

Woody De Othello: Hope Omens

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**John Michael
Kohler Arts Center**

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“The first time I recall touching clay was in undergrad, in an elective ceramics course. Our first project in that class was a combined pinch pot where I made a little bust combining two pinch pots together. I experienced some sort of revelation, where my past and future kind of clicked together.”

In this oft-repeated quote, San Francisco Bay area ceramicist Woody De Othello expresses the profound connection he feels to his medium. This instant attraction has endured, leading Othello to a successful and experimental engagement with clay’s potentials.

Best known for his large-scale anthropomorphic figures, which often appear as humorous portrayals of domestic objects, Othello stretches the scale of the everyday. For *Hope Omens*, he presents an entirely new body of work. Eschewing the traditional delicate preciousness associated with ceramic work, these larger-than-life scaled sculptures upend expectations and traditional uses of clay.

Drawing on various household objects’ human qualities, Othello’s anthropomorphized figures express a range of emotions. “We use phones to speak and to listen, clocks to tell time, vessels to hold things, and our bodies are all indicators of those things,” Othello observes. Breath and breathing are ideas often expressed by his forms. These concepts, and the power to deprive people of their breath and their ability to breathe, are now more highly charged. In addition, many of these new works feature ears, offering meditations on listening, hearing, and being present.

Some of his objects appear collapsed, or folded over, as if exhausted by use or deflated by the passing of time. Others seem to cover their eyes or ears, unable or unwilling to see or hear what is around them. Some seem to wring their hands, and grip themselves for support.

This expressiveness, in conjunction with their lumpy and shiny surfaces, animate the works throughout the exhibition. This suspended tension represents both Othello’s working process and a sensation viewers may have in the works’ presence.

“There’s a lot of anxious buildup when constructing some of the objects,” says Othello. “At times I am unsure if things will collapse under their own weight, but as I’m working the clay starts to dry and solidify. It freezes that tension. Gravity is literally at play.” Their scale, and fragility, combine to create a heightened awareness of bodies in space; the exchange of energy between viewer and object can be thick with suspense and expectation. Their precariousness belies the physical and emotional pressure they hold. Will this last? Can this stand? Is this too heavy?

Informed by his Haitian heritage, and his own investigations into diaspora, Othello draws from the African belief system of nkisi, in which objects are thought to be invested with powers of protection and healing. He says, “What these works offer are my personal emotions around learning about my diaspora. I have always thought about it, but recently I have been feeling it. There is a lot of joy and enlightening feelings around this investigation, but some stories and accounts are tragic, unjust, and heart-wrenching. So maybe objects can be carriers of some of this emotion as well.”

For Othello, these familiar objects become bearers of his own interrogations, feelings, and contemplations of the world. He describes the making of them as cathartic, a release. “It is where the bad juju goes,” he explains of the pieces. “All that anxious energy goes into the ceramics, and it leaves me with the freedom and the space to be lighter and more optimistic.”



2

Hope Omens represents two firsts for Othello. Many of the sculptures were produced using molds Othello created during his Arts/Industry pottery residency at the Kohler Co. factory in early 2020. This was his first opportunity to work in slip casting. Due to the pandemic, the residency ended several weeks early and forced Othello to take some of the molds home to continue his work. A new sound piece by Oakland, California, musician Cheflee accompanies Othello’s sculptures. Made in response to the work in the exhibition, the ambient composition is designed to subtly guide the viewer through the space, creating an immersive environment. Some of the vessels emanate sound from within, as if imbued with a spirit.



3

Arts/Industry is administered by the John Michael Kohler Arts Center and generously hosted and funded by Kohler Co.

Cover Woody De Othello: *Hope Omens* installation view at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center, 2021. Woody De Othello (from left) *Proclaim*, 2021; ceramic and glaze, *Blue Field of Feel*, 2021; ceramic and glaze. Courtesy of the artist and Jessica Silverman Gallery.

1 Woody De Othello, *Openness* (installation view, John Michael Kohler Arts Center), 2021; ceramic and glaze. Courtesy of the artist and Jessica Silverman Gallery.

2 Woody De Othello, *Caught in Eye* (detail, installation view, John Michael Kohler Arts Center), 2021; ceramic and glaze. Courtesy of the artist and Jessica Silverman Gallery.

3 Woody De Othello: *Hope Omens* installation view at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center, 2021. Woody De Othello (from left) *In One Piece*, 2021; ceramic and glaze, *Safeguarding*, 2021; ceramic and glaze, *Holding it Together*, 2021; ceramic and glaze. Courtesy of the artist and Jessica Silverman Gallery.