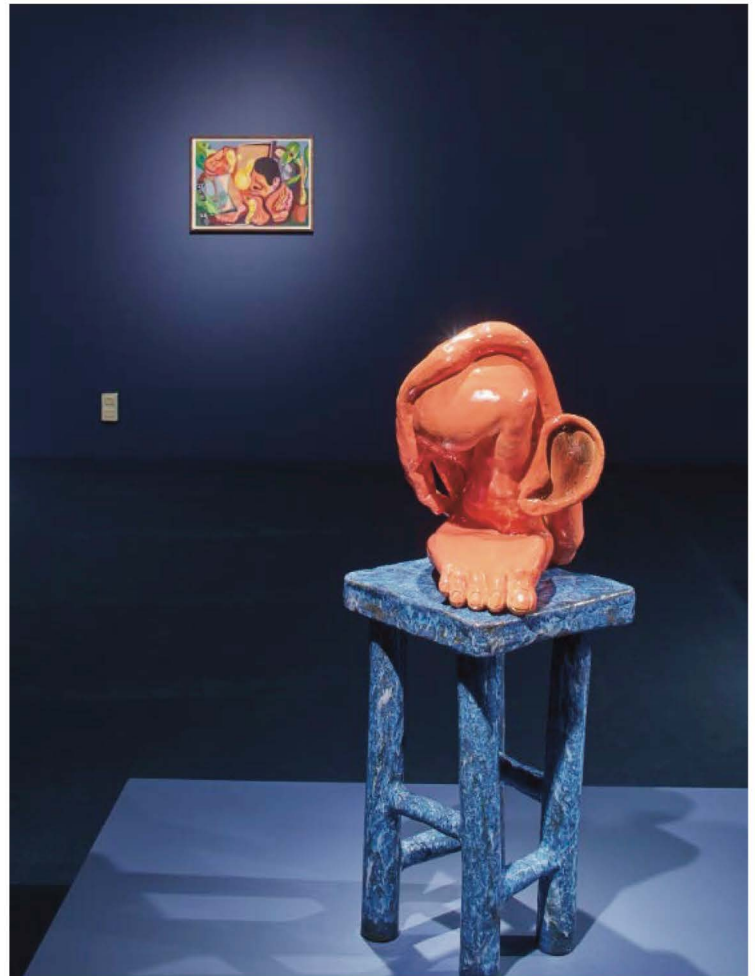
WDO: The drawings help envision a reality that the vessels exist in. They also just help me think about space, forms, color combinations. I was making them at the earlier stages of creating ceramics for the exhibition, and in making these works on paper, forms for sculpture start to come as the overall color scheme. The figure is also explicitly present in the drawings and paintings. I've been focusing on drawings in which the characters are kind of confronting themselves. They are contorted, holding up and facing mirrors, behind glass and reflections. Édouard Glissant talks about this philosophy of opacity and transparency. I've become interested in that formally, so a lot of the drawings have imagery of foliage in a glass, mirrors, clear vases, and windows in conjunction to the figure, doors, wood, and other opaque features.

CM: As an artist working primarily with ceramics, how do you situate yourself in the debate questioning the "craft" roots of this medium versus the "fine art" domain? In your experience, is this divergence still relevant in contemporary art?

WDO: I personally don't think the difference is relevant anymore. Everything is "craft" in my eyes. Plus it's 2020.



Woody De Othello, *Vessel for Feelings of Shame and Guilt*, 2019
 Courtesy: Jessica Silverman Gallery, San Francisco



Woody De Othello: *Breathing Room* installation view at SJMA – San José Museum of Art, 2019-2020
 Photo: JKA Photography

[1] Maria Elena Buszek, "Introduction," in *Extra/Ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art*, ed. Maria Elena Buszek (Durham, NC: Duke University Press), 1.

[2] Lou Fancher, "Hope, Danger, Humor Coexist in Exhibit Spotlighting Top SF Bay Area Artists," *San Jose The Mercury News*, September 20, 2018, <https://www.mercurynews.com/2018/09/20/hope-danger-coexist-in-exhibit-spotlighting-top-sf-bay-area-artists/>.

Woody De Othello (b. 1991, Miami), lives and works in Oakland. Recent solo shows include *Karma*, New York (2019); *Meridians*, Art Basel Miami Beach (2019); *Living Room*, Jessica Silverman Gallery, San Francisco (2018); *Lights Out Night Out, Quality*, Oakland (2016); *Real Life Still Life*, Old New England, Berkeley (2016); and *Patty's Mashed Potatoes*, UFO Gallery, Berkeley (2016). He has participated to the group exhibitions *Roommates*, Shulamit Nazarian, Los Angeles (2019); *CRACK UP – CRACK DOWN*, 33rd Ljubljana Biennial of Graphic Arts, Slovenia (2019); *Blow Up*, Friedman Benda Gallery, New York (2019); *Bay Area Now*, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco (2018); *Horizon Lines*, Jessica Silverman Gallery at 288 Pacific, San Francisco (2018); *Kinship*, Jessica Silverman Gallery, San Francisco (2018); *FRONT International*, Cleveland Triennial for Contemporary Art (2018); *From the Ground Up*, Carrie Secrist Gallery, Chicago (2018); and *Kinder Gentler Nation*, *Karma*, New York (2018). His work resides in the collections of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the San José Museum of Art, and the Rennie Museum, Vancouver. In 2020, De Othello will have solo shows at Lulu, Mexico City, and John Michael Kohler Arts Center, Sheboygan, Wisconsin.

30 UNDER 35 2020

WOODY DE OTHELLO MIXES PLAYFUL WITH POLITICAL

ELIZABETH KARP-EVANS

PHOTOGRAPHY BY AUBREY MAYER



Oakland-based artist Woody de Othello draws on the city's artistic lineage as well as its political legacy to create his surreal, anthropomorphic sculpture. A ceramist first—although he paints, draws and works with found objects—his sculpture is loose and large, often slumped precariously and fired in a multitude of colors reminiscent of Ron Nagle, though adapting none of Nagle's sleek compact forms. "It's a question of 'how can I afflict the sculptures with a human quality or an emotive quality?'" he says, citing Ruby Neri and others from the Mission School as inspiration. When we speak, he is working on his first institutional solo show at San Jose Museum of Art, which will run through April 2020.

In 2018, successful exhibitions at San Francisco's Jessica Silverman Gallery and Karma in New York saw the familiar arrangement of oversized household objects sporting characteristic arms and legs, ears and lips, but it was at the latter space where a rather symmetric presentation of pared-back sculpture necessitated viewers' acknowledgment that humor isn't always at the bottom of what de Othello creates. Sets of oversized prayer hands and unadorned glasswork paired with ceramic bars, glazed in pewter-like quicksilver and moody blues, were a subdued yet weighty reminder of the futility felt by black and brown bodies within the police state—and of the tenuous political environment within which art is now made. "I hear about the work being cartoonish, I always hear about humor. Those are all legitimate readings," he emphasizes. "But when you look at them formally, outside of some of the color decisions, they are manipulated and slumped over. They're constrained, uneasy." Whether creating life-size figurative work, anthropomorphic everyday objects, or the sober, elegant ceramics of late, one thing is clear for de Othello: "Since the first time I touched the material, it's been this constant in my life. So many other things have changed, but ceramics has always been there, driving my spirit forward."



Art

The Artists Everyone Talked about during Art Basel in Miami Beach

● Alina Cohen Dec 9, 2019 5:23pm

Woody De Othello



Woody De Othello's eight-foot-tall, eight-foot-wide bronze-and-enamel sculpture of a distorted fan thrilled Meridians visitors. Presented by [Jessica Silverman Gallery](#) and [Karma](#), the work sold in three editions in dark blue, orange, and yellow, to private U.S. collections, for \$175,000 each. De Othello is best known for his colorfully glazed ceramics, which often resemble tweaked domestic objects—a melting remote control or a strangely proportioned telephone, for example. Jessica Silverman Gallery did its best Art Basel in Miami Beach business ever, selling 48 works total within the first three days.

Art fairs evolve like any other event, but the changes can be subtle. Even if you are told that striking, thematically linked treasures are on offer in a special sector, rows of gallery booths have a way of blending together.

So the organizers of Art Basel Miami Beach, taking place Thursday through Sunday for its 18th edition, are making an effort to create a palpably different atmosphere for a new sector, Meridians.

Over all, 269 galleries will be on hand in the Miami Beach Convention Center, from places as far-flung as Tokyo and Toronto. The new sector will have 33 projects arranged in the center's Grand Ballroom and one outside the convention center.

Last year, the ballroom had only been recently completed at the time of the fair, after a three-year renovation of the center, and it held a special multidisciplinary work.

"Meridians is an inflection point in the history of Art Basel Miami Beach," said Marc Spiegler, the global director of Art Basel, who also oversees its iterations in Basel, Switzerland, and Hong Kong.

"It puts this fair on another level; it allows us to show works of a quantity and size that no other fair can do," he said, save for the Unlimited sector in the Swiss fair.

Mr. Spiegler added that while his team got through the complications of a long renovation process, "the Grand Ballroom was the prize we had our eyes on."

Last year, in a rare move, the Miami Beach fair actually scuttled two sectors, Film and Public, attempting to centralize its activities in the convention center.

Organizers are always keen to distinguish themselves in a crowded field.

"The art fair paradigm has been copy-and-pasted the world over, with 200-plus fairs," said Noah Horowitz, Art Basel's director of the Americas and the chief of the Miami Beach fair. "We're trying to take it up a notch."

Pace Gallery is showing two works in the Meridians sector: Adam Pendleton's video "Ishmael in the Garden: A Portrait of Ishmael Houston-Jones" (2018) and Fred Wilson's installation "Sala Longi" (2011), partly composed of 27 paintings done in black Murano glass.

Meridians was curated by Magalí Arriola, the director of the Museo Tamayo in Mexico City.

"Many of the works deal with gender and race issues," she said, citing "The Garden" (1996) by Portia Munson as a work that "ties femininity to the ecological."

Mr. Horowitz said he was pleased that Meridians had a variety of galleries involved.

"People tend to assume that large-scale projects are only for the mega-galleries," he said. "And we have a lot of younger galleries making a contribution."

One example of that is Woody De Othello's "Cool Composition" (2019), presented by Jessica Silverman Gallery of San Francisco and Karma of New York.

The installation imagines a humid summer day like the ones Mr. De Othello experienced growing up in Miami in a Haitian family: One of its elements is a fan cast in bronze, and there are ceramic stools.

"Woody remembers his family moving around the house based on the where the fan was," Ms. Silverman said. "It's a really beautiful piece."

Ms. Silverman, who founded her gallery in 2008, also has a booth in the fair's main sector, Galleries.

It represented a move up to the big leagues in a trajectory that is typical for many dealers. She started in the satellite fair NADA Miami Beach, then moved into the Nova sector at Art Basel.

That initial jump, she said, "increased the level of business we were able to do tenfold, not only sales but connecting with colleagues."



By Ted Loos

Dec. 3, 2019



"Cool Composition" imagines a humid summer day in Miami, where the artist, Woody De Othello, was raised. Woody De Othello/Jessica Silverman Gallery, San Francisco and Karma, New York

Art Fairs

The Class of 2019? Meet 6 Fast-Rising Artists Having Star Turns at This Year's Art Basel Miami Beach

These emerging artists work in all manner of media, from ceramics to textile to painting.

Artnet News, December 3, 2019

Woody De Othello



A work by Woody De Othello. Courtesy of the artist, Jessica Silverman Gallery, San Francisco and KARMA, NY.

Who: Still south of 30 years old, this ascendant Miami-born sculptor has become known for comically surreal ceramics of oversized household objects, which usually look to be in the process of melting, sprouting cartoon limbs, or both. Think Dali's *The Persistence of Memory* adapted for Nickelodeon.

Based in: Oakland, California

Notable Resume Lines: De Othello currently has a solo exhibition at the San Jose Museum of Art (through April 5, 2020), and, in February, the San Francisco International Airport unveiled three of his new bronze sculptures permanently installed on its remodeled observation deck. His work was also featured in the 33rd Ljubljana Biennial of Graphic Arts in Slovenia this year, as well as the inaugural Front Triennial in Cleveland in 2018.

Where to See It: Art Basel's new Meridians section as well as the main gallery section, where his work will be presented by Jessica Silverman Gallery and Karma.

What to Look Out for: Cool Composition, De Othello's contribution to Meridians, recalls the Miami summers of the artist's youth, where the box fan was the nexus of home life and his Haitian-descended family told tales of spirits inhabiting everyday objects. The installation consists of a giant bronze fan—sagging from exhaustion, or perhaps bending down to whisper secrets—surrounded by a set of life-size stools and citrus trees. His dealer's booths will host wall sculptures of telephones, vents, and clocks, along with freestanding sculptures and works on paper.

Prices: De Othello's works are priced between roughly \$8,000 and \$15,000.

Fun Fact: De Othello is a CrossFit die-hard.

Up Next: 2020 will keep the artist busy with a solo show in esteemed Mexico City project space Lulu, a residency at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center in Sheboygan, Wisconsin, and a solo booth with Jessica Silverman at Art Basel Hong Kong.

W

Artist Woody De Othello's Oversize Ceramic Sculptures Distort Household Furniture and Appliances



by Glen Helfand

Photo by Max Farago

November 14, 2019 9:55 pm

Photograph by Max Farago; Styled by Nadia Beeman.



The artist Woody De Othello is a CrossFit devotee, so it's hardly surprising that his work, too, is extremely physical. He makes large, intentionally clumsy ceramic sculptures that emulate and distort household furniture—stools, lamps, nightstands, and urns—and oversize appliances, like a wall-mounted telephone with a glossy red tongue for a receiver. It's a theme he began four years ago while at the California College of the Arts, in San Francisco, where he made “a big-ass neti pot” based on the one he used for his persistent allergies. “I was in this mind-set of anthropomorphizing everyday objects,” De Othello, who is now 28, says. “I made the big pot with a fingernail at the end of it to reference picking your nose. If it makes me giggle, I'll try to make it.”

For De Othello, who was born in Miami to Haitian immigrants, the California dream had less to do with beaches, surfing, Pilates, and kale Caesar salad than with ceramics artists. “Peter Voulkos, Robert Arneson, Viola Frey, Ron Nagle, Ken Price—all West Coast,” he says. “I'm in better conversation with their work in California than in South Florida. I had this vision of living somewhere, but I didn't know where it was. The longer I'm here, the more I realize it was the Bay Area. It's what I was dreaming of.” He currently works out of a one-story stucco building in El Cerrito, an endearingly retro suburb just north of Berkeley. There's a modest kiln behind the metal roll-up door, and an assistant, a friend from school, helps him roll out clay on a press to make table legs for a new piece to be featured in a solo show at the San José Museum of Art. The space is smaller than you might expect for the ambitious scale of the work.

In 2017, as De Othello was completing his MFA studies, the gallerist Jessica Silverman, who is now his dealer, discovered him at a school-sponsored open studios event where he was showing various sculptures, including a yellow ceramic cat scratching post and that neti pot. She had to pinch herself not to offer him an exhibition on the spot. “He had an infectious spark—and his work looked so different than other ceramics,” Silverman recalls. She brought him to the Armory Show in Manhattan that same year, signed him on a few months later, and hosted an ambitious solo show in the fall of 2018. He was subsequently picked up by Karma in New York, where he had another solo show this past summer.

Barely out of school, De Othello has participated in the Front International: Cleveland Triennial for Contemporary Art; the 33rd Ljubljana Biennial of Graphic Arts, in Slovenia; and the Bay Area Now 8 show, at San Francisco's Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. He also created a series of bronze sculptures of stretched, intertwined body parts and surrealistically melting clocks for the San Francisco International Airport. For all of his achievements, he says he was especially pleased to be included in Art Basel Miami Beach last year. His parents still live in Florida, and he visits them often and calls them multiple times a week. “I've always, always dreamed of being at that fair,” he says. “All my family got to come see my work. That was so cool.” He'll be in Miami again in December, with a new eight-foot-tall bronze fan, which the artist describes as exploring “the conceptual history of breathing.”

Like his enormous fan, De Othello says, his lumpy HVAC sculptures, which he presented in his first solo show, reference air quality, and “thinking about my body taking a breath.” They are also about the bodies of Africans who were brought to the Caribbean and worked to death. And about Eric Garner’s last words, “I can’t breathe.” “I wanted to do something subtle, where if you didn’t have that train of thought, you could look at that AC unit as a formal thing. It’s weird, its center is sunken, it’s having a hard time. Imagine what it would sound like if it were an actual working thing? I like to think that a lot of the stuff I make is a catharsis,” he says. “They’re like vessels to place our bad juju. Put it in this thing, let this object have it so we can go about with more lightness and openness.”



The artist's studio, in a former auto-repair shop.
Photograph by Max Farago.



"De Othello's Space Heater", 2019.
Photograph by Max Farago.

First Solo Exhibition of Bay Area Artist Woody De Othello Opens at San José Museum of Art

SAN JOSE, California / October 16, 2019



Woody De Othello, *Defeated, depleted*, 2018.
Ceramic, underglaze, and glaze, 38 x 22 x 19 inches;
San Jose Museum of Art. Gift of Tad Freese and the
Lipman Family Foundation; 2018.13.
Jessica Silverman Gallery

San José, California (October 16, 2019) – The San José Museum of Art (SJMA) is pleased to present the first solo museum exhibition of Woody De Othello, an Oakland-based artist who creates colorfully glazed ceramics of anthropomorphized objects.

For his new installation, *Breathing Room*, Othello has re-envisioned the Museum's gallery as an interior space padded with carpet and filled with large ceramic vessels that sprout arms, eyes, and hands rendered in gestures of both reverence and desperation. At first blush, these objects seemingly respond to the legacy of Bay Area Funk artists like Robert Arneson, Viola Frey, and others. However, Othello, who was born in Miami to a family of Haitian descent, was drawn to clay for its connection to his ancestral roots. Influenced by postcolonial theorist Frantz Fanon's study of the psychological impact of racism on black bodies, Othello's vessels are linked by the artist to contemporary nkisi—a type of Central African object or container inhabited by a spirit. As characters, uncanny and alive with personality, they slouch and sag, seemingly exhausted by their own weight and the daily burdens of racial and economic strife. Yet they also absorb energy and trap emotion, containing the traumas of life to offer a moment of repose.

Specifically, the ceramic vessels in *Breathing Room* are based around a work by Othello, *Defeated, depleted*, (2018), which was recently acquired in the Museum's permanent collection. Featuring a dark, richly glazed jug-like form with human arms, hands, ears, and lips in an anthropomorphically suggestive yet non-figurative arrangement, *Defeated, depleted* recalls African vessels and reflects the artist's focused research into his diasporic heritage. Othello's process also reinforces this influence: he builds up the clay until, burdened by its own heft, it slumps and folds, giving each piece a psychological weight and sense of emotion. He then allows the soft structure to reach a point of equilibrium only to apply more clay. The comically crumpled and expressive objects embody the artist's own exhaustion and make visual the physical and emotional fatigue experienced by many African Americans in the US today.

Expanding Othello's interest in the tension between his sculptures and their environment, these new vessels are held up by ceramic space heaters, vents and air conditioners—tools for climate control, and a nod to the human desire to filter our surroundings and create a buffer against the outside world. Accompanying the installation are four new paintings on paper, a parallel component of Othello's practice that offers a diaristic form to explore related ideas. Additional creature comforts, like ceramic light switches and electrical outlets, animate the space. *Breathing Room* is both literal and figurative—a space alive and full of energy, yet one that offers respite from the stresses of daily life, leaving the artist with room to breathe.

Biography of the Artist:

Woody De Othello received a BA from Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton (2013), and an MFA from California College of the Arts (2017), San Francisco. He has had solo exhibitions at Jessica Silverman Gallery, San Francisco; Karma, New York; Quality, Oakland; and UFO Gallery, Berkeley, CA. His work has been included in group exhibitions including 33rd Ljubljana Biennial of Graphic Arts, Slovenia; Bay Area Now 8, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco; Front International Cleveland Triennial for Contemporary Art, Cleveland, Ohio; as well as exhibitions at Alter Space, Minnesota Street Project, San Francisco; Carrie Secrist Gallery, Chicago; Johansson Projects, Oakland; and Sonoma State University Art Gallery, CA. Othello lives and works in Oakland.

ART & EXHIBITS

6 ceramic sculpture exhibitions not to miss



Charles Desmarais | July 15, 2019 Updated: July 29, 2019, 10:39 am

The increased interest in ceramic sculpture among artists has seen a corresponding expansion of offerings in Bay Area art galleries, from introductions of new artists to rediscoveries of historic figures. Here are six long-running museum exhibitions of special note, in chronological order.



Woody De Othello's "Alone at the Table" (2018) was shown at Jessica Silverman Gallery last year.
Photo: Jessica Silverman Gallery

“Woody De Othello”: “I’m still an avid cartoon-watcher,” the artist says. Don’t be fooled. De Othello’s woozy visions are equal parts fantasy and fear. 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesdays-Sundays. Nov. 1-April 5. \$8-\$10; 17 and under free. San Jose Museum of Art, 110 S. Market St., San Jose. (408) 271-6840. www.sanjosemuseumofart.org

Funky Ceramics Are Everywhere. Including in Galleries.

The fine art world has started to embrace works made from clay — a material it once deemed lowly.



By Kate Guadagnino

June 14, 2018



Clockwise from top left: Work by Ruby Neri, Julia Haft-Candell, Didi Rojas and Woody De Othello. Clockwise from top left: courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, photo: Lee Thompson; courtesy of Parrasch Heijnen Gallery; courtesy of Didi Rojas; Courtesy of Jessica Silverman Gallery

More than sewing, flower-arranging or zine-making, clay might offer the perfect antidote to modern times. Hyper-tactile, it taps into a primal desire to shape earth — what the potter and writer Edmund de Waal has described as thinking through the hands — and is beloved for its immediacy. “You move and the clay moves with you,” says Aneta Regel, who was a finalist for this year’s Loewe Craft Prize and who, 12 years after graduating from London’s Royal College of Arts, now finds her works — lumpy, funky, cooked until cracked — aligned with a prevailing taste for artfully imperfect handwork, more generally, and for all things ceramic, in particular. If it is unsurprising to find mounting evidence of the trend on Instagram and at lifestyle-leaning boutiques like Samuji in New York and CristaSeya in Paris, it is notable that clay’s proliferation has, over the past decade, extended to the fine art world, which has long been wary of the material, widely considered to be lowly, functional and inexpensive. One of de Waal’s early teachers liked to say that his pots “had to be cheap enough to drop,” a condition that recalls the train tracks around Kolkata, India, strewn with shards of terracotta as a result of riders’ tossing their empty cups of chai out the window.

That has not been the attitude taken at recent art fairs. At Frieze New York last month, Matthew Marks Gallery showed a speckled and contorted coil by the ceramic artist Ken Price, while Parrasch Heijnen showed craggy forms by Julia Haft-Candell, one of Price’s artistic heirs. On the walls of Martos Gallery’s booth were paintings by Dan Asher; in the center, several small sculptures of his — modest unglazed stacks of what looked to be clay scraps. A low-slung table at the Blum & Poe booth was set as if for coffee with friends — or, dare I say, a craft fair — with pretty but plain-looking mugs and bowls by J.B. Blunk. In a way, it was among the most provocative displays at an event so focused on remarkably high prices, underscoring how, by placing ceramic works in this context, these artists and gallerists are not merely signaling a stylistic shift, but asking age-old questions about what qualifies as art.



From left: Ruby Neri, "Women with Burdens," 2018; detail from Woody De Othello's "At Night I Can't Sleep," 2018. From left: courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles. photo Lee Thompson; courtesy of Jessica Silverman Gallery.

Of course, plenty of modern artists have at least dabbled in ceramics — most of the Fauves took a turn painting on pitchers and platters, and then there are the several thousand ceramic works by Picasso, from plates with faces to vases with tails, some of which were recently on view at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art outside Copenhagen. As Picasso worked in Vallauris, France, an emerging band of California sculptors (Viola Frey, Peter Voukos, John Mason) made strides in establishing clay as a primary fine art medium. As did Betty Woodman, who started out as a “preconscious studio potter,” says Stuart Krimko, the research and editorial director at David Kordansky Gallery, which works closely with the artist’s estate, and who ended up being the first living woman to have a retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum of Art — in 2006. Woodman struggled for most of her career to be taken seriously, in part because she was a woman, in part because she worked in a medium that was relegated to the realm of decorative arts, but her work resisted easy classification. (Krimko mentions her “sort of proto-pillow pitchers that she dubbed erotic burritos.”) According to the sculptor Arlene Shechet, a friend of Woodman’s and a witness to her ongoing frustration with her lack of acceptance, “She’d ask me, ‘Why should we agree to be in any of these ceramic shows?’”

Perhaps thanks to battles already waged, today’s contemporary artists seem to be relatively free of hang-ups about turning to clay. In addition to planning a coming retrospective of Woodman’s work, David Kordansky recently exhibited a series of large-scale pots by Ruby Neri depicting naively painted female nudes, their breasts in relief and their ponytails doubling as handles. Neri, whose father is the Bay Area sculptor Manuel Neri, trained in painting at U.C.L.A. in the late ’90s and transitioned to making fully ceramic works around 2015. “At first, I didn’t know if I could overcome ceramics’ heavy-handed history,” she says. “And I’d sort of pooh-poohed ceramics in grad school, like a teenager rebelling against their parents, but once I crossed over I realized it allowed me to shed all this debris, like fabricating armatures to put other material on top of, and focus on the enjoyable aspects of making work.” She considers the move a breakthrough, but says she does not feel inclined to push clay to its technical limits, as a traditional ceramist might.

Shechet, who makes sculpture in clay as well as in a variety of other mediums, believes there is indeed still a line between fine art and crafts, and that good art is imbued with conceptual rigor and chases a higher aim. “More than any one material, what interests me is making works that are about being human,” says Shechet, whose partly porcelain sculptures will be installed in New York’s Madison Square Park in September. Though one could argue that, especially when compared with, say, bronze, ceramics, these fragile works that can’t help but retain traces of their maker, possess an inherently human quality.

This philosophy pertains to work by a new generation of ceramic artists as well. Didi Rojas, a recent Pratt graduate, experiments with sculpting clay shoes — color-blocked Balenciaga sneakers, pearl-studded Gucci boots — expressly not made for walking. (Some of her latest creations are currently up at Andrew Edlin Gallery on the Bowery in downtown Manhattan and are about to go on view at Fisher Parrish in Brooklyn.) “Shoes are self-portraits of their wearers,” Rojas says, “and I like the idea of making something attainable through material, one made of the very ground we walk on.” Woody De Othello, who graduated from California College of the Arts last year and is set to have a solo show at Jessica Silverman Gallery in San Francisco this September, also uses clay, with all its associations of functionality, to build nonfunctional versions of everyday objects, such as a warped air vent or a blocky TV remote. He hopes that viewers will see themselves in the pieces, which droop downward as if they’ve had a long day, and uses a high-gloss, almost reflective glaze to heighten the effect. “A lot of times when people look at my sculptures,” Othello says, “they experience a desire to reach out and touch.” Does he allow it? “It’s definitely not allowed.”

Hope, danger, humor coexist in exhibit spotlighting top SF Bay Area artists

By [LOU FANCHER, CORRESPONDENT](#) |

PUBLISHED: September 20, 2018 at 2:09 p.m. | UPDATED: September 21, 2018 at 4:31 a.m.



Woody De Othello's ceramic installation work, "Rest in power, let it not be in vain," reflects on mortality and remembrance. The work is part of the Bay Area Now 8 exhibit at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts.

Turbulent times and hope for the future are both on view in Yerba Buena Center for the Arts' eighth annual "Bay Area Now" exhibit.

The exhibit running through March spotlights 25 artists selected as representative of the style and tenor of the Bay Area arts scene. Artists in all kinds of formats — from paint and ceramics to photography, video, mixed-media installations and more — as well as designers and architects are represented.

A common element of this year's selected artists is the use of debris left behind by institutional disruption and violence — evictions, forced migration, demographically disproportionate incarceration, queerphobia, colonialism, slavery, environmental destruction, and more. Often, the works imply renovation or complete dismantling of existing power structures to create safe places for healing, forging new alliances and building hope for the future.

Marking YBCA's recent mandate to acknowledge environmental and landscape art as well as housing design as important segments of the art scene, and underscoring the increased importance of place and setting in contemporary fine art, co-curators Lucía Sanromán and Susie Kantor sought to include in Bay Area Now for the first time designers and architects who define our cities, homes and workplaces. Accompanied by Martin Strickland, YBCA associate director of public programs, who organized the exhibit, the curators visited Bay Area expanded their search to design studios and architecture offices.

Kantor said many artists respond in their work to physical, political and social environments, making for an organic connection to design and architecture.

From Sofía Córdova's post-Hurricane Maria video/sculpture installation to Constance Hockaday's works inspired by President Franklin D. Roosevelt's fireside chat radio broadcasts to David Bayus' end-of-the-universe dwarf star tended to by a single farmer, the artists make evocative statements about where and how survival is possible.

Rhonda Holberton's installation invites visitors to experience a reiki (hands-on healing) session via virtual reality; Charlie Leese alters perspectives with a bare-bones structure emphasizing the absence of a body within, and Woody De Othello's ceramic sculptures introduce everyday objects as human.

Othello, who lives in West Oakland and creates in a studio in Richmond, often features such things as phones, analog clocks, teapots, waste baskets and handrails in his art. For Bay Area Now, he is represented by a work titled “Rest in power, let it not be in vain,” which includes three oversized candle holders, a 30-inch tall urn and tile base and riser-like pedestals upon which they rest.

“The materials themselves carry marks of the artist’s hand, evoking the labor that goes into their making,” says Kantor. “The installation functions as a memorial both general — speaking to our world at large — and specific, thinking of those in the Bay Area who have recently and unjustly lost their lives.”

Othello, 27, says the work, with its themes of time and mortality, is “self-explanatory,” and intended to start conversations more than convey a particular message. Some will recognize the religious themes evident in the trinity of candle holders, but anyone familiar with candles placed in public settings to mark a passing of life will find an entry point.

“It’s inherent with the times we’ve been living in,” he says, “there are a lot of publicized deaths in the media. It’s a common experience of being human so I don’t value one life over another. The title indicates the nature of remembrance.”

Asked to recall childhood memories and artistic influences, Othello says he always drew — himself as a boxer beating up bullies, for example — before turning to aluminum foil as a primary material.

“I made weird things. My mom always kept the house loaded with aluminum foil to keep my imagination stimulated.” In high school, he worked on the yearbook and made custom T-shirts adorned with text and the flag colors and outline of Haiti.

“My dad was always saying, do what you want to do as long as you put your best foot forward. He instilled in me the idea to give my best energy to whatever I was committed to.”

After earning a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in ceramics at Florida Atlantic University, Othello completed an Master of Fine Arts at California College of the Arts in Oakland. Along the way, affinity for the cartoon-style realism in neo-expressionist painter/printmaker Philip Guston’s work sparked narratives embedded in Othello’s self-described, “slumpy energy, woody-fied” artwork.

Humor rides on the surface of his ceramics, but underneath, deeper reflection touches on everything from society’s over-reliance on technology, to how a person feels on a Monday morning, to the manner in which we pass through the world.



Woody De Othello, at work in his Richmond studio, often uses everyday objects to evoke themes and meanings in his works (Yerba Buena Center for the Arts).

ART & EXHIBITS

Woody De Othello's clay bodies at Jessica Silverman



Charles Desmarais | September 18, 2018 Updated: September 25, 2018, 10:37 am



There is something about ceramic art that seems to prompt in its practitioners an appreciation for the fantastic. And no wonder: The process itself might be magic. Moistened earth, slippery and pliable, mutates in the heat of terrible fire into durable object.

No matter how refined, ceramic objects are still of the earth. They are rocks formed by human hands, magma arrested mid-flow. The sculptor who chips art from stone conquers nature; the ceramist conjures.

Woody De Othello is an Oakland artist with virtuoso skills in the medium of clay and an obvious affinity for the surreal history of ceramic imagery. His work is the subject of an absorbingly loopy exhibition, "Living Room," at Jessica Silverman Gallery through Oct. 27. A major piece is also included in the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts survey "Bay Area Now 8," where, despite its large scale, it might be missed in the dark corner of a kind of corridor space.

From the face jugs of enslaved Africans in the American South, to the work of such Bay Area masters of funk as Robert Arneson and Viola Frey, to the sculpture of Robert Gober — whose plaster pretenders are made to look like porcelain but also like blanched flesh — Othello consumes quirky influence, leaving us with something half-digested.

It has to be that way. One gets the feeling that the full force of the artist's imagination, untethered from reference to everyday objects — a telephone, a fan, a radio on a stool — would be an unbearable experience.

Take the work "All Talk" (2018), a wall-hung, phone-like object. Its crudely numbered buttons and long, curly cord convey familiarity. Mounted on the Spam-pink body, however, a lascivious-looking tongue stands in for a receiver — and that cord, dripping pink and fleshy, seems more intestinal than technological.

Traditional ceramic objects are inherently anthropomorphic. Cups and pots, with their gaping mouths, potbellies and nose-like spouts, have proved irresistible to cartoonists and animators as metaphors for human traits.

Little pitchers, as we know, have big ears. The clay body is the artist's basic material.

A blood-red chair as alive as any figurative sculpture holds a central spot in the exhibition. Embraced in its arms is a brown creature with child-like legs and feet. It's all nose and ears from the waist up, a vessel opening at its top — a pot, a person, a receptacle for sensation.

Also included are several drawings, not closely related to the sculpture formally but perhaps a key to the artist's approach. A work called "Self Support" (2018) might be his declaration of independence from conventional logic.

Woody De Othello: "Living Room": 11 a.m.-6 p.m., Tuesdays-Saturdays. Through Oct. 27. Free. Jessica Silverman Gallery, 488 Ellis St., S.F. 415-255-9508. <https://jessicasilvermangallery.com>

Woody De Othello, "Alone at the Table" (2018)
Photo: Jessica Silverman Gallery



Woody De Othello, "Self Support" (2018)
Photo: Jessica Silverman Gallery



Woody De Othello, *Locked Down*. 2018, ceramic, glaze, carved wood, custom glazed tiles
Overall: 57 x 50 1/2 x 38 1/2".

SAN FRANCISCO

Woody De Othello

JESSICA SILVERMAN GALLERY

488 Ellis Street

September 13–October 27, 2018

A large, wall-mounted, blush telephone with cartoonish keys and a conspicuous fleshy tongue for a receiver is delightfully farcical, while a glazed puce vase with humanoid knees tucked up on the seat of an oversize, wavy, cardinal-red chair carries an air of loneliness. Paired with bright representational paintings, the anthropomorphized household objects rendered in ceramic form in Woody De Othello's debut solo exhibition charm in their absurdity yet remain cryptic in their subject matter.

A recent graduate of San Francisco's California College of the Arts, Othello channels a rich Bay Area legacy of large-scale, colorful ceramic sculptures of people, the kind made by Funk artists such as Viola Frey and Robert Arneson or the Mission School's Ruby Neri. The medium, with its inevitable flaws, is uniquely suited to express the imperfect nature of the human condition. In Othello's sculptures, the body merges with domestic items: Seventeen ears on a vase (*All Hear*, all works 2018) or lightbulbs protruding from a giant nose (*Knows For*) entangle messy human lives with quotidian objects. The visceral sensation provoked by these forms is compounded by ceramic appliances—a fan, a wall heater, and an air conditioner—that nod toward temperature and its psychological associations (the sweat of anxiety, the chill of fear).

Certain works, such as *Locked Down*, suggest an inscrutable narrative. From one vantage, two clunky bare feet appear mid step on pale-yellow tiled stairs turned on their side. An exaggerated, warped padlock sits atop them. Walking around the sculpture reveals a triple-locked blue door with a peephole—a manifestation of exclusion and even hostility. Underneath their slapstick veneers, Othello's intimate works brim with an uneasy vulnerability.

—*Jeanne Gerrity*

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Critics Page

Ceramics and Preservation in the Bay

By [Woody De Othello](#)

The Bay Area has had somewhat of a magnetic pull on me. Primarily because of my interest in ceramics and figurative works, the historic draw weighs heavy. Artists such as Rob Arneson, Viola Frey, and Peter Voukos helped to formulate my early understanding of the potential of what clay could become, and opened my eyes to the various approaches and applications of the medium. I felt the influence of the Mission School artists as an undergrad, encountering Barry McGee's work at the Margulies Collection in Miami. I remember being completely enamored with the cartoony illustrative appearance of his work. This sparked an interest to delve deeper into other Bay Area artists and allowed me to discover folks such as Chris Johanson, Margaret Kilgallen and Ruby Neri.

This pull that the Bay Area had on me was solidified at the National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts (NCECA) conferences held in Houston and Milwaukee in 2013 and 2014. It was there that I became aware of the ceramics program at the California College of the Arts (CCA), taking note of the outstanding work being produced by graduate and undergraduate students Victoria Jang and Yeon Joo Lee. Another pull to the Bay was the obsession I had with Berkeley-based rapper Lil B, whose demeanor and anomaly to hip hop encapsulates the aura of the free speech movement, an open-mindedness and freedom that I have learned is synonymous with the Bay Area. I knew that I wanted to be a part of this energy, and pursuing a graduate degree at CCA was the way I inserted myself into the scene here. In choosing CCA for graduate studies I received an extension of the history tied to the California Clay Movement, studying under Nathan Lynch, who was a student of Ken Price and Ron Nagle, and working with Arthur Gonzalez, who studied under Robert Arneson and Manuel Neri while at UC Davis. The reputation and legacy is still vibrant on the historic Oakland campus where the arts and crafts formerly attached to the CCA name remain poignant. Especially in the Noni Eccles Treadwell Ceramic Arts Center, the design of which was guided by Viola Frey, one can literally see remnants of previous years as the "kiln gods" still hover over numerous gas kilns and a huge graveyard of sculptures left behind make up the motif that consumes the entire south-facing window on both the top and bottom floors of the building.

Flash forward two years since my move to the Bay, and I cannot say for sure if the Bay Area art scene has anything distinctive about it as, I've only lived in Miami prior. But what I can say about the Bay Area is that there are many places and people for support and there's a persistent mentality despite the monetary challenges we all face living here. The spaces range from underground spaces managed by artists that include UFO Gallery, City Limits, Nook Gallery, Quality, Aggregate Space Gallery, CTRL+SHIFT, and R/SF projects, to more commercial spaces that have national and international draw such as Ratio 3, Jessica Silverman Gallery, Et Al, Capital Gallery, Altman Siegel Gallery, Alter Space, Guerrero Gallery, Johansson Projects, and so much more. The breadth of discourse here and openness to engagement from different perspectives is what I can attest to. There is a strong social engagement in the works and exhibitions being produced, which is tied to the radical legacy of the Bay Area. It's political, it's progressive, and it's queer.

I am not sure what the future holds for the Bay Area. It is increasingly a challenge to make ends meet, as well as a struggle for artists to be able to afford both rent and a studio, with enough time between jobs to create. Despite this, I do feel it is an exciting time to be in the Bay. It's active, vibrant, and constantly reassuring to be surrounded by people who are finding a way to survive here

Contributor

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WOODY DE OTHELLO is an artist currently
residing and working in the Bay Area.

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