

ARTFORUM

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CRITICS' PICKS

by Jeanne Gerrity



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

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.