

ARTAFRICA

"Woody De Othello: Curating the Seen and the Unseen"

By Brendon Bell-Roberts and Jennifer Inacio

July 30, 2026

For Jennifer Inacio, curating is not about explaining artworks but creating the conditions for meaningful encounters. In 'Coming Forth By Day', Woody De Othello's first solo museum exhibition in his hometown of Miami, everyday objects become vessels of memory, spirituality, and transformation. Drawing on Haitian cosmology, African spiritual traditions, and diasporic histories, the exhibition unfolds as a multi sensory journey where colour, scent, architecture, and sculpture invite reflection rather than certainty. In this conversation with ART AFRICA, Inacio discusses curating through sensation, embracing ambiguity, and creating spaces that encourage audiences to see both art and the everyday anew.



Installation shot of 'Woody De Othello: Coming Forth by Day' (2026). Pérez Art Museum Miami. Image courtesy of Pérez Art Museum Miami.

Brendon Bell-Roberts: 'Coming Forth By Day' brings together Haitian cosmology, African spiritual traditions, and everyday domestic objects in a deeply immersive environment. How did you

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curate an exhibition that invites viewers to experience these references sensorially rather than intellectually?

Jennifer Inacio: One of the most important curatorial decisions was not trying to explain everything. Woody's work is deeply informed by Haitian cosmology, African spiritual traditions, and personal history, but we didn't want visitors to feel like they needed to understand every reference before they could connect with it. From the beginning, Woody and I talked about creating an exhibition that would be felt, not just understood. He really wanted people to experience the exhibition through their whole body, so we paid close attention to colour, scent, sound, texture, and even the rhythm of moving through the galleries. For example, visitors begin in a narrower, more intimate, hallway-like space before arriving in a larger, illuminated gallery. That transition was intentional. It creates a moment of anticipation and then release, encouraging people to become more aware of their own movement through the exhibition before encountering the work in a more expansive environment.

As for the texture, you can't touch the sculptures, but the carved surfaces of the wooden work and textures on the wall almost invite you to, creating this quiet sense of intimacy. We weren't trying to recreate ritual, but rather create the conditions for presence—for people to slow down, become aware of themselves in the space, and feel something before they started asking questions. I think that's where Woody's work is most powerful.



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Woody De Othello transforms familiar objects into vessels of memory, emotion, and spiritual presence. What conversations emerged between you and the artist about sustaining the tension between the ordinary and the sacred?

One of the things we talked about a lot was that, for Woody, there really isn't a separation between the ordinary and the sacred. His work starts from the idea that everyday objects already carry memory, emotion, and spirit. A telephone, a chair, or a clock...these aren't just functional objects; they are witnesses to our lives and also serve as metaphors for our lived experiences at times. They absorb and also reflect our joys and our losses. As a curator, my role wasn't to emphasise one over the other, but to create a space where visitors could begin to see those objects differently.

That idea also shaped other elements of the exhibition itself. The pyramid installation, for example, uses familiar forms almost as a metaphor for life's journey. At the base, many of the sculptures feel more constrained or entangled, reflecting moments of uncertainty or struggle. As you move upward, or toward enlightenment, the forms gradually become more open and resolved. It's not a literal narrative, but it suggests a process of transformation—of moving through experience toward greater clarity or liberation. I think that's something visitors can feel, even if they don't immediately put it into words.



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The exhibition title, 'Coming Forth By Day', evokes transformation, rebirth, and renewal. How did these themes shape the exhibition's narrative, and what journey did you hope visitors would undertake through the space?

The title became an important framework for thinking about the exhibition. The title 'Coming Forth by Day' comes from what's commonly known as the *Egyptian Book of the Dead*. Despite that name, Woody sees the book as being less about death than about how we live, and how we move through life with intention, awareness, and a sense of transformation. That really shaped the way the exhibition was approached. It wasn't meant to tell a linear story with a beginning and an end, but to create a series of experiences that invite reflection.

For me, the journey wasn't about arriving at a single interpretation. It was about leaving the exhibition seeing the everyday a little differently. If someone walks away with a greater sense of curiosity and attention, not only toward the objects around them, but toward their own memories, relationships, and the life they're living right now, then I think the exhibition has done its work.



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This is Woody De Othello's first solo museum exhibition in his hometown of Miami. How does returning to the city where he was born add another layer to the exhibition's exploration of ancestry, belonging, and personal history?

There's something really meaningful about Woody returning to Miami for his first solo museum exhibition because, while the work is deeply personal, it's also in conversation with the city itself. Miami is a place where African, Caribbean, and Latin American cultures intersect, so many of the exhibition's themes—ancestry, migration, spirituality, and belonging—are part of the city's narrative. Presenting the work here creates a dialogue between Woody's own story and the broader histories that still shape Miami today.

At the same time, there's something universally relatable about returning to the place where you began. It invites reflection on where you've come from, how you've changed, and what you carry with you. I hope visitors see that the exhibition isn't just about Woody's story, but that it opens up space for them to reflect on their own histories as well.

On a personal note, Woody and I actually attended the same undergraduate program at Florida Atlantic University, here in South Florida, around the same time, even though we never crossed paths. I always find that such a special coincidence. Working together on this exhibition felt, in a way, like coming full circle. We shared the same beginnings as artists and curators, and even though our journeys unfolded separately, it was really meaningful to reconnect through this project and bring it to Miami.



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Throughout the exhibition, clay, bronze, wood, scent, and colour work together to create an environment that feels almost ritualistic. How important was it to think beyond sculpture and consider the exhibition itself as a living, embodied experience?

It was very important because, from the beginning, we weren't thinking about the exhibition as simply a collection of sculptures. We were thinking about the exhibition itself as an experience.

I often say I like to curate in layers. There's the work itself, but then there are all these other layers—the architecture, colour, light, sound, and the rhythm of moving through the galleries. Each one contributes to how the work is encountered.

That's really my role as a curator: to create the conditions for meaningful encounters. Not to tell people what to think, but to create a space where they are open enough to have their own experience with the work.



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Woody's practice draws on concepts such as *nkisi*, where objects are understood to carry spiritual force and agency. In a contemporary museum context, how do you present these traditions with care while allowing audiences to form their own relationships with the work?

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For me, it's about approaching these traditions with humility and respect. Woody's work is informed by ideas like *nkisi*, but it isn't an illustration of those traditions. It's a contemporary artistic practice that is in conversation with many different histories, beliefs, and lived experiences.

I think my responsibility as a curator is to provide enough context for people to understand where the work is coming from without trying to define or fix its meaning. I never want to close down interpretation, and I'm sure neither do the artists I work with. Instead, I want to create space for curiosity to thrive, which I believe is one of the most important things a museum can offer. Visitors don't have to leave with all the answers. Sometimes it's enough to leave with a deeper question, with an introduction to a new topic, or a different way of seeing something they are already familiar with.



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Much of your curatorial work engages artists whose practices are rooted in diasporic histories and material memory. What do you think 'Coming Forth By Day' contributes to broader conversations about African diasporic identity, spirituality, and contemporary sculpture?

I'm fascinated by how spiritual traditions, symbols, and ways of knowing travel across different places and cultures, taking on new forms while still maintaining a shared lineage. In Woody's work, for example, there's a sculpture titled *Ibeji*, which references the Yoruba twin deities. It's a figure I have come to know through Afro-Brazilian Candomblé traditions, so encountering it in Woody's

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work immediately resonated with me. Yoruba deities, or *orishas*, are also something I have noticed appearing more frequently in contemporary art, which speaks to the ways these traditions continue to inspire artists across different geographies and cultural contexts. That's one of the reasons I enjoy working with art across the African diaspora. It's also a thread that runs through my curatorial practice more broadly. In my current exhibition, *One Becomes Many*, many of the artists engage with ancestry and spiritual traditions rooted in Yoruba and Afro-Brazilian cosmologies. What interests me is seeing how those ideas continue to travel, evolve, and take on new forms across different geographies and artistic practices.

Identity isn't fixed or bound by geography. It's constantly being shaped through movement, exchange, and memory, and contemporary art becomes a space where those connections become visible. I think 'coming forth by day' contributes to that conversation by inviting audiences to see those connections not as something belonging to the past, but as living ideas of our everyday.



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Taking into consideration the role exhibitions play in creating connections across Africa and its diasporas, what do you hope audiences, particularly those from African and Caribbean contexts, take away from Woody De Othello's deeply personal yet globally resonant practice?

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I hope they feel a sense of recognition. Not because the exhibition represents any one tradition, but because it reflects the richness and complexity of diasporic experiences. One of the things I love about Woody's work is the way it reveals connections across geographies, cultures, and generations while still leaving room for difference. The references that inspire Woody, whether it's *nkisi*, the *Egyptian Book of the Dead*, or even the Edgefield face jugs, aren't reproduced directly. They are transformed into his own visual language, and perhaps some visitors might recognise it.

At the same time, I hope the exhibition speaks just as powerfully to audiences who may be encountering these ideas for the first time. For me, that's one of the most meaningful roles museums can play: to create spaces where we become curious about experiences beyond our own while also recognising the things that connect us. Ultimately, I hope people leave seeing the everyday a little differently. If the exhibition encourages someone to look at the objects they live with, to reflect on their own memories, ancestry, or relationships with greater curiosity and attention, then I think it has done what it set out to do.

This exhibition was on view at the Pérez Art Museum Miami from 13 November 2025 until 28 June 2026.

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