

# ARTSY

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### WOODY DE OTHELLO IMBUES LIFE INTO HIS SCULPTURES OF EVERYDAY OBJECTS

by Jaelynn Walls



Woody De Othello, installation view of “Looking In” at Jessica Silverman, 2021. Photo by Phillip Maisel. Courtesy of the artist and Jessica Silverman, San Francisco.

“When I touched clay, everything just made sense,” said Woody De Othello, welcoming me into his large studio in Richmond, California. Located in an aluminum-paneled structure behind a large storage facility, the space carries an ever-present ambiance with the sound of passing trains.

De Othello is known for his monumental ceramic and bronze constructions that resemble everyday objects—rotary telephones, faucets, stools, and remote controls. All of these items are reimaged as bulging, sometimes anthropomorphic, sculptures.

“Clay is a material that has a life of its own, so every time you work with it, based on the environmental conditions going on outside—your emotional space, your physical space—it picks up on all of that,” De Othello said. “I like it as a material, I like how challenging it is. But it’s diverse and capable of doing so much.”

Originally from Miami, De Othello received his MFA in 2017 from the California College of Arts in San Francisco. He has since garnered serious attention in the Bay Area, where De Othello is now based, and has had solo exhibitions at Jessica Silverman in San Francisco and the San Jose Museum of Art. In 2018, De Othello was included in the triennial exhibition “Bay Area Now 8” at Yerba Buena Center for

the Arts (YBCA) in San Francisco.

His growing acclaim has extended to the east coast with solo presentations at Art Basel in Miami Beach and at Karma in New York. He has also exhibited internationally in group exhibitions at T293 in Rome and Hayward Gallery in London. Most recently, De Othello was tapped for the upcoming 2022 Whitney Biennial. His installation will feature five ceramic vessels with hands emerging sporadically from their sides, perched atop molded tables and stools.

De Othello's works reflect a consistent interest in instilling life into seemingly mundane objects. During his undergraduate studies, this was primarily channeled through painting and printmaking, but during his graduate studies, De Othello turned to ceramics. He first attempted to draw on clay—an experiment that led him to what is now the center of his practice.

When first encountering De Othello's sculptures, I was struck by their larger-than-life stature. *Fountain* (2021), his nearly ten-foot-tall depiction of bright orange, intertwining faucets posits not only the power of water and its place in the world, but also the human-like nature of the objects around us. In De Othello's hands, spigots resemble towering bodies bent elegantly forward. Giving these objects such concentrated attention within his works bestows them a figurative quality, each object a recurring character in a familiar cast.

“Instead of having the presence of the figure in the space, what if the emotional presence of the figure existed in another way?” De Othello asked. What if the telephone held the anxiety we feel while answering calls, his works seemed to inquire. What if the stools we sat on exuded our tiredness? These common items are a ubiquitous part of our lives, riddled with connotations, yet, absent of our emotions. “These objects have anthropomorphic qualities,” De Othello said. “Universality is important to me...It makes sense to make monuments to clocks or phones.”

From Salvador Dalí's clocks, to Marcel Duchamp's urinals, to Felix Gonzalez-Torres' candies, artists have long engaged with quotidian items as a way of finding meaning in everyday life. Encountering these objects in art spaces allows for a reconsideration of the seemingly pedestrian. “I do enjoy the impetus in artists like Dalí and Magritte's works to subvert the every day, but intuition and art history work together,” De Othello said of this lineage. “Making is not an individual experience. Making is looking at art, looking at people you could potentially be in alignment with. There's connection and inspiration.”

We stepped into a small storage room off of his studio, where maquettes of the artist's larger works lined a nearby shelf. One of the sculptures closely resembles a face jug—a style of vessel credited to enslaved communities of the Edgefield District of South Carolina. In fact, there were several other vessels in the same style present.

Recently, De Othello's work has been informed by his interests and research in precolonial beliefs as well as postcolonial theory on the psychological impact of racism on the colonized. De Othello links his vessels in particular to *nkisi*—a type of Central African object or container inhabited by a spirit. "I've been learning more about what existence was like outside of colonialism and trying to make sense of being a first-generation American," said De Othello, who was raised by Haitian immigrant parents. "I don't know that much history about Haiti, about enslaved people. As I've gotten older, I've become more curious. I find that the intuitive work I've been doing has actually been connected to some of the art I've found through this process. I made these vessels on some sort of intuition and then learned about face jugs."

Often, alongside his sculptures, De Othello exhibits brightly colored paintings exploring many of the figurative themes of his three-dimensional work. In "Living Room," his 2018 solo show at Jessica Silverman, the artist's paintings depicted crowds in pastel hues and shades of deep purple, their limbs exaggerated and monochromatic as they covered their faces with their hands. "Drawing has been a part of my life for a minute. As a kid, that's how I was able to cope with everything going on in my life," De Othello said. "I remember drawing in elementary school to communicate or express my feelings in a way that made sense to me." This interest in drawing extended to a studied painting practice during his graduate program. That natural progression, he said, occurred through attempts to see how different objects could be interpreted through different media.

In terms of the next steps in his career, De Othello cited collaboration as a serious point of interest. "My friend Imari Mubarak (Cheflee) and I have collaborated on some unique sounds for the Wisconsin show," De Othello said, referencing his current solo exhibition "Hope Omens" at John Michael Kohler Arts Space in Sheboygan. "[Cheflee] made a soundscape for that show. I feel like the sonic marriage between his work and the sculptures felt good. Even outside of art, collaboration is important. Community is going on hikes with people, taking breaks from the studio, being a person."

When I asked about upcoming projects, De Othello chuckled and shared, "I'm one of those types of people who don't think too far ahead, you know? It doesn't happen until it happens, right?" He added, "Seeing this Whitney installation fully actualized is next. I'm slated to do a solo show with Karma in New York later this year, and I'm just now starting to open my mind to it."