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In the Studio with Magdalene Odundo: “recapturing the spirit of the void”

February 7, 2018 By [Jan Garden Castro](https://blog.sculpture.org/2018/02/07/magdalene-odundo/) <https://blog.sculpture.org/2018/02/07/magdalene-odundo/>



Final day of the workshop. Carrie Johnson, Jamie Wade, Gayla Lenke, Barbara Thompson (Hawaii Craftsmen), Laura Phelps Rogers, Ellen Crocker, Sally Jackson, Tom Gibson, Evan Jenkins (in back, Hawaii Craftsmen), Annie Stiefel (student and Magdalene’s assistant), Magdalene Odundo (instructor), and Erik Wold (studio manager).

Magdalene Odundo’s vessels have a signature beauty and depth. At the Yale Center for British Art exhibition *Things of Beauty Growing*, she talked about “humanizing the static clay” and “capturing the spirit of the void.” Historically, her handmade vessels may borrow ideas from San Ildefonso Pueblo in New Mexico, from British potters including Lucie Rie and Bernard Leach, and from Greek, Roman, and Nigerian processes. Her work has been compared to Cycladic art, to sculptors including Gaudier-Brzeska, Hans Arp, and Constantin Brancusi, and to painters including Henri Matisse and Amedeo Modigliani and is in over 50 notable museum collections, including the Stedelijk, the Victoria and Albert, the Nelson-Atkins, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and the Smithsonian Institution. In 2008, Odundo was appointed Officer of the Order of the British Empire in the Queen’s Honour’s List for Services to the Arts. In June, 2018, she becomes Chancellor at the University for Creative Arts in Surrey, England, one of the world’s top ceramic institutions. In 2017, Odundo participated in exhibitions at The Hepworth, Wakefield; The High Museum, Atlanta; and the Yale Center for British Art.



Magdalene Odundo, *Untitled*, 1995, hand-built, terra sigillata, polished and carbonized terracotta clay, Gift of Jane and Gerald Katcher, Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, courtesy of the artist and Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven

At Yale, Odundo’s black and red vessels had striking multiple qualities that gave each its own identity, form, and finish. *Asymmetrical Betu III*, 2010 (cat. 125, Collection of Jeanne

Greenberg Rohatyn) had carbonized smooth black surfaces that shifted seamlessly from silky to cloudy to shiny/oily. The shape was voluptuous—abstract yet human—its small base and waist and large open mouth. The artist told me her work was “full of the life of the person: ...they are open; they breathe.” She continued, “They recapture the spirit of the void that we belong to” and illustrate “virtual space.” She suggested that the works sometimes refer to her parents, friends, the soil, and the earth itself. Simon Olding, the Director of the Crafts Arts Study Centre at the University for Creative Arts, told me that Odundo’s vessels are noted for their nipples, tiny handles that suggest earrings, and their liquidity of color. Being made by hand, the vessels have human touches and often are seen as anthropomorphic, suggesting the body’s parts, such as spine, waist, arms, and breasts. Yet they always find a proper balance between an overall form, suggestions of female form, and abstract/geometric properties.



Magdalene Odundo, Untitled, from the Kigango Series I-III, 2013, hand-built, terra sigillata, polished and carbonized terracotta clay, Collection of Magdalene Odundo, Farnham, courtesy of the artist and Anthony Slayter-Ralph

Odundo builds her vessels by hand using the coil method and a shell to smooth the coils inside and out. The outside’s smooth surfaces have shiny to matte textures and red to deep black to smoky hues due to the methods of firing. She has developed a sigillata process, which has Greek and Roman origins. As the High Museum noted, Odundo “often fires them repeatedly, which results in colors ranging from bright, bold orange to smoky, iridescent black. Rather than glazing her pots, Odundo uses an ancient method called terra sigillata. She coats the pieces in colloidal slip (refined, watered-down clay) and burnishes them after firing to achieve smooth, polished surfaces.” The artist’s use of saggers replicates Pueblo Native American open firings. The artist uses both oxidized firing and reduction firing to achieve the different hues and finishes. Each vessel’s position inside the saggers, the use of gas, and the temperature range from 960 or lower to 1080 C affects the outcome.

Odundo was born in Kenya and also lived in India when young. Her processes are influenced by ceramic studios/practices she studied in Nigeria and Ghana, Mexico and China. She studied Graphics and Commercial Art at Nairobi Polytechnic in Kenya before moving to England in 1971 where she discovered ceramics in 1974. The artist received her Bachelors’ and Masters’ art degrees at what is now the University for the Creative Arts and the Royal College of

Art. Her sculpture has its own distinctive identities, often dark and female with voluptuous interiors and fluid ways of interacting with space, light, and other objects.

In 2004, Anthony Slayter-Ralph published a catalog raisonné of Odundo's work to date, with just over 200 images. The artist's website is magdaleneodundo.com



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Master Class instructed by Magdalene Odundo on October 9 -14, 2017 Notes from resident potter and instructor, Erik Wold. Volcano Village, Hawaii.

Where & Who: Volcano Art Center, organized by Hawaii Craftsmen.org. Ten attendees from the state of Hawaii and various states within the U.S.

The clay: A smooth white stoneware clay originally supplied for the workshop was not to her liking. She said it was over-processed and lacked "life." I brought over a couple car loads (1/4 ton) of my personal supply of scrap clay which we recycled during the workshop. It was mixed red and white stoneware clay with a smattering of local basalt sand and volcanic ash. A few leaves and twigs had found their way into the clay as well. Plenty of "life"! Magdalene said of the clay she normally uses for her work —“ a fine red with a small percentage of 120s molochite.” Magdalene advised: “The clay should be soft, pliable, and open. Color does not matter. A good throwing body for medium-sized ware will suffice. There is some scraping to attain fine surfaces, so no coarse grogg.”



Erik Wold's first completed pot using the method Magdalene taught. I have books of her work open to illustrate points of reference. This pot will be fired with the student work and included in any exhibition.

The Assignment: Magdalene gave the students an ambitious assignment in terms of quantity and scale. They dove right into working with sizable quantities of clay using the East African handbuilding method she demonstrated. Some attendees had never touched clay before. However, all were experienced artists in their chosen mediums. On the final day of the workshop we all discussed how the work created during the week might be saved instead of deconstructed and returned to the recycle bins as originally planned. We decided that I would fire the work to highfire stoneware temperature in my gas kiln at my home studio. She and I picked out a palette of glazes from my inventory to choose from. Later, after Magdalene said she had a dream about it, she recommended we glaze everything in a single glaze choice. We selected a Tenmoku glaze (black which breaks to brown) which I mixed from recipe. The idea

is that after all the work has been fired, there could be an exhibit and auction of the work with the proceeds going to benefit our clay studio at the Volcano Art Center. I have begun firing the work. We are targeting spring, 2018 for an exhibition.

Magdalene's top advice: Practice, practice, practice. Practice and patience was the mantra. She discouraged getting too caught up in ideas of attaching stories and titles heading into a work. She said, "You're not fooling anyone here. The work should stand on its own." She emphasized the importance of the pot's interior, saying the exterior should be guided by a well-formed interior. She described the physical action of bringing up the clay by hand from the inside as directed toward one's core –as feeding oneself. Magdalene noted direct observation is the most effective learning method, adding, "Put away the camera and watch," as she gave a demo.

Magdalene uses homemade tools for scrapping and shaping clay forms. I asked for and received permission to trace her tools which we cut from a 5 gallon plastic bucket. This provides a curved and flexible tool. This workshop didn't reach the finishing stages of decorative surface treatment; it was enough to learn the forming method.

On the final day, among other discussions, Magdalene addressed a question about being an artist. She stressed that "artist" was just a label and it's best not to get too caught up in such identity issues. She said she was proud to call herself a potter.

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Magdalene Odundo, Asymmetrical Betu III, 2010, hand-built, terra sigillata, polished and carbonized terracotta clay, Collection of Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn, New York, courtesy of the artist

Asymmetrical Betu III, 2010 --For Magdalene Odundo

Her impossibly large open mouth
is a trope representing a composed
inner body's presence: a void, heart, core.
Carbon markings leave streaks of light, a patch
among dark ovals, the pitch interior.

Her waist turns
toward me and toward the sun.
A tulip belly balances on its tip-toe;
a ghost face with lively eyes and hair swirling
up glides on the surface. One breast bud emerges!
Seen from the port side, the belly rounds in front:
she bears progeny inside. Curves of space
surround her and triple shadows
echo her dance.

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