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### WOODY DE OTHELLO'S EXTRAORDINARY MONUMENTS TO THE MUNDANE

by Anna Furman



Credit Francesca Tamse

Ahead of his inclusion in this year's Whitney Biennial, the emerging sculptor reflects on the spiritual power of domestic spaces.

"Home holds a lot of psychic energy," says the artist Woody De Othello, who's not referring to the shelter-in-place orders of recent history or to his apartment in Oakland, Calif., but to the concept itself. Domestic scenes recur in much of his work: In brightly colored bronze and ceramic sculptures, he reimagines ordinary household objects — a remote control, faucets — as bulbous, biomorphic forms, some with eyes and ears. As if the result of a solo game of exquisite corpse, these composite creatures are oddly proportioned and at turns alluring and unsettling. Thus, Othello highlights the thrum of spirituality he finds in everyday environments.

He began to combine figurative and nonfigurative elements in his work as a graduate student at California College of the Arts in San Francisco (where he met his West Coast gallerist, Jessica Silverman, in his first year during an open studio day). Previously, he had created life-size, mannequin-like pieces and installed them in unexpected neighborhood spots: the bodega or a barbershop. But then he began thinking about individual limbs and fragmented body parts that could stand alone in a gallery space, and possibly open his work to a wider range of interpretations. "Then the viewer becomes the figure," he says. "You bring your own experience and

your own evidence to the work. Though there are a lot of visual cues to both guide and complicate that.” He adds, “In a lot of my work, there’s a confrontation of self. I’m a Gemini; I’ve got multiple sides to my personality.”

At 30, Othello has already rapidly ascended in the art world. In 2019, at Art Basel Miami Beach — a sort of homecoming, as the artist was raised in Miami by Haitian immigrant parents — his giant sculpture of an electric yellow box fan received major attention. (His work has since been added to the permanent collections of the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, D.C., and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.) Last month, at Frieze Los Angeles, his elegant 10-foot installation of interlocking water spigots resembling a tangle of blue snakes, or possibly intestines, was displayed at the entrance to the fair. Next month, he’ll debut his most significant project yet: five ceramic vessels with cartoonish hands perched atop thick, glossy tables and stools, his contribution to the Whitney Biennial.

On a crisp Sunday morning in February, Othello popped into his studio, which is lined with corrugated aluminum panels and located next to a railroad track. It’s a peaceful place, until a blaring train or his neighbor, who is a welder, breaks the silence. While his dog napped in a patch of sun, he answered T’s Artist’s Questionnaire.

### **What do you usually wear to work?**

I’ve been wearing Carhartt cargo pants and graphic T-shirts. Adidas or New Balance sneakers with Dr. Scholl’s support inserts because I do a lot of standing and walking back and forth. It’s been cold here recently, so I have an orange woven Brain Dead beanie. Studio clothes are important. The pants should fit a certain way and I have to make sure I’m warm, and I don’t like them to be too dirty. They’re definitely studio clothes, but they’re still well kept.

### **What is your day like?**

I wake up, make coffee, take my dog, Mia, on a walk and try to head to the studio between 9 and 10 o’clock. When I’m making work, things happen on a somewhat subconscious level. I’m not thinking much; I’m just letting the work decide what needs to happen. It’s a crazy head space. I always leave at 4 to work out. I’m into CrossFit — it’s a good hour of sweating that gets my heart rate jacked up. I don’t even have to think about it. I just tap in, tap out. I’m a more effective human, a calmer human, when I do those workouts. I use my watch to track my fitness and how much energy I’m putting out. This week, I walked 35 miles and my active time was 7 hours 1 minute. If I have more work to do, if I’m in the crunch of something, I’ll go back into the studio after dinner.

### **Is there a meal you eat on repeat when you’re working?**

It varies. I’m making black bean patties tonight for dinner. The other night it was shrimp biryani. The studio is kind of in a food vacuum, so I always bring my own

lunch — usually leftovers. I've been using a pressure cooker and making things in bulk to parcel out. Also, I love juicing.

### **What's the first piece of art you ever made?**

I was young, maybe third or fourth grade. I used to draw myself with colored pencils as a character from the video game Ready 2 Rumble Boxing. I was one of the boxers, beating up people who bullied and made fun of me. Years earlier, in kindergarten, I would make aluminum foil cities with people and buildings and other little things. I remember being devastated when my grandmother threw them away; I'd developed a strong attachment to some of the characters. They were part of the story. I was influenced by cartoons like "Dragon Ball Z" (1989) and "Yu-Gi-Oh!" (2000). "Static Shock" (2000) — about a teenager who had magnetic power, and the only Black superhero — was my favorite.

### **What's the first work you ever sold? For how much?**

In high school, I used to make custom T-shirts from drawings using a combination of heat transfer and fabric paint. For Haitian Flag Day, I'd sell them for maybe \$30 or \$40.

### **When you start a new piece, where do you begin? What's the first step?**

Things start off with a title or an intention or an energy that I'm trying to put into the work. I like drawing and writing, drawing and writing. I write how I'm feeling — and if I'm listening to a song or hear a catchphrase I like, I'll jot it down. If I'm reading a heavy text, it helps to write notes with the page number so I can go back to the section and have an aha moment. Having a relationship with my sketchbook is important. It helps me think about the type of figures or emotions that live adjacent to the sculptures.

### **What music do you play when you're making art?**

When I was making work for the biennial, I was listening to a lot of jazz, like Horace Silver's album "Song for My Father" (1965), and a lot of Alice Coltrane and Donald Byrd. That kind of spiritual music: spacey, huge and universal but intimate. There's this Afrofuturist wave of jazz that's about peace and existence — it's beautiful and nuanced and complicated. I was trying to harness some of that energy.

### **What are you reading right now?**

Recently, I read "Of Water and the Spirit" (1995) by Malidoma Patrice Somé, about a shaman who was abducted and spent time in a Christian mission that he escapes. I also enjoyed the book "Vigilant Things" (2011) by David T. Doris. It's about the Yoruba practice of making impromptu sculptures to help protect things — spiritual objects composed of straws from a broom, a chewed-up ear of corn, an old shoe. The Yoruba term àṣẹ, which means the power or will to make things happen, is the

title of this collection of sculptures I'm finishing.

**What's the weirdest object in your studio?**

A ceramic bust named Patty. She's named after mashed potato patties.

**How many assistants do you have?**

Two. They're necessary to make the work happen. In the last couple of years, I've been doing larger, more ambitious things. They both have ceramics backgrounds.

**How do you know when you're done?**

I don't. If you leave something around me long enough, it's going to get reglazed. It's done when it leaves the studio.