

WOODY DE OHELLO: JOHN MICHAEL KOHLER  
ARTS CENTER

by Jenny Harris



Woody De Othello, *Closed Reflection*, 2021, ceramic, glaze, red oak.  
Installation view.

For his solo exhibition “Hope Omens,” Woody De Othello has transformed John Michael Kohler’s Victorian Italianate parlor home into a sensuous, colorful sanctuary. Seventeen vessels displayed on custom pedestals—almost all ceramic—are installed across six rooms with brightly painted walls: the first a French blue and the rest a glowing marigold. The sculptures are anthropomorphic forms featuring a smattering of bodily appendages. Othello made them from molds he produced during his Kohler Arts Center arts/industry pottery residency, which provided him unusual access to the industrial-scale kilns (and high-quality clays and glazes) of the Kohler Company, a manufacturing firm best known for the production of porcelain bathroom fixtures such as sinks, bathtubs, and toilets. Othello is a ceramicist who places experimentation with materials and processes at the heart of his practice, so the residency was a natural fit.

The works and their carefully considered installation insist on an awareness of one’s body as a sensory vessel, and of the clay vessels themselves as animate, even spiritual things. As the title of the show suggests, these corporeal objects are infused with a prophetic force that radiates through space. With their glossy, iridescent, and vivid glazes, their surfaces are visually striking. Yet their fleshy protrusions—lips, ears, noses, and hands—assert other modes of sensual consumption. Sometimes Othello evokes nonvisual senses through the inclusion of

actual or sculpted objects. In *Starting Off* (all works 2021), for example, the exterior forms—a coffee mug and the two hands cupping it—evoke both taste and touch, while the interior cavity, filled with partially burned wax candles, emits an imaginary smell. Elsewhere, Othello executes this effect by displacing body parts: In *Sealed*, a pair of side-by-side ears perched above a set of pursed lips substitute sound for sight. In *Openness*, hands resemble feet, arms become legs, and the head itself is absent, implied only by the inclusion of a pair of ceramic headphones perched as if slung over a shoulder.

While many of the sculptures explicitly refer to intimate forms of tactile embrace—hands clasp other hands or caress the surface of the vessel body—all of them imply tactility through their irregularly modeled surfaces, indexes of the artist working the clay. That Othello foregrounds such haptic qualities invites questions about his relationship to Kohler’s industrial facilities: What happens when an artist who relishes the unpredictable, back-and-forth interface between artist body and clay body encounters processes designed to streamline mass production and minimize irregularity?

During his residency, Othello experimented for the first time with slip casting, a technique in which liquefied clay (in this case, vitreous china) is poured into a plaster mold and left to form a thin, skin-like layer, the cast. The method can be seen in just three of the works included in the exhibition: the sculptural pedestals comprised of brick-like forms stacked, somewhat precariously, as in a game of Jenga. Though each sculpture comprises a pedestal and a vessel, these elements are made separately. Here, the three slip-cast bases appear texturally distinct: Their surfaces are smoother and more viscous, their color more uniform. When his residency was cut short because of the pandemic, Othello returned to Oakland, California, where he lives. There, he made almost all of the works for the exhibition by abandoning the slip-casting technique, returning to the use of stone clay, and converting the Kohler molds into press molds (in which the clay is pushed into the mold rather than poured), his choices favoring flexibility, uncertainty, and the variation of both materials and process.

While the surfaces of Othello’s works draw attention to the interface between artist and material, their installation insists on linking the space of the artwork to that of the viewer. Extending the immersive qualities of the wall paint and sculpted pedestals, Othello commissioned Cheflee, an Oakland-based musician, to compose a soothing soundscape inspired by the works. The score’s overlapping tracks are punctuated by a range of soft, electronically mixed, ASMR-like sounds—slow breathing, static crackling, birds chirping, and paper rustling—some of which emanate from the vessels themselves. In the opening gallery, one such work rests on a wooden bench-cum-pedestal, its sounds beckoning the viewer beside it to an intimate tête-à-tête. Othello’s efforts to activate the interiors of his works reflect his fascination with Central African nkisi—objects imbued with spiritual forces and valued for their healing properties. They likewise point to the exhibition’s larger aim to stage a constellation of talismanic objects—what the artist calls “hope omens”—that activate bodies through the sensuous and soothing properties of worked clay.