

WWWW, WOODY DE OTHELLO

Woody de Othello (b. 1991 Miami, Florida) works in paint and clay. His large, ceramic sculptures transform the shapes of outmoded technologies like rotary phones, typewriters, and swamp coolers into anthropomorphic “beings” with high-gloss surfaces upon which viewers might reflect their own memories and emotions.

de Othello moved to the Bay Area in 2014 as an MFA student at California College of the Arts. In five short years, he has graduated, joined the roster at Jessica Silverman Gallery, been selected for Yerba Buena Center for the Art’s 2018 Bay Area Now exhibition, and installed three bronze statues in the International Terminal at SFO. His first solo show in New York opened on June 27, 2019, at Karma Gallery, and his first solo museum presentation will be on view November 2019 through April 2020 at the San Jose Museum of Art.

Over the course of a studio visit in Richmond, Frieze’s debut weekend in Los Angeles, and a Google doc, de Othello and Megan Steinman, independent curator and director of The Underground Museum, dug into the dimensions of de Othello’s work. Inspired by the W in Woody’s first name, the questions were formed by the classic interrogatory sequence of who, what, why, where, and how.

WHAT

Megan Steinman: Let’s talk about clay. It’s an incredible material to work with: totally temperamental, and reveals every touch.

Clay is having a resurgence in functional design and sculpture. How did you come to this medium, and what makes you continue with it?

What should we know about clay?

Woody de Othello: Not to come across as cheesy or anything, but clay really speaks to my spirit. I feel like it connects me to my ancestors. In undergrad I took a hand-building elective by chance, and the physical sensations I had when pinching and pressing the clay, observing how my hand immediately affected the material...I remember having this overwhelming feeling that everything I needed to know about my past and future was held in the clay. Since that day I’ve never looked back. Clay is one of the most important things that drives me forward.

I think that clay is a very trying material, it humbles you, makes you slow down and think. It has its own life force and is very reactionary to the atmosphere—not only environmental factors, but what you bring to it. Sometimes I’m in awe at how revealing it is, how it holds its own energy. At other times it’s as if I’m an alchemist, conjuring and manipulating an object from a lump of nothing into something that has a presence.

WHEN

MS: Your sculptures make me think of the novel *Roadside Picnic* by Arkady and Boris Strugatsky (which later became the basis for Andrei Tarkovsky’s sci-fi classic *Stalker*). In the novel, extraterrestrials have visited Earth and left behind a toxic wasteland that holds clues to their existence in the form of alien tools and technology, but the beings themselves are long gone. There’s a haunting that surrounds the archeological digs and rogue looting of this site where a crew of inter-planetary travelers made, in essence, a pit-stop. The heart of the novel is about the ephemera of life: the collections of stuff and situations that mark our own time on Earth.

Could we hover in this thinking for a moment? All good science fiction is really about the conditions in which it was created. Likewise, your sculptures and sculpted environments contain found objects, and they function as found objects themselves. From where or when do your objects come? Where is their origin, and where do they belong? I also wonder what your sculptures are meant to tell us about our current time and technology? Archeologically speaking, what can we learn from them?

WdO: I have been attempting to pin down some internal logic to the aspects of the origin, the time referenced, the type of objects that I choose to manipulate, and why, and there are several methodologies and processes that I can point to.

I think about the phenomenology of objects, why we choose the objects that inhabit our most intimate spaces and what happens if these objects begin to take on some of the stresses and psychology of their owners. In this climate, it may be easier to be empathetic towards something inanimate versus another human, I like to think that my works call attention to that.

There's also the logic of labor in the work, thinking about how it feels to be overworked and underpaid, just getting by, month by month, and the amount of debt that forces a lot of us to work to ensure tomorrow. This is something I observed growing up, and am also experiencing now. The idea of security is dead, all of us are living precariously, and I try to infuse this energy into the objects. Formally, a lot of my work does have this slumpy, sunken, almost bent, tired feeling, this all is about exhaustion. Part of me is hopeful that the objects I create can act as a placeholder for all these negative emotions, so I don't have to live with them in my own life. I'm starting to think of them as a contemporary version of Nkisi dolls, cathartic.

The types of objects I like to reference can be considered obsolete or dead. This how ideas of memento mori manifest. We don't like to be in the past because of what history holds, we're stuck on trying to move forward. I think these objects are a subtle jab, like if you can remember this old landline phone and how it preceded the iPhone, why can't you make a connection with other notions that have happened historically?

I like the tension that ceramics conjures materially, there's always a tension with precious objects that might fall over. I think that makes ceramics very human.

WHERE

MS: In addition to galleries and museums, you've exhibited in apartments, hotel rooms, and San Francisco International Airport. How does each environment affect your objects?

With "where" in mind, let's also talk about the Bay Area. We always hear about artists and art collectives leaving, it's all true, but there are many who stay. You seem to have created a very supportive network for your practice. Why did you choose the Bay Area, and why do you stay?

If there was something that the city could provide for its artists, what would that be? Where should artists gather for communing, collaborating, commiserating and generally keeping the Bay Area creative together?

WdO: Textures like carpeting, wood flooring, molding, and colored walls add their qualities to the work and give it a different type of spirit—it's context that helps situate the work within a narrative. I do get more excited to show in a unique space like an apartment or a hotel room because it becomes a response and collaboration that way.

In regards to moving to the Bay, CCA was the first pull for me. In undergrad I would go to ceramics conferences, and when I looked at the juried student exhibitions, I was always drawn to the work coming out of CCA. Upon further investigation I was really attracted to how interdisciplinary the department was, it seemed like the ceramics department was pushing the material in ways I wasn't necessarily allowed to in the past. Mixed media and exploration were encouraged.

I stay here for the support and pace of life. Working with Jessica Silverman is a huge reason to stay, and things kind of fell into place. Upon graduating I received a residency at one of CCA's College Avenue galleries and one of my friends asked me to split an old car shop in Richmond[as a studio]. I also have a pretty sweet deal on rent, which really helps. I can really get behind the politics here and the advocacy for mental welfare and self-care, and being able to drive about an hour away to escape the city is pretty perfect. Can't complain the slightest amount.

In terms of something the city can provide, not only for artists but for a lot of people here in the Bay, is cheaper rent. I'm sure that's not possible, but rent can't continue to increase without wages going up as well. That's the scary part about living here, but it's a problem that any city has these days.

The Bay is small enough that whenever you go out you're likely to run into someone you know, which is nice. I'm part of a group of artists into sports, so we meet up to watch a game somewhere. Also you'll run into folks going to shows and supporting local musicians. Like any other city, openings are the primary places where creatives link up.

WHO

MS: When you create an object whose use value requires another human to complete its transaction—I'm thinking here of your phones, doors, or the Genie Pot Neti Pot with a genie finger that both selects you for wishes and clears your nose—is there someone you imagine on the other end? Someone you'd like to answer that phone or door? Someone who actually inhabits the rooms and worlds you create?

WdO: I've been thinking about this idea of reflection, both on a metaphorical level and on a very formal level. I've been thinking about the glaze and surfaces as a way to explore this idea of reflection in the works, to literally see yourself in them. I do feel the viewer is necessary to complete the works. I think one of the things that drives me to use these everyday items is for viewers to assess their own relationship to these objects. I've always adored surrealism for this reason, because it challenges the everyday.

The idea behind the a/c unit, space heaters, and fans is really one that ties to this idea of breath, it's just a subtle, indirect way to think about something we probably take for granted. The neti pot was actually the first iteration of this thought process, thinking about my relationship to allergies and taking for granted all the times I'm able to properly breathe through both nostrils.

The phones follow a similar logic. The first iteration entitled I Can See You, But I Don't Hear You acknowledges that there is a person on the other line. My thought was of a bill collector—at the time I was getting a lot of spam calls about student loan forgiveness and lower rates—but it's still this dialogue with oneself: Do I pick up and confront this, or do I choose to ignore it? The doors pertain to access on a personal level. A lot of sculptures I make that reference entry relate to a lack of access, being closed off, the other isn't too essential but the why one does not have access to it is.

I think it all ties back to this confrontation, this reflection of oneself.

WHY

MS: Following is a list of artists who seem to orbit your practice:-

Robert Gober
Philip Guston
Francis Bacon
Jenny Saville
Simone Leigh
Salvador Dali
Kenny Scharf
David Hammons.

This is not to say that any of the artists on the list is a one-to-one comparison; rather, elements of each of their practices, their own whys and hows, form a mound of clay ready for you to sculpt into your own vision.

Would you agree with this list, and why? Any additions you'd like to make, and why?

If you had a dream three-person group show, who else would be in it, and why?

WdO: Yeah, this is spot on. I would add some painters, like Jacob Lawrence, Robert Colescott, and probably Edward Burra. I think a trait all these artists share is a meditation on the mundane, transforming things that we take for granted, and providing a lens to question, rethink, and reimagine. I'm primarily a fan of Guston and Jacob Lawrence because of their styles, the artist's hand is so prevalent in the work, whenever you encounter their work it's undeniably their work. I remember first encountering a Guston painting and feeling his presence, it was as if he just walked away and was about to come back to the canvas to work some more. I think Robert Gober is very humorous, but in the humor holds a lot of pain and seriousness, it's a delicate balance.

For the three-person show, I'd definitely want to be in one with Lawrence and Guston. They can occupy the wall space, and I can make sculptures in response to the wall works, maybe even create an installation for the works to exist in. I also describe their works as this social realism, I think that's where I situate myself, the zone of being very human, very vulnerable and emotional.

HOW

MS: How are you? It's been some time since we saw each other last, so I'd really love to know!

WdO: I've been excellent. This is probably the most clear-headed and focused I've ever been. It's a really busy but exciting time.

I've also been doing a lot of personal work and growth, too. I've been making space to be heard, to be a bit more vulnerable and emotional which has been significant for me. It's really showing in the new work. This is probably the most excited I've been in the studio, and I'm really looking forward to seeing these new sculptures out in the universe!