



"Oakland Sculptor Woody de Othello Imbues Objects with Soul"

By Ira Madison III

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As his acclaimed exhibition travels to California, the artist transforms domestic forms into meditations on consciousness, ancestry, and connection.

"All that you touch, you change. All that you change, changes you. The only lasting truth is change. God is change." In 1993, Octavia Butler wrote these words in *Parable of the Sower*, her speculative novel set in a dystopian America. Her protagonist Lauren possesses hyper-empathy, the ability to physically sense the pain of others. Most artists are attuned to the world around them, but sculptors — who shape their visions with their hands — may be among the most connected. Every piece of clay Woody De Othello touches, he changes into everyday objects that become surrealist versions of themselves. Like Butler, whom he greatly admires, he uses speculation to explore what it means to be human.



Woody De Othello.

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Across his practice, Othello transforms the often overlooked — including telephones, clocks, chairs, jugs, combs, plants — into sculptures that feel quietly sentient. Swollen in scale and at times punctuated by oversize ears, hands, or expressive faces, these familiar forms become meditations on memory, spirituality, and what it means to be conscious in the world.

Zooming with Othello in his Oakland studio about what inspires him is like entering a library. Aside from Butler ("of course, the GOAT"), he name-checks academics and writers like Michael Pollan, neuroscientist Antonio Damasio, and African ontologist Malidoma Patrice Somé. "I've been listening to a lot of stuff around consciousness," Othello says. "Contemporary ways to practice shrine building, healing, and ceremony. Right now, I'm reading a lot of Afrocentric scholars. I'm rereading Cheikh Anta Diop's *The African Origin of Civilization*. He's essentially writing to all the Eurocentric Egyptologists, asking how the originators of Egypt could be from Europe and Asia when there's so much emphasis on the predecessors of Egypt and Ethiopia and the Kingdom of Kush."



Othello in his Oakland studio crafting *fortified against strife*, a new nkisi-inspired sculpture that will be part of his exhibition at the Manetti Shrem Museum of Art.

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Those questions around consciousness, ancestry, and perception are embedded throughout his sculptural language. Othello's first solo outdoor exhibition, *Guardian Spirit*, installed along the East River in New York City, features four large-scale bronzes and three totemic redwood sculptures. One of the sculptures, titled *thought in mind*, features an enlarged landline phone and comb leaning against each other. Of the sculpture, Othello says, "I'm using the everyday, commonplace thing to point back toward this idea of consciousness and being awake and being alive. I feel like the phone's a recurring motif. You never know what phone call is gonna change your life. There's so many biblical verses that talk, 'Do you hear the call? Are you chosen?' It goes back to all the ear[s] in the work too. There's this kind of listening deeper than just using your auditory functions. How do you use your entire body to listen and perceive?" Other sculptures in the Brooklyn exhibition feature melded hands and ears that mirror *nkisi*, a sacred power figure from the Kongo peoples of central Africa.

The tension between ordinary and metaphysical lies at the heart of Othello's practice. Household objects become stand-ins for the human body, whereas familiar domestic forms are transformed into vessels for memory, ancestry, and Black spiritual traditions. Rather than depicting people directly, he allows everyday objects to carry the emotional weight of being human. Recognition has come quickly for Othello's quietly monumental forms, which resist easy categorization. Equal parts sculpture, design object, and spiritual totem, they caught the attention of Jessica Silverman Gallery in San Francisco and Karma in New York and Los Angeles, which represent him.

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Othello was raised in Miami by Haitian immigrant parents. Art wasn't part of his regular upbringing, but he says, "I do remember my mom sometimes, on the phone, she would just doodle on envelopes. I didn't really grow up around art per se or go to museums, but I feel like Haitian people are very craft-y, whether it's giving this dress for church or decorating our house or preparing food. There's a lot of color and a lot of texture growing up."

Othello's work ethic comes from his parents, whom he describes as "old-school Black. I was never late for school, perfect attendance, did our homework — Dad sat down watching over us while we did our homework." That discipline extended into his teenage years: He enrolled in ROTC throughout high school and almost joined the military before discovering art. "I've always prioritized sleep and exercise," he says.

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Othello works clay by hand, coaxing an expressive sculptural form from the raw material.

It wasn't until becoming an undergrad that he realized being an artist was a viable career path. When an artist came to speak at his school in Boca Raton, Othello asked what else he did for work. The artist replied, "This is my job. Making art is my job."

He says, "I was just like, 'Oh shit, I could totally do this' because I felt like I was already a better artist than him at that point."

Call it cockiness or betting on himself, but learning has been central to Othello's journey. After he studied printmaking, a roommate encouraged him to experiment with sculpture, leading him to a ceramics class that became an obsession. "I became addicted because of how hard the medium was," he says. "You spend time making something, get attached to it, and then it blows up in the kiln or comes out looking completely fugly. It has a way of humbling you."

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A wall of richly hued glazes reflects Othello's instinct for color and experimentation.

That patience is evident in every finished work. Othello's sculptures are built over weeks, sometimes months, with richly layered glazes that create remarkable depth and luminosity. Deep greens, burnt oranges, smoky blues, and velvety blacks pool and shift across the ceramic surfaces, giving each object a tactile richness that feels simultaneously ancient and, at times, futuristic.

Othello draws a direct line between ceramics and his own artistic development: "I'm shaping the clay, [and] the clay is actually in return shaping me. I don't know if I wasn't working in ceramics, if I would be as interested in African ontology, you know?" Pottery is one of the oldest human inventions, and Othello feels the connection to African history: "It's like learning more about my ancestors and where I came from. I think the material has been a huge part of my own self-discovery and self-study."

Othello pursued an MFA at California College of the Arts, partly to immerse himself in the California Clay Movement, with artists such as Viola Frey, Robert Arneson, and Ken Price, expanding ceramics beyond function into contemporary sculpture. "All the other educators I'd come into contact with had their MFA," he says. "I could've just moved and figured it out, but I wanted that structure." The influence of that tradition can still be felt in his work, though his visual language is entirely his own, blending African diasporic histories, speculative fiction, neuroscience, and spirituality into clay forms that exist somewhere between dream and reality. The 2022 Whitney Biennial was a breakthrough that he describes as "a pinch-me moment." (David Breslin, the show's cocurator, has since included his work in a group show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.) "I do remember my whole family, my immediate family, coming out

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for that Whitney opening. My dad was reconnecting with one of his friends from Haiti that he hadn't seen in 30-plus years." Another highlight was participating in Art Basel Unlimited, a space for large-scale works, earlier this year. "I was looking at some of the other names, like Chris Burden, Theaster Gates, Torkwase Dyson. I was like, Wait, wait — I guess we're really here at the table."

"I became addicted because of how hard the medium was."

This fall, Othello celebrates a homecoming of sorts when his acclaimed museum exhibition, *coming forth by day*, will make its California debut at Manetti Shrem Museum of Art at the University of California, Davis, following its run at Pérez Art Museum Miami. Named after the ancient Egyptian funerary text commonly known as the *Book of the Dead*, the exhibition brings together works of ceramics, bronze, and wood exploring transformation, consciousness, and rebirth through his distinctive vocabulary of animated domestic forms. The California presentation feels especially significant as he brings his most ambitious body of work to the state whose ceramic legacy helped shape his artistic language.



LEFT: Othello scores his clay. RIGHT: Brushes await the artist's next work.

Othello has lived in Oakland for 10 years, which he didn't imagine at first, since moving to New York or Los Angeles seemed like the obvious choice. "L.A. is a lot of fun, but there's just peace here to me in the Bay. I fell in love with being outside and hiking and being around trees. I fell in love with being able to ride my bike. I really love the grocery stores here."

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He's married with a newborn (he and his wife met on a dating app during the pandemic — "a Raya success story"), and a typical day begins at 5 a.m. He meditates, works out, spends time with his daughter, Violette, before her nap, and reads a book before hitting his studio. "We live in our studio, so the commute is very chill. I walk downstairs, work for a little bit, maybe go to the farmers market or go for a walk. I'm able to parcel out chunks of time to work. Now, with the baby, I'm not working six hours in the studio straight. I work for two hours, stop for another two hours, come back for another hour. It's very much making the most out of these pockets of time."



The artist with his latest sculptures in his Oakland studio.

Oakland, for Othello, is what his wife refers to as "real 1990s living," where he can stop during a bike ride to have a conversation with a neighbor. And having a child has opened up his community to more than just artists; he has friends who are firefighters, accountants, and software engineers. He has also found a music studio and a glass studio to collaborate with. "The

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work opens it up to other makers because I feel like I'm very much in the space of nothing happens by yourself," he says. "The galleries do a lot; I'm not gonna hate."

Othello credits the people and institutions that have supported his career, including Jennifer Inacio, who curated *coming forth by day*, and Jenée-Daria Strand, the assistant curator at Public Art Fund, which brought *Guardian Spirit* to New York.

For Othello, that sense of connection extends beyond art — to family, community, and something larger than himself. "God just sends you angels along the way. Many angels have helped me. Not to get too spiritual or woo-woo, but if God wasn't an all-giving God, and if God didn't love us, none of this would be here. So we're only here because Source continuously provides for us, so it's kind of up to us to pay that energy forward, however we can."

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