

OCULA

Woody De Othello "Faith, Interiority and Belonging: Woody De Othello in Miami"

By Annabel Downes

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Woody De Othello, 2025. Photo: Jonah Reenders.

When Woody De Othello was growing up in Miami during the 2000s, he screen-printed seven identical T-shirts, each stamped with the word 'POSITIVITY' across the front. He was a teenager working in retail at the time, and whenever a difficult customer came in and he wanted to respond with a snarky remark, he'd look down at the shirt and remember the energy he wanted to put out into the world. He wore those T-shirts every day through his final semester as an art student at Florida Atlantic University, roaming the city's art museums and imagining his own work there one day. 'I'm hopelessly optimistic,' laughs the artist, who was raised in a Haitian family to first-generation immigrant parents in the U.S.

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When we speak, Othello is at his parents' house in semi-suburban North Miami Beach, the home in which he was born, and where he lived until he was 18. He resides in Oakland now, having moved there in 2015 for his MFA at California College of the Arts. During an open studio event at the college, San Francisco gallerist Jessica Silverman encountered Othello's wobbly, anthropomorphic ceramics: limbs twisting into Escher-like puzzles, dial-up phones looping beyond use, clocks as functionless as Dalí's wilting ones. She signed him soon after and gave him his first gallery show in 2018. Othello stayed in the Bay Area and now works from a studio in Oakland, spending weekends hiking the redwoods with his wife and their dog. 'When I was younger, I could only imagine a life like this,' he says. 'It is humbling and sometimes overwhelming.'



Left: Woody De Othello, *Wake up* (2025). Glazed ceramic with enamel paint. 13 x 12 1/2 x 8 inches. © Woody De Othello. Courtesy the artist, Jessica Silverman, and Karma. Photo: Phillip Maisel.

Right: Woody De Othello, *May I look upon myself and my shadow* (2025). Glazed ceramic. 27 x 14 x 14 inches. © Woody De Othello. Courtesy the artist, Jessica Silverman, and Karma. Photo: Phillip Maisel.

Othello's newest exhibition, *coming forth by day* at the Pérez Art Museum Miami (PAMM), is his first museum solo in the city and the latest in a sequence of major presentations, following his inclusion in the 2022 Whitney Biennial, Jessica Silverman's presentation of his giant glazed bronze fan at Art Basel Miami Beach's Meridians section in 2019, and a series of exhibitions with Karma, his East Coast gallery. The PAMM show gathers new ceramics, tiled wall works, a large-scale bronze and the beginnings of his nascent practice of working with wood. ('I mean, I'm called Woody, so it kinda

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makes sense to be curious, don't you think?') 'I love coming back here,' he tells me. 'You could definitely get lost in the sauce, as they say in Miami. It's easy to have too much fun. But for me, the city is super-grounding.' Othello grew up with his sister, now a pharmacist in Orlando, and their parents, who emigrated from Haiti in the 1980s, his father a social worker and his mother a home health aide. 'For many immigrants from the Caribbean and Latin America, Miami is a welcoming space,' he says. 'My Haitian heritage and South Florida upbringing [are] the soil and foundation from which my life has sprouted.'



Exhibition view: Woody De Othello, *coming forth by day*, Pérez Art Museum Miami (13 November 2025–28 June 2026).
Courtesy PAMM. Photo: Lazaro Llanes.

Faith shaped his childhood, and its practices have stayed close. 'My folks are super-Catholic, so I've always tuned myself to read and listen towards the light.' That spiritual grounding runs through the exhibition, most explicitly in the title, taken from scholar and spiritualist Muata Ashby's *Egyptian Book of the Dead: The Book of Coming Forth by Day* (2000), a modern interpretation of an ancient funerary text. For Othello, the book offered a way to think of each day as a new beginning, and a renewed search for truth. 'Being in my physical body as a Black man, it's helped me tune myself to the scope of Black existence outside of colonisation.'

Othello's sculptures—anthropomorphised vessels sprouting ears, inverted mouths, and legs that bend back-to-front and inside-out—have become a way for him to think through interiority, belonging, his relationship to his African ancestry, and to reach towards broader cultural identities. Much of the ceramic work draws on Central African *nkisi* power figures and the stoneware face jugs made by enslaved Black potters in Edgefield, South Carolina. Aside from the obvious name associations, his recent move into wood follows that same curiosity, since many of the African artefacts he studied were carved from it.

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Woody De Othello, *Another side* (2024). Glazed ceramic with wooden frame. 19 x 15 1/4 inches. © Woody De Othello. Courtesy the artist, Jessica Silverman, and Karma. Photo: Phillip Maisel.



Woody De Othello, *Ibeji* (2022). Ceramic, glaze, paint, and redwood. 57 x 19 x 20 1/2 inches. Collection Pérez Art Museum Miami, purchased with funds provided by Simi Ahuja and Kumar Mahadeva. © Woody De Othello. Courtesy the artist, Jessica Silverman, and Karma. Photo: Eric Ruby.

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One of the most striking works on show is a large wooden pyramid structure that shares the exhibition's title. The form is drawn from spiritualist philosopher Eugene Fersen's treatise *The Science of Being* (1923), which uses the pyramid to illustrate the equilibrium of life, its four corners representing life, mind, truth and love, rising toward an apex of spirit. Othello has reimaged the structure in the gallery, filling small niches with incense and ceramic objects. 'For me, it's about bringing awareness to being inside your own body,' he says. 'The objects are about ascension, about cultivating wisdom, and learning how to hold the heaviness of life.' Many works reference face vessels or heads, echoing Kongo cosmology, where the head is seen as an altar. 'That makes sense to me, because the ultimate altar is consciousness. Feelings often hold more truth than words, and when you encounter something that resonates with you and touches on the subconscious, it opens up a different way of contemplating the world.'

That belief sits at the heart of how Othello thinks about art, and Miami's place within it. His show coincides with Miami Art Week and prominent fairs, including Art Miami and Art Basel. Both are rooted in Miami's position as a gateway between the U.S. and Latin America, and have helped to transform the city from one with limited art infrastructure into a global cultural destination, expanding its public museums and civic arts programmes in the process. 'With all this expansion, we need to make space for folks who cannot afford to live here,' he says. 'Growth is important and it can be beautiful, but it only works if we show care for everyone.' Art, as Othello reflects, only matters if people can access it. 'Art can help people change their minds. And when you change your mind, it changes the lens you move through life.' —[O]

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