

WOODY DE OTHELLO, 2021

THE RESTLESS SCULPTURE OF WOODY DE OTHELLO

by Ricky Swallow

Pyrometric cones are essential tools in any ceramicist's studio: they assure one's kiln is hitting the required temperature for the clay body being used. These tiny ceramic cones are loaded into the kiln with one's work, stubbed into a snake of clay, and positioned in front of the kiln's peephole. When they come out, the cones droop and curl to varying degrees, vitrified like comical teeth fused into a new form. Ceramicists tend to keep these around. They populate windowsills or kiln tops in the studio as artifacts of a continually renewed process.

A cone's "wonk" is a good sign. Its measured slump is its most defining and useful characteristic. Woody De Othello's recent ceramic sculptures remind me of this willful slump (or funk!) whereby an object's gait becomes an essential part of its physical and conceptual energy: a positive indicator of things being as they should.

In Othello's hands, familiar domestic forms wane and teeter under their own weight and transformation. The legs of the integrated ceramic stools that support many of these forms also have a warble. They follow the type of line work usually displayed in preparatory drawings for sculptures: here the immediacy of translating one's idea into form has been relayed into the slower practice of sculpture. This specific type of malleability becomes a structural tool informing much of Othello's objects. Looking at his sculptures invites the viewer to sway and surge along with the forms, to experience their expression, their weight, their tactile color, and the gloss of their surface.

They are very active things.

Bouncing between a few distinct families of forms, Othello creates works in which a subject's cohesiveness is distorted to varying degrees. His reference objects include clocks, faucets, jugs, telephones, and radiators. These objects are not just familiar from our own sustaining interiors—they are the iconic mainstays of an ever-cycling still life tradition.

Othello's ceramic clocks are essentially compositional studies. Reorganizing the elements required to tell the time, he scatters the numbers, or piles them at the bottom ledge of anthropomorphic dials. The extremity of their distortion and soupy glaze is fact-checked by the inclusion of working clock hands installed off-center, and often in pairs on the object's surface. This odd combination of fact and funk brings the sculpture back to the life of operation. A hanging sculpture of a clock tells the time and humorously acknowledges the inescapable refrain of the "functional"

inherent in the ceramic tradition.

In other new sculptures from 2019, metallic glazed faucets twist and curl with stage fright. Retreating from any recognizable use, these faucets hang from the wall, detached from the moorings of their ceramic basins. The faucets appear to be the typical kind found on mess sinks, in older houses, or in civic locations. A rudimentary cross-handled design with a stubborn familiarity—the picture one may have in one’s mind when I say “faucet.” An artist working in clay spends so much time at the sink. So many sink trips occur daily in an attempt to remove clay from hands, under nails, and off arms, that it’s not surprising Othello has locked in on them as subjects. Resembling playful amulets, they give real expression to the most mundane of forms with a Gustonian candor. Like Othello’s radiators and fans, the promise of relief or comfort is replaced with the sculptural expression of that expectancy.

There is also a playful relationship to ideas of “efficiency” in many of Othello’s sculptures. More often than not, the subjects that he chooses to model in clay are either dated, modest, or ineffective at providing the service they embody. Much like the space heater, hot plate, or desk fan depicted by Vija Celmins in early paintings from her Venice studio, the wall registers, AC units, fans, and wall lamps that populate Othello’s exhibitions all seem to be drawn from the smaller rooms in which their service is normally enlisted. There’s a definitive limit to the service these compact helpers provide: as abbreviated versions of integrated systems, the comfort they provide is often more symbolic. They present as personal effects—leftovers that are reanimated by the artist’s sculptural and emotional concerns. It’s interesting to think of air and heat literally blasting through their crudely cut grilles and hollowed forms during the clay firing process. As finished forms they entreat our company, encouraging a type of personal exchange with the viewer that seems both rooted in their functional counterparts and amplified by their slightly biomorphic leanings.

The best sculpture succeeds in ensnaring its audience.

Othello’s larger-than-life bronze sculpture *Cool Composition* (2019) enlarges a classic box fan to an eight-foot tall marigold-yellow form that buckles and torques under the weight of the artist’s proposition. Its whole function is basically reversed: here the fan component reads and radiates more like a sun than a cooling nucleus. The grille openings normally scaled to impede a finger now permit a whole hand—an entire arm can pass through it, yet there is nothing menacing about this form. More than a monstrosity, it reads like a monument to the thing’s humble ubiquity, its necessity. It’s a diagram one can walk around.

Part of this object’s success is that it bears the characteristics of Othello’s smaller works. It hasn’t traded its soul for the trappings of enlarged sculptural production. The process of its making is still physically felt, and like all Othello’s work, one becomes a guest in its company. It’s hard not to imagine a gliding hand carving its way across the surface apertures, a body’s pressure applied to create the required

distortion to the fan's housing. The symbolic circulation implied by the object allows it to become a type of "place"—its physical footprint encourages congregation. Othello's larger objects are like public markers or meeting places, the scale and pull of which bring people together. The artist's curiosity about his subjects extends outward, encouraging both personal and public rituals. Mass-produced things are also mass-experienced things.

Othello's vessels evoke even more extreme transformative effects than his more utilitarian forms. This ongoing series references the history of the "face jug," which are some of the most compelling and mysterious craft forms produced in America. Dating back to the mid-1800s, the first face jugs were created by enslaved African artisans producing ceramic wares on plantations in South Carolina. Thrown on the potter's wheel with locally dug clay, the pots have masklike features integrated into their surface, with eyes and teeth articulated through the use of lighter slip glazing (or unglazed elements) against the darker glazed clay body. The face jug's spout rises from the top of the head, giving functionality to the vessels. It is unclear whether carrying water was the sole function of the face jugs. It is widely speculated that they held a spiritual meaning and were utilized in burial rituals. They are intensely expressive things and have an integrity which is lacking in the whimsical versions produced by white potters that followed.

As a Black artist using clay as his primary medium, Othello approaches the face jug with reverence and innovation. *Faceless Face Jug* (2016) depicts a giant, swollen version of a face jug, rising from a ceramic stool and finished in a deep purple glaze. Its only facial features are prominent ears and lumpy protrusions, which flank the spout of the bottle. It seems a fitting monument to the potters responsible for the first face jugs, anonymous and uncredited in their endeavors, yet perpetually influential in their forms. What could be interpreted as a head nursing injury can also be seen as one in mid-transformation. This idea is supported by the forms of Othello's subsequent vessels, which sprout a cacophony of facial features, hands, and limbs. One could see the face jug as a kind of standard that the artist episodically returns to with license to improvise, expand upon, and mess with endlessly. A collection of ears populate one jug (*All Hear*, 2018); and hands extend from many others, sometimes praying, sometimes caressing (*Sometimes spending too much time alone leads to loneliness*, 2018)—in certain works, they seem to actively contort the body that they bloom from. A common feeling across the series is a burgeoning agency that contradicts the stasis of the jugs, all of which are stationed on furniture of the artist's design. These integrated furniture stands allow Othello to locate his subjects, narratively speaking, and to prevent the sculpture's placement atop existing furniture once it leaves the gallery. The pieces therefore contend with their own incorporation into interior decor: the stools which ground them are assured their own standing room.

Othello's creations have a palpable autonomy. We recognize the labor in their fabrication, yet they also appear self-directed as they stretch out and jostle for space in the room. They heave and breathe and emit actual air. As sculptures, they overwhelm the static nature of their earthen medium, existing in a state of positive impatience.