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Woody De Othello's clay bodies at Jessica Silverman

By Charles Desmarais

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Woody De Othello, "Alone at the Table" (2018)
Photo: Jessica Silverman Gallery

There is something about ceramic art that seems to prompt in its practitioners an appreciation for the fantastic. And no wonder: The process itself might be magic. Moistened earth, slippery and pliable, mutates in the heat of terrible fire into durable object.

No matter how refined, ceramic objects are still of the earth. They are rocks formed by human hands, magma arrested mid-flow. The sculptor who chips art from stone conquers nature; the ceramist conjures.

Woody De Othello is an Oakland artist with virtuoso skills in the medium of clay and an obvious affinity for the surreal history of ceramic imagery. His work is the subject of an absorbingly loopy exhibition, "Living Room," at Jessica Silverman Gallery through Oct. 27. A major piece is also included in the Yerba Buena

Center for the Arts survey "Bay Area Now 8," where, despite its large scale, it might be missed in the dark corner of a kind of corridor space.



Woody De Othello, "All Talk" (2018)
Photo: Jessica Silverman Gallery

From the face jugs of enslaved Africans in the American South, to the work of such Bay Area masters of funk as Robert Arneson and Viola Frey, to the sculpture of Robert Gober – whose plaster pretenders are made to look like porcelain but also like blanched flesh – Othello consumes quirky influence, leaving us with something half-digested.

It has to be that way. One gets the feeling that the full force of the artist's imagination, untethered from reference to everyday objects – a telephone, a fan, a radio on a stool – would be an unbearable experience.

Take the work "All Talk" (2018), a wall-hung, phone-like object. Its crudely numbered buttons and long, curly cord convey familiarity. Mounted on the Spam-pink body, however, a lascivious-looking tongue stands in for a receiver – and that cord, dripping pink and fleshy, seems more intestinal than technological.

Traditional ceramic objects are inherently anthropomorphic. Cups and pots, with their gaping mouths, potbellies and nose-like spouts, have proved irresistible to cartoonists and animators as metaphors for human traits.

Little pitchers, as we know, have big ears. The clay body is the artist's basic material.

A blood-red chair as alive as any figurative sculpture holds a central spot in the exhibition. Embraced in its arms is a brown creature with child-like legs and feet. It's all nose and ears from the waist up, a vessel opening at its top – a pot, a person, a receptacle for sensation.

Also included are several drawings, not closely related to the sculpture formally but perhaps a key to the artist's approach. A work called "Self Support" (2018) might be his declaration of independence from conventional logic.

Woody De Othello: "Living Room": 11 a.m.-6 p.m., Tuesdays-Saturdays. Through Oct. 27. Free. Jessica Silverman Gallery, 488 Ellis St., S.F. 415-255-9508. <https://jessicasilvermangallery.com>



Woody De Othello, "Self Support" (2018)
Photo: Jessica Silverman Gallery