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Gravity at Play: Woody De Othello

by Chiara Moioli



Woody De Othello: Breathing Room installation view at San Jose Museum of Art, 2019-2020

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)

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.

[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