

Artist Talk: Woody De Othello

Conversation with Woody De Othello on March 18, 2024, exploring the imagery—household objects, human features, and the natural world—that De Othello recreates and recombines in his paintings, drawings, and three-dimensional works in materials including clay and bronze.

This transcription is provided as a record of the live conversation, for educational use. [Read more about the Wexner Center for the Arts' Mission, Vision, and Values.](#)

Transcript

Emily Haidet (00:00:12):

Hi, everyone. Good afternoon. Welcome to the Wexner Center for the Arts. I am Emily Haidet, curator of public programs in the Department of Learning & Public Practice. And I'm thrilled that you are all here post spring break hanging out with us. Good to see you all. Today we have an artist talk with Woody De Othello. This talk is presented in partnership with OSU's Department of Art. How many of you are students or faculty in Department of Art? Awesome. Thanks for being here. Before we begin, I do have a few housekeeping notes. Silence your cell phones. Yeah, I do want to thank a few folks who've made this event possible, all our teams at the Wex. I also want to give a shout-out to Deon Lee for her leadership and support of public programs. Just like these you may have seen, there's another public program next week with B. Ingrid Olson as well, so hopefully we'll see you then. It's on Wednesday the 26th.

(00:01:16):

Learning & Public Practice programs are made possible by CoverMyMeds and Huntington. Following a presentation from Woody tonight, Bre Hendricks, a graduate student in the Department of Art, will join Woody for a few questions before we invite you all to raise your hand and ask your own. We'll come around with a mic. My colleague Jess will be here. Just raise your hand and Jess will find you. You can also text your question to the Wex hotline. If you don't already have it in your contacts, I'll read it for you now. It's (614) 813-3416. Read it one more time, (614) 813-3416. We'll also have a slide up at the end, but that way you can text your questions in if you're not comfortable raising your hand.

(00:02:05):

Okay, on to our speaker. Woody De Othello holds an MFA from California College of the Arts in San Francisco, and a BFA from Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton. His work is in collections throughout the US and abroad. Othello's work was included in the 2022 Whitney Biennial and has been exhibited widely in group exhibitions at the Museum of Arts and Design, New York; SFMOMA; and FRONT International: Cleveland Triennial for Contemporary Art. Othello has also completed numerous large-scale public art commissions around the country. Please join me in welcoming Woody De Othello.

Woody De Othello (00:02:53):

Hello. Hey, how are you guys doing today? Good. Awesome. Sweet. I'm Woody, thank you guys for having me. And I guess just a little preface to my artist talk, it's like a journey and arc of my art practice. I'm going over some work that I made when I was an undergrad, and some inspiration. I'm going through the gamut of undergrad, MFA, and professional life. This first slide is a public commission that I did in London for Frieze Sculpture last year, but we'll dig into this specific sculpture a little bit further. Yeah, the artwork that you see on the screen is of Jacob Lawrence, he has a series on the Haitian Revolution. This is my first slide because I am of Haitian descent. I grew up in South Florida. Both of my parents are from Haiti. And just knowing about my history, knowing about my lineage just means so much to me. And Jacob Lawrence is just one of my favorite artists. I love his graphic quality and how he's able to elevate this illustrative style, and propel it, and elevate it, and make it super accessible.

(00:04:28):

I grew up watching cartoons. It's probably the reason why I wanted to become an artist. I always thought that I would end up a cartoonist, that was my earlier aspirations. Just reading the newspaper and reading the cartoon section that my dad would bring home. I drew pretty much my entire life, a lot when I was younger. Drew all throughout elementary school, middle school, and I started drawing because I got heavily bullied in school, so I used to draw myself as anime characters beating up all of the kids who were tormenting me. I've always had this deep emotional relationship with drawing and making artwork. These are some drawings that I made in high school going into undergrad. I actually dug these up from my old Tumblr page, but again, I just always drew. It's been the thing that helped me to make sense... to make sense of the world around me. It was like a place if I was going through something emotionally, I was able to communicate my emotions better through drawing imagery versus actually speaking.

(00:05:58):

Now we're going to slide into some of my earliest ceramic work. Probably some of the stuff that I was proud of at the time when I had made it. I didn't start making ceramics until I was 18 or 19 years old. I took my first ceramics course in undergrad, and I just remember touching clay and having this epiphany of sorts of... I feel like everything that I needed to know about my past, present, and future was in the material. At this point, ceramics was just like this extension of drawing. I was very much into the figure. As you guys can see here, the figures are a little bit alienated, grotesque. I guess I was into the emotional psyche that just comes from living and existing. Sometimes things get hard, and how do you cope with those things?

(00:06:55):

I feel like these sculptures were an externalization of a lot of the emotions that I was feeling internally. So when I was in undergrad, I was just focused solely on the figure and just the context of the figure. And making these things, kind of getting my ceramic skills up, building larger. But at some point I started to get a little bored with just expressing the figure. And I started getting really interested in installation. This next slide are Edward Kienholz and George Segal, two artists that I look towards with thinking

about installation. Growing up in South Florida, I was introduced to their work just from going to museums.

(00:07:49):

And I just love the amount of context that they gave the sculptures, thinking about the environment and just the entirety of this world instead of just the solo object. This was a huge inspiration for thinking about context, thinking about the figure, and thinking about world building, which is something I'm still questioning and thinking of in my work. After seeing this I tried to give it a jab myself. This is one of the first installations that I made in undergrad. This was right after my undergrad thesis show. And I had the opportunity to have an exhibition in South Florida, so I started sourcing a ton of furniture, thinking about the environment. Everything at this point is situated in the domestic. All of the picture frames, I'm drawing this faux family, even the image on the TV screen, I was editing things and trying to make this immersive experience. The name of this was *Fred, Frederick, and Freddy*, to me they're this extension of the id, ego, and superego or the subconscious, conscious, and superconscious. They're all in the same figure to me.

(00:09:25):

This is another attempt at making installation. And again, here I'm thinking about wall color, I'm thinking about flooring. I even put the blinds on the screen here, or on the window to block out the light. I wanted the wallpaper, the entire wall in this install, but I didn't have enough funds to do so, so I just did that little block here. But this is essentially where my headspace was. Before I applied to graduate school this was the work that I applied with. And I ended up applying to a CCA and I got into CCA, so I made the shift from living in south Florida to moving to the Bay Area.

(00:10:16):

This is a slide of my studio, maybe the first semester of grad school, and that was such a trip for me. I moved to California, I didn't have a car. And I started thinking about sculpture differently. I couldn't really collect as many objects as I wanted to, just because I didn't have the actual space to do so. I started to think about making these environments and sculpture a little bit differently. Those were the two figures up there, these characters that I was playing around with in school, Patty and Ralph, and I was struggling with thinking about installation and making installation and giving the figure all of these contexts. I figured instead of bringing all of this stuff into a space and trying to build out an installation, I then instead decided to take the sculpture out into the world and use the already built environment to give it context.

(00:11:26):

This is the barber that I used to go to, and I just asked him if he was down to help me with this art project. And I think a lot of the thinking is the same as the work before, of trying to like provide this context, this backstory into the sculptures and just trying to figure it out. The image on the right is of Ralph going to the baseball game. I have images of him photoshopped at a gym and doing all types of weird things. But that helped me to explore the extent of thinking about this built environment, and it started to get me to think a little bit differently about the figure and space. This is more from that series. This is Patty at the bodega, and Patty's at the beauty salon trying to get her little style going on. She's working on her self-improvement. So, even though these figures

are hella like, I don't know, creepy and almost sinister looking, I think there's a level of optimism in the work, because they're doing things to help themselves to get in a better space.

[\(00:12:39\):](#)

Yeah, I think that was the end of me thinking so strictly about the figure. I mentioned a couple slides ago that I didn't have a car and I didn't necessarily have space to store everything. When I was making these figures, I was making them in parts so they're easier for me to transport around. And I just remember seeing this work or these mannequin parts in the studio just jumbled together on the side and I was like, "Oh, this is starting to do something more nuanced, more interesting." Just seeing them in parts, seeing them kind of broken down in this way was just a lot more nuanced for me. And then going to graduate school, that was super helpful for my conceptual development, I guess. I mentioned in a couple of studio visits today that I had read, or yeah, we had read this text called the *Phenomenology of Perception*. And it started to get me to think about how the entire body is used to view art. And how our bodies are actually this whole perceptual phenomenon.

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I started to think less about the strict figure and started to think more about what happens if the psychic energy going on in the figure became transmuted and started to populate and radiate the objects that accompany the space. During that time I got really into Robert Gober. I feel like he's one of my favorite artists. He's kind of up there in terms of my personal heroes, and I just love his practice in the sense where he has developed this lexicon of objects that almost become super psychological and just really loaded. There's a beautiful text that Hilton Als wrote for his show, *The Heart is Not a Metaphor*, that talks in depth about his personal history and how multilayered a lot of the objects are.

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The sink is a reoccurring motif in his work. And Hilton Als talks about how he grew up in a Catholic household and how the sink references the idea of water and purification. And Robert Gober also is a queer artist who survived the AIDS epidemic. The sink has this loaded quality, but you don't necessarily need to read super into it. It just becomes this basin or this open object for you to bring whatever you want to bring into looking at the work.

[\(00:15:39\):](#)

Another artist that I absolutely love and adore is Philip Guston, and I feel like he does a very similar thing where there's certain objects that become these reoccurring motifs. And his body of work that start to stand in as this character where you can read so much into it without having the kind of legibility that comes with the fully formulated figure.

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With that in mind, I started to focus more on the possibility of objects being able to hold this psychic energy. I think in getting ready for this slide show, and looking at this slide, I realized that these two images are actually portraits of my parents. The one on the left is this bodily lamp with this work shirt. My dad would wear dressed up clothes to go to work every day, he worked as a social worker. It's like thinking about that commitment for him providing for me, my sister, and my family. And the two combs, I realized, were this

memory related to grief. When we lost my grandmother, I remember my mom's hair falling out in chunks. I say this to you now to explain the artwork, but a lot of times when we're reviewing things we don't necessarily have this context.

[\(00:17:13\)](#):

And I just started to become really interested in storytelling, not so much with the figure, and using objects as a stand-in. And that was like a turning moment for me in graduate school that really, I feel like, broke myself and my work open in a way to become more exploratory and try different things out.

[\(00:17:39\)](#):

The next couple of slides are just me in graduate school experimenting. This was a show I did at my friend's apartment—Ben Quinn, who actually is from Columbus, Ohio—so there's nice little synergy there. But yeah, my impetus for this show was just to make works that were self-illuminating. I had this vision to like—because it was in this domestic space—to kill off all the overhead lights and create this super intimate viewing experience. I feel like there are a lot of, I guess, throughlines with some of slides before the TV is a recurring motif. The lamp was a form that I was going back to a lot. And yeah, the name of this show was called *Lights Out, Nights Out*.

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This next slide is towards the tail end of graduate school. And I'm starting to really hone in and get a little bit more comfortable with this idea of exploring, I guess, the psychology of objects. I think a lot of these objects on the screen have a lot of personal history, but they're also really open. The handrail on the wall is a reference to my parents, and their aging, and the tribulations with your body becoming less workable. It's just seeing my dad go through his personal struggles, that was a notation to that. The doorknobs are this reference to access. I made the cat tree in homage to a cat that I lived with that passed away. They're these subtle references to time passing, life happening, and also larger history going on.

[\(00:19:46\)](#):

The neti pot I made, and I realize now it's like a self-portrait. I have mad allergies. And its one of those things where it's just you take for granted being able to breathe through two nostrils until one of them is clogged. I realized this is one of the first works that I made that were dealing with breath in our bodies in, like, physical form outside of ourselves. These two were these pivotal moments in graduate school. The phone on the right is called, "I can see, but I don't hear you." I made this phone after I had a call with Sallie Mae about paying back my student loans, and I'm just like, "I'm just going to ignore this." And the jug is actually the first face jug that I made in reference to the history of face jugs, which we'll get into in a little bit.

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But at this point I was really fortunate enough to develop a relationship with my first gallery, Jessica Silverman. I started that relationship in graduate school. We had open studios and she popped by. And, I don't know, for some reason took a liking to my work and was checking up. These two pieces were the first pieces that I showed with her. She took them to the Armory Arts Fair in New York and both of them sold. And I was like, "Damn, this is possible." It was literally the most amount of money I've seen in my account at one time. And I was just like, "Oh, this couple of thousand dollars, this is

going to last me for at least three years. I could buy a house, a car, a kiln, I'm set." But needless to say, I think these two objects, I don't know, were really pivotal in my formation as an artist.

[\(00:21:49\)](#):

And the face jug on the left kind of happened by accident, because I was making these stools and chairs for a theater group. For some reason they wanted these terracotta chairs. I'm just like, "I don't think this is going to work. Because if you're planning to move these things around and perform with them, ceramics is not the material." I ended up making it anyways. They used them, realized, "Yeah, it's not going to work." I had a selection of these stools and tables lying around in my studio. And, by chance, with this jug, it fit perfectly to the stool. It was like, in the studio one day I had this stool and one corner and this jug was fully formulated. I had no clue how I was going to display this jug. And I looked back and forth between the two pieces and I was like, "Holy hell, I think this will fit on top of that." And that was one of those moments that, I don't know, it's just where things become aligned.

[\(00:22:55\)](#):

You could call it synchronicity, but I don't know, the bases and the ways that I display my work. It was super important. I'm not the biggest fan of pedestals, that's just a personal preference. I have no offense with pedestals, I just don't like them with my objects. There's something of a discord that starts to happen, because ceramics is such this loose and fluid material. It has a lot of curvilinear lines. I think for me I realized, whenever I put an object on a traditional pedestal, something just... the energy was just, there's a discord happening there. A little bit of a happy accident, but I had been thinking about different ways of displaying the work, and how to build as much context as possible with the individual objects.

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Post grad school I just entered the gallery world without really knowing too much. I was like, I don't want to say I was in the rabbit race, but that's the word that comes to mind. I was in the studio, I guess in between graduate school and setting up my own studio. I did a little residency that my grad program had. I used the money from that artwork that I sold to buy a kiln. I had no place to put the kiln. I figured if I'm going to be making ceramics, I need a kiln. I bought the kiln, figured out the studio stuff later with a buddy I went to school with. And I just hit the ground running. I was not really thinking so much in terms of what I was making. I was letting my intuition drive me as much as possible. But in hindsight, I realized that just making, I started to build this lexicon of objects that made sense to me that were really familiar, but we're just open-ended in the sense where they're just really open.

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The phones to me are about speaking up, making sure that you're heard. But communication is a two-way street. So, if you're making space for yourself to be heard, we also have to make space for ourselves to listen, which I think that gets lost a lot of the time, so that was a little reminder for me. The faucets are a huge reoccurring motif. These were the first ones that I made. And I made these because I was dating somebody at the time and they were convinced I was bipolar. It's just hot and cold. And I just love how objects are able to hold this kind of metaphor to hold these different traits.

And this just came out of moving into an apartment, too. Just everyday life. I moved into an apartment and there were two different spigots for hot and cold water. It was you could only ever get really cold water, super hot water.

[\(00:26:12\):](#)

It was super frustrating. It was like, "What if you want warm water?" I embodied that experience into sculptural form. But water is now a loaded, at least for me, a loaded reference. And these were kind of the first vents and air purifiers that I started making. These are a huge part of my lexicon now. More vents, AC units. And this ties back to the neti pot that I showed before. I started really to think about how the objects, like that occupy our space are just an extension of our spirit in physical form. I started to think about the anthropomorphic, the animism of everyday objects. And I was thinking about how our homes, our interior spaces circulate air. For me, the AC units and the purifiers reference this notion of breath and breathing. The AC unit on the left, its center sucking in, so it's almost like taking this deep breath, this inhalation of some sort.

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These are more objects that I was making, the TV has been this reoccurring motif. I went from making these more, I guess video pieces in the earlier slides using actual TV to using the symbology of the TV. But clocks are really huge part of my artist lexicon with the mixed up numbers, they're bleeding and melting away. Phones, outlets, these on and off switches, these remote controls, all about agency, changing the channel when you don't want to watch something. It's almost like to me it goes back to thoughts. If I have a bad thought I just change the channel on my thoughts and think about something else. I loved how the objects start to become this extension for living life, which is what they actually are to me.

[\(00:28:41\):](#)

These are plants. Plants are a huge part of motif, too. A lot in ceramic form, but I'm also just using actual plant life now. And I started making the plants, because I realized whenever I was hella stressed or just super busy, my plants would start to have this wilting notion. It's just a reflection of my interpersonal state, radiating outward, my immediate environment. And the vessels. The vessels are a huge part of, yeah, just the work. I've realized now that the vessel to me is just an extension of the figure. To me it's very figurative in a way. Because it's super poetic and I'm able to express a lot of things that I was doing before with the fully formed figure, just a little bit more, I guess, nuance with these vessel shapes. These are more vessels. And I mean, I guess the context of all of this work, I really was just in the, I guess, yeah, I guess working with the gallery.

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I think when I was making this work, I actually started working with two galleries, Jessica Silverman, first gallery, and Karma in New York. I was trying to figure things out, trying to balance making work that I wanted to make, but also there's this different pressure that starts to happen when the work becomes a commodity of some sorts. And these are more vessels. I'm just in the studio making work, figuring things out, trying to build a studio, which is an entirely different entity in and of itself. Started working with an assistant at this point. And yeah, I was just doing the thing. This is maybe like 2018, 2019, this work here.

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And as I'm working, the opportunity to submit a proposal for public art came. This was probably like 2018. And I was fortunate enough to get selected to make these large-scale bronzes for the San Francisco airport. And little did I know that the public commission and large-scale bronzes would become a huge part of my practice. I just want to take some time to talk about that process, and to talk about some of the commission work. For making the commissions, everything always start off with a drawing and a maquette. It's hard to pitch something abstract to somebody, especially when they're liable for it. A lot of the large-scale bronzes takes on a different process in the studio, I kind of just make things as I feel. But yeah, commission work is definitely a lot more laborious in terms of the planning, so everything always starts off with the sketch and a maquette.

[\(00:32:12\)](#):

And once I make the maquette, we actually... that's what we actually use to make the actual bronze. For most of the bronzes that I do, I hardly ever make them to scale. What we do is 3D scan the maquette. A lot of them get milled out of foam, and then I cover the foam with a thin layer of an oil-based clay to get the qualities that I would have in the clay work. And from here, the foundry is able to take this form to make molds, to make a wax, to start the lost-wax process. They oftentimes cut up a larger scale form into hundreds of manageable pieces, depending on the size of their furnace. And there's a lot of metal work that goes to building it and piecing it back together. This is the execution of that project at the San Francisco airport.

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After I did this commission, I had the opportunity to again make another large-scale bronze for a section at Art Basel called *Meridians*. And this was probably another really pivotal moment in my development in my practice. I'm from Miami, that's my hometown, so to be able to have an opportunity like this to make something that my whole family can see was, I don't know, it was super important. I remember the opening night of this and just the emotional roller coaster that I went on. Because I made this yellow fan and I'm making it in the context of just my studio myself. But I remember walking around the rest of the floor. I think David Hammons had a piece, Isaac Julien had a piece. There were all these artists that had really incredible large-scale artwork. And I'm just like, "Oh my God, I made a yellow school bus, a box fan. This is not going to go over so well."

[\(00:34:36\)](#):

But I think fortunately, this piece got a lot of really positive, an extreme amount of positive feedback. And I don't know, it's like one of those lessons of just, sometimes you could do the thing that doesn't make any sense, and see it through as long as you have the impulse, and the intuition and I don't know... Yeah, sometimes I don't need to know what I'm doing. Sometimes it's almost trivial and silly. And I've learned to follow those notions more or less. Between that SFO project and this, it just kicked off this run of doing a lot of large-scale bronzes. This is another bronze that I did for a show at Jessica Silverman, and maybe this is like 2019, or actually, I don't know, I don't have the date on here. But yeah, time is doing a weird thing.

[\(00:35:39\)](#):

But you can see how this lexicon of objects just is this reoccurring thing. This is definitely a touch point to the faucets that I was making before. Yeah, yeah, the vessel. How are

you guys doing? You guys are doing good? Sweet. Awesome. I do want to touch upon the vessel. I mentioned that when I first started working with clay I had this epiphany of feeling like the material was the key to my past, present, and future. And I think the more and more I work with the material, the more and more that's proving itself true. This vessel is by David Drake, who was an enslaved potter. And he actually inscribed on his vessels. This one has the word "catination" on it, which means "a state of being yoked or chained." And this vessel is dated 1836, which was two years after South Carolina passed the anti-literacy act.

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The act of him writing on the vessel was a courageous act. The fact that he's making them and inscribing on them, he was literally risking his life. And I think being interested in the material of ceramics, it propelled me to be interested in learning more about, I guess, where I come from and the vastness of the African diaspora. Through making clay work I learned about the Edgefield Potters and the history of face jugs, and South Carolina. One of these, the one on the left is by Jim McDowell, who's a contemporary artist. And he's who I found out about face jugs. And the one on the right is more of an historical face jug made by an enslaved person.

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A little bit about the history of the face jugs. There was a slave ship called the Wanderer that illegally transported slaves to the states. The slaves ended up in Edgefield, South Carolina. And apparently there has never been a history of face jugs before these people entered the United States. When I look at these objects, I see this personal history and a reflection of more ancestral inspiration. Learning more about the history of the face jug, the importance of it, it's inspired a lot of jugs in my work. The jug is an object that I come back to. My jugs oftentimes don't have any eyes at all. Actually, I don't think I've ever made a jug with any eyes. I've learned through just the different diasporic art practices the meanings of different formal maneuvers and just what the sculptures mean. Going on with that, the image on the right is an Nkisi figure, and I just have been learning a lot about various African art. Learning about Nkisi figures, learning about Dogon statuary and Djenne ceramics.

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I learned with this figure, the Nkisi, that oftentimes the eyes are open wide to be able to see evil spirits in the horizon. Oftentimes these objects weren't looked as simply objects to be gazed at, but they were activated. A lot of them had these secret cavities where a shaman or a sacred practitioner would conjure up these different medicinal herbs to put inside of the sculptures to activate them to help heal with different social ailments, fertility issues, or just appeasing the larger powers that be. The kneeling figures are often kneeling to show reverence to a higher source, a higher power. The Djenne ceramics are just super fascinating, because I think a lot of scholars have no clue why this figure is anthropomorphized or contorted in this way. But I think for me the mystery is the amazing part, because I feel like there's so much emotion and reflection that gets transposed onto the figure, because it is exaggerated in this way.

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So yeah, I don't know. I think to be able to see emotion expressed outside of yourself in physical form can just be super healing in terms of our own reflection and meditation. All

of these references from the common everyday object to more ancestral inspiration is like what I poured into the work that I made for the 2022 Whitney Biennial. This piece is called, *The Will to Make Things Happen*, which is the essence of the Yoruba word, “ase.” And you could just see the entirety of my lexicon attributed here—the kneeling vessel, the face jug, the radiator, the TV, the step ladder to me is a really positive object, thinking metaphorically about how a step ladder is used to help you reach things that are unreachable. And again, you can see how all of the thinking that I’m doing with context, like the pedestals, like the floor, all the consideration comes together in this moment.

[\(00:42:26\)](#):

This was another really surreal opportunity being included in that show. And I think all the moments of exhibiting work, I think some of the thing that brings me the most joy is being able to share that with my mom and my dad. I have a near and dear picture of my entire family in front of this installation. Just all of us are boo-boo crying with boogers in our mouths, and it was just a really tender moment. I remember seeing one of my favorite artists in the audience, too, and no shame, I’m just having this full emotional spread happened.

[\(00:43:07\)](#):

So yeah, these are show ... Actually, this show I did right after the Whitney show. This was at Karma in New York, and I’m using some of the same objects as the Whitney works, but to me I feel like I’ve been trying to do the same thing for the past, I don’t know, 10, 17, I don’t know. Since I was 18, I’ve been trying to do the same thing. If I go back to the slides before at the beginning of the presentation, you could see how a lot of the same considerations, I’m taking in the work here in terms of context, environment, flooring.

[\(00:43:49\)](#):

So, with this space it’s subtle things, this is not the actual flooring of the gallery. We put this faux wood flooring and added this molding to it to make it feel a little bit more domestic. This show was called, *Maybe Tomorrow*, and it was inspired, or the name comes from a jazz composition by Grant Green, and I don’t know, it was a song that I was listening to a lot at the time, and it just had this kind of eerie, slow, melodic quality, but had uplifting chords at the same time. I think I was thinking about how you can hold on to happiness and grief altogether. I think that’s the energy that went into the objects.

[\(00:44:38\)](#):

I’ve been playing around a lot with wood and wood carving and the synergy between ceramics and wood. This piece is called *Ibeji*, which is a Yoruba deity, which means the twins. It’s a marker of abundance, and this vessel is two-faced, so it’s a fully, I guess, 3D sculptural in the sense where it’s entirely completely different face on the other side. This is more of exploring with different wood bases, and you can see how now the full figure is starting to come back in the work, but a lot more nuance. I realized trying to articulate the facial expressions and the figure was doing a little bit too much. And for me, that cone shape is becoming a reoccurring lexicon. I think it ties back to this notion of jazz music. I love the trumpet; I love the saxophone. I love how it sounds sonically, thinking about how that sound travels. But also, to me, I think that horn shape is like a double edge thing where it’s just like it’s speaking out, but it’s able to draw in different qualities.

[\(00:46:04\)](#):

This is my dog Mia, who's a reoccurring motif as well. I read this thing that talked about when beast becomes man, it's like a notion of progression, but when man becomes beast you don't want to do that, when people start acting like animals. But I've been playing around with the image of my dog and this almost metaphysical space of like, she's starting to become self-actualized or self-realized. So, there are a lot of notions of her just looking at herself, or in meditation or in these states of contemplation, like she's having actual thoughts about her past, present, and future and some of the things that she's done. Like, "Maybe I shouldn't have chased that squirrel, that squirrel's really traumatized by me barking at it." But yeah, yeah, she's becoming a huge part of it.

[\(00:47:04\):](#)

This is a bronze piece that I conceived during the pandemic. It's called *Some Time Moves Fast, Some Time Moves Slow*, and it's this figure kind of clutching and grappling with time. And this is, again, this is actually all older work coming together for an installation, so all of this work is probably, I don't know, a couple of years apart. But just starting to think about how the different pieces could come together to formulate something new.

[\(00:47:43\):](#)

And this was a show I did in London, this was last year, called, *Faith Like a Rock*. And again, a lot of the same notions of how simple gestures could start to change a space. When I say we, my studio team, we did an exhibition design and we engineered this really basic flooring using reclaimed pallets and boards from scaffolding, but we didn't anticipate how it read in the space, but it almost read as rafts in the space. So, it's almost as if these sculptures were on a voyage and arrive in Europe.

[\(00:48:31\):](#)

This was another part of that exhibition, and this leads to a more current exhibition, but when we did this we also didn't anticipate the kind of radiation of the colors radiating onto the ceiling. So, I started to think about, "Oh, it's cool how these two colors are interacting with each other to create this glow."

[\(00:48:57\):](#)

But yeah, this was the slide that I started off with. This form was inspired by the Dogon Kanaga mask, and it's essentially a bird. It symbolizes, or the upper, it symbolizes the cosmic order. The upper bar represents the sky and the lower bar represents the earth. It's primarily used in funerary rituals to help guide the spirits of the deceased to the afterlife. So, it's like this notion of "as above, so below." I grew up in the church, so I think about, "On earth as it is in heaven." But a huge source of inspiration to me is how a lot of prehistoric African people had this really sophisticated knowledge of the heavens and star patterns. So, that's something that is becoming very interesting to me in my practice.

[\(00:50:00\):](#)

And I guess, to round off this talk is my current show at Karma. I mentioned a moment ago how the light was reverberating in that other installation. That led me to think about different ways to change the space, create context. And you know what, painting the walls and doing wallpaper is a lot of work, but putting film on some light bulbs is way easier and a lot more effective. These three pieces are larger bronze pieces. This one in the front is called *Involution*. I've learned this word recently. It's the opposite of evolution.

I learned about it and I think either the Bhagavad Gita or the Dhammapada, and they talk a lot about this space of dreamless sleep. Or even in the Bible in Genesis they talk about creation, but before there's creation there was this void. With this sculpture I was interested in making this nebula where there's this interior cavity in it, almost being protected by the different lines in the sculpture.

[\(00:51:19\)](#):

To me, it also relates to the idea of feeling with your solar plexus. Like, what does intuition feel like? I was trying to see that outside of myself. This show also has a soundscape that I commissioned one of my friends to do. I guess a lot of the things that I'm starting to think about, too, is just, I guess what I've always been thinking about—How viewing sculpture, how does it become this thing that's fully bodily? I think the way that the light situated and it fills the space and the sonics fill the space just causes the viewer or myself to slow down as I'm looking, I'm using the entirety of all of my senses to perceive everything.

[\(00:52:11\)](#):

A lot of people actually hated this orangey-yellow light, which I thought was hilarious. I'm like, "That's really cool that you hate that, because you're going to remember it." But the yellow light came from a text that I read, the *Seven Rays of Light* by Alice Bailey, who's this kind of out-there theosophist. But the orange light in particular represents harmony through conflict. I think, I don't know... Everything that I was getting at with this show was just like, yeah, being in your body, what does reflection look like? How does the viewing experience become a little bit more slowed down? Which I realized these are all things that I've always been interested in throughout making art. The sculpture on the left is called *Inner Knowing*, and the sculpture on the right in the background is called *Capacity*.

[\(00:53:15\)](#):

The sculpture *Capacity*, to me, is almost like this communication tower. I'm fascinated by looking at the different satellite dishes and whatnot. There's a satellite dish, almost like a sound receiver, a cone, but it's becoming this thing where some of the parts are looking like faces, like the cones and the sound receivers if you walk around the sculpture. This was the backspace of the room with a lot of different assorted ceramic sculptures. The drum shape has been another huge lexicon. I recently read Amiri Baraka's *Black Music*, which is a phenomenal book about jazz music, if you like jazz music. But he talks about the African drum being this communication device, and then he talks about how, in a lot of plantations, they realize that different plantations in proximity to each other we're using the African to communicate ... We're using the drum to communicate with each other, so they banished the drum from these colonized spaces. But I don't know, the drum, the bass that also goes back to being in your body, this idea of your heart beating. It's a little tongue-in-cheeky, but I like those references in my art.

[\(00:54:48\)](#):

This is a close-up view, and in this space is a drawing room where I was making all of these more kind of loose, more like open-ended drawings. They're very, the loosest drawings, the most abstract drawings that I've ever made, and we fill the gallery with 80 tons of sand. As you're walking through this space, you're trying to have this solely

visual optical experience, but you're having to negotiate just this layer of sand underneath. And yeah, that's pretty much my slideshow, I think that's that.

Bre Hendricks ([00:55:31](#)):

Oh, boy. Hello, everyone. Why am I nervous all of a sudden? We've been hanging out all day. I can't stop thinking about that lunch we had earlier, though, because we did have a lot of questions from the grad students that did come. I thank you for that. We talked about contrast and finding optimism, and in your work you find optimism through spirituality and you entwine that with abstracted sculpture. How does abstraction or the development of your work in loosening your forms invite optimism?

Woody De Othello ([00:56:24](#)):

I don't know. You guys can hear me, right? I think a lot of the times our eyes lie. We're so accustomed to looking at things through a particular sense and lens. I think there's a way if you skew something or slightly tweak the volume of something where it just forces you to have a different interpretation of it, a different type of reaction to it. I think a huge part of when I'm realizing now just existing is just like, where does everything come from? This chair, this room, this space, my clothing? And it's just before it exists as something, a physical, it must first exist in consciousness. And that is a blurry type of perceptual thing to try and navigate. I think one, having a spiritual practice, you just learn to look at the essence of something, so I don't know if I purposely abstract things. I think that's an inherent quality in working with ceramics and leaning into the properties of ceramics. But yeah, I don't know. I think it's a matter of just being able to switch perality and view things from multiple different points.

Bre Hendricks ([00:58:03](#)):

Yeah, I agree. Ceramics is one of those mediums that's already inherently very therapeutic, because it's so tactile. And it's also very community building as well, because we get to share what we've learned and share our processes. We did talk about how you've hired or you work with people for commissions.

Woody De Othello ([00:58:23](#)):

Totally, yeah, yeah.

Bre Hendricks ([00:58:23](#)):

How do you pay it forward? How does you fostering or forging a community in your studio pay forward, give opportunities for artists to network, or to build communities outside of school?

Woody De Othello ([00:58:35](#)):

I think I just try and be as helpful as possible to be of service. And one of my favorite things to ask somebody is like, "What do you want to do? What'd you dream about?" Which is like, I'm just really curious to hear, or, "What are you working on?" Or just opening up that space a lot. I think there's something about, I don't know, just giving that feels really amazing. I do work with the studio team, that's how I'm able to do these more

ambitious things. I do feel like I have a pretty ... And it's also like the Bay Area, too. The Bay has a very liberal kind of—

Bre Hendricks ([00:59:23](#)):

It's so cool over there. I got to visit it.

Woody De Othello ([00:59:26](#)):

... attitude towards it. It's just, I don't know, it's not worth it if you're not able to pay it forward. And sometimes it don't cost nothing to give nothing, and it's just, it is simple as just checking up on somebody, creating space. Yeah, I'm not the most perfect at it either. I definitely have some blunders and whatnot, but I'm trying to do the best that I can.

Bre Hendricks ([00:59:54](#)):

Thank you for doing the best that you can, that's awesome. In thinking about practices, someone did ask a really good question earlier about having a switch and turning off the art practice and trying to, I guess, assimilate into the world that's like nine to five in the office, go home, cook dinner, whatever, is there an off switch for making?

Woody De Othello ([01:00:25](#)):

Physically I can't make all the time.

Bre Hendricks ([01:00:28](#)):

True.

Woody De Othello ([01:00:28](#)):

That's physically impossible. I think there are always moments for rest. I do feel like I'm a very balanced person. I don't like to work super late, I work with the energy of the sun. But in terms of the conceptualizing, the thinking—I feel like being an artist is such a privilege, and you never know when inspiration will happen. I think in a lot of ways, when are we ever truly turned completely off? It's just, I don't know, I think focus and intention goes a long way. And being able to listen to your body, listen to your intuition is like things that ... Is a life's work for me of being able to find balance and peace ultimately. That's my ultimate goal of anything that I do is just to find harmony and peace.

Bre Hendricks ([01:01:40](#)):

I also agree with finding harmony and peace in artwork and in life. We can't have one without the other as, at least, an art student over here. I'm curious to know about how ... When was the moment that you found out you were in the Whitney Biennial, meeting these artists that are also in a great upper echelon as you are. Can you talk about the process of doing the Whitney Biennial, if you feel comfortable with sharing?

Woody De Othello ([01:02:10](#)):

I could talk about it. We were talking about it before, and I think almost not having any expectation is ... I'm a little naive to a certain degree. I don't like to research folks so much when they come by. So, crazy enough, when Adrienne and David came by, I didn't

know what they were coming by for. I didn't have no clue. I was just like, "Oh, they're people coming by the studio." And I think not having the expectations just gives you the opportunity to also not perform in a particular way. I don't know, people are just people. I rather just work with people that I get along with than ... I don't actually really ... The Whitney is one of those things that you dream about, so I definitely have dreamt about it. I guess I can't say I've dreamt about it now, because it happened. But I don't know, it's just like all of it, low-key feels like, I don't want to say surreal, but yeah, I don't know.

[\(01:03:23\)](#):

Sometimes I'm able to stop and reflect and I'm like, "Holy shit, that happened." But I don't know, I also ... Yeah, I don't know. It's an indescribable experience. And I mentioned it when I was up there, the thing that really made everything tangible in a way was just getting to experience that with my family. My dad had reconnected with a friend from Haiti, and he was telling him at this time period how he was in New York. He was going to travel to New York to see his son's show, and how his friend was just like, "Damn, that's amazing." And hearing my dad tell me that story, I was just like, "Oh, wow." That's like, just thinking about the different histories and especially when I'm looking at the history of people in our bodies, that trajectory, I don't know. I just have to be super thankful in that sense.

Bre Hendricks [\(01:04:38\)](#):

Yeah, yeah. I'm thinking about how you put a lot of value and put a lot of work into your research. I feel like I did ask earlier what you like to have on in the background of your studio, like, "I love a podcast. I love something live." What are you reading right now?

Woody De Othello [\(01:04:59\)](#):

Oh, right now I'm reading this book called *Talk to Me* by Rich Benjamin, who's a Haitian American. His dad was the ... Or not his dad, his grandfather was the interim president of Haiti for 19 days and got kicked out of office by a United States-backed coup, so that's a really interesting read. And then I read multiple things at a time. I'm like a bird, I chip around. I'm reading this translation of the Egyptian Book of the Dead by Muata Ashby, and he's a practitioner of Kemetic theology and philosophy. I try to read the Wallis Budge translation of that book, and I was just like, "I don't know what I'm reading." But to read it from somebody who's not an anthropologist, who's a practitioner, it's just a lot of the philosophies and customs. He's trying to write it in a way that they could be applied to just contemporary living, which I think is beautiful.

[\(01:06:13\)](#):

And then I've been slowly reading through *The Dawn of Everything*, which that's been fascinating too. Going back to focus and attention, which is like also the TVs that come up in the work. It's just like, I like to try and be as mindful as possible with how I'm spending my time. A lot of times I can spend a lot of time just on Instagram.

Bre Hendricks [\(01:06:41\)](#):

Oh, yes.

Woody De Othello ([01:06:42](#)):

Which I mean, everything happens with due time. I do love dog memes, but yeah, it's just I like to have balance, so it's almost like ... My wife is just like, I don't really watch too much TV, but my wife is just like, "Bro, you're either reading book or scrolling on Instagram. It makes no sense." And then I have the audio on, so I'm listening to the craziest stuff on Instagram, but...

Bre Hendricks ([01:07:07](#)):

Dualities.

Woody De Othello ([01:07:08](#)):

Yeah, that's the Gemini in me. I'm Gemini, big Gemini energy. So yeah, that duality is important.

Bre Hendricks ([01:07:16](#)):

Thank you for sharing. I may have stopped reading this semester, but I have a list that I can add too. I would like to open it up to the audience. If you all have some questions, please wait until Jess comes around with the microphone so we can have you speak into it. Anyone have questions?

Jess Xiao Long ([01:07:34](#)):

Thank you. Just raise your hand up high and I'll come give you the microphone, or feel free to text in. I can actually start us with one from the hotline. Thank you for someone texting in so early. Someone from the audience asks, "Have you ever had moments where your vision did not come to life? If so, did you still run with it and continue, give up, redo, or leave it, and what emotions were related to that vision that didn't come to life?"

Woody De Othello ([01:08:07](#)):

I'm one of those, first, there's some things that are just too crazy to do, so those I'm just waiting. But I'm also one of those type of people, I like to see things through, even though if I know while I'm in the process of doing it it's not going to work out, there's something about just seeing it all the way through. But failure is just a part of making artwork, and that's the one beautiful thing about ceramics. It's almost, to me it's a very much—you could almost have a Buddhist-like philosophy in the sense of not getting too high or too low and being the same in your pain and your joy. I think I learned a lot of those things through the failures of making ceramics. And a lot of the times I'm in the studio, I would say I'm pretty even. I get excited, but I don't get overly excited. And I get down, but I don't get overly down. It's really just balanced and measured.

([01:09:24](#)):

I don't know, the failures, you learn the most from when things that don't work out, but I also apply that just to life, like when I'm feeling hurt, or I don't know, something emotional is going on, I try not to get too down about the emotion. But I always have a reflection of gratitude in the sense of just like, "Thank you that this is happening, because I am able to learn from this opportunity."

Bre Hendricks ([01:09:52](#)):

You definitely talked about time being like a pendulum earlier, that really resonated with me. We have successes and we have our stresses, so it's nice to have a nice strike or a balance in between the two.

Woody De Othello ([01:10:03](#)):

That's a good title for something.

Bre Hendricks ([01:10:05](#)):

Yes.

Woody De Othello ([01:10:06](#)):

Yeah.

Jess Xiao Long ([01:10:08](#)):

Alright. Any hands? Here we go. Sorry, I'm going to go this way.

Audience 1 ([01:10:19](#)):

Thank you, Woody and Breanna, for the talk. I was curious when you have to work with others to execute your projects, what your approach is for those large-scale works or collaboration, or being in charge, telling people what to do, how you handle that?

Woody De Othello ([01:10:50](#)):

Yeah, that's something I've learned to do. I haven't been the greatest at it at the past. I think it goes back to a lot of stress management. If I'm stressed out, everybody else is going to be stressed out. But if I'm calm, chances are everybody else is probably going to be calm. So yeah, I just really try to manage my own emotions before I interact with somebody. And there's a way to give feedback where it's just like, it's encouraging, but you're also just communicating some like... in terms of how you want things done. If I'm trying to correct an assistant with something, I'm just like, "Hey, that's really amazing, but let's try it this way."

([01:11:44](#)):

But I think a lot of it, too, is not micromanaging as well and just being open to the different energies that are coming into the work. Especially with clay construction, ultimately in the studio I end up doing something to everything that gets touched, but in terms of building a rough form, it's just like I have a certain way of doing it and somebody else has a certain way of doing it, and that's a part of the exchange of having help. It's just, you have to be open to the ways that somebody gets from point A to point B to point C. So yeah, I'm not the biggest micromanager, but I've realized a lot of times, if I'm really just calm and measured, that starts to radiate through. But the relationships, they take time, they take time. And I feel like I'm one of those people where I'm just like, "You reap what you sow. So, the energy that you put out is what you receive."

([01:12:54](#)):

There've definitely been times where I've had, I don't want to say schizophrenic, just crazy, buzzing energy, and then I am looking for help, and then I attract the exact thing

that I'm radiating. I don't know. I think a lot of times dealing with these interpersonal situations, it's really just looking in the mirror. I feel like a lot of times people in your immediate space, i.e. the studio, are just a reflection of what you're putting out. Sometimes it could be challenging, but I don't know. Also, at the end of the day it's art, it's not like I'm an architect. That's really different. If I was putting up a building and things wasn't getting done, most of the time with art there's a remedy to it, but I'm a big believer of just, yeah, you reap what you sow.

[\(01:14:00\)](#):

It's like, is another thing too. If you have help and you're not paying your help the most, you're probably not going to get the best in exchange. So, what is that middle line? What is the thing that just expresses that, "Hey, I value you coming here, X, Y, and Z." Those are all the things that I try and think about with just my personal studio team. I want it to feel like exchange of energy is equitable, because I've been in situations where I'm working my ass off, but then I am not getting paid that much, so I start showing up late. I start just calling out. I start doing all these other things, because it's just like, it's not worth... the value is not worth my time. I think all of those things play a factor. And I don't know, I think critique is actually a really loving thing to do, and feedback is actually a really loving thing to do, so I try and do that as lovingly as possible.

Jess Xiao Long [\(01:15:12\)](#):

Alright. Unfortunately, we only have time for one more question, so I'm going to try to wrap up a few that I got from the hotline. So many of you have been texting in, thank you. Quite a few people ask about advice going from school to being a full-time professional artist, particularly in relation to one, finances and connections, and two, sort of an imposter syndrome. How do you sort of build yourself up to be who you are?

Woody De Othello [\(01:15:41\)](#):

Yeah, we talked a lot about this in lunch too, the imposter syndrome. And I read something recently. I've been saying this a lot. I feel like since I've read it, I don't even remember where I read it from. I can't remember where I read it from. But it's just like, "You can't plant lemon seeds and expect an apple tree to grow," right? And it's the same thing with thoughts. It's just like, you can't have crazy thoughts of imposter syndrome, and I don't know, just these deconstructed thoughts, and expect reality to have this constructive mirror. And it's just, to be honest, if you're feeling like you have imposter syndrome, our emotions are compasses, they're navigational tools. It's just like, if you feel like you have imposter syndrome, think about what is the thing that is going to help you not have imposter syndrome. It's something I've suffered a lot with, and I was just like, "Damn, I have imposter syndrome when I was in school, because I feel like, oh, I don't know as many things. I haven't read as many books."

[\(01:16:50\)](#):

And I still haven't read as many of the "art theoretical books," but I like to read what I like to read, and that's what goes into my work. And that's helped me to battle those notions of like, "I'm not doing enough." Or if I feel like I'm not working enough in the studio, I start working a little bit harder in the studio, but you don't want to be working in the studio and not have the mental and spiritual parts aligned, because just like working, working, working and not fixing the root of just the thing, it's like not going to, at least for me, it's

not going to help. I really approach things from a metaphysical standpoint in the sense where the physical part is actually the least effective action to take. But if you could conquer and get your mental and spiritual aligned, it's going to make anything that you do in the physical space just a lot more productive.

[\(01:17:53\)](#):

I don't know, yeah, the imposter syndrome, it's just like I really struggled with that a lot when I first got out of school, in school. I'm not perfect, it still comes up a lot, but it's just like I have to sit down and ask myself, and one, listen to my thoughts, listen to why these feelings are coming up, two, reflect on them and then meditate on them, and then figure out what the course of action is. Because yeah, that dialogue, everything has a cause and effect, so it's just like, "What is the cause for that kind of dialogue?" And I think a lot of times it's just a misalignment between the mental-spiritual space and the physical space, so I like to approach that from that sense.

[\(01:18:48\)](#):

And I don't know, sometimes it's just you don't have to tell everybody what your desires are, but a lot of times if you have mixed expectations you get mixed results. I always point to a situation with my sister, she was living in Alabama and she wanted to move out of Alabama, and she's like, "I just want to get out of here." And then I was just like, "Where do you want to go?" She's like, "I don't know." And then she ended up in Pensacola and she's like, "I don't like Pensacola." I'm like, "Well, you figured out the first part, because you wanted to get out of Alabama. You got out of Alabama, so that happened. So, maybe you want to have a little bit more specificity with the actual destination, do some research, try and travel someplace to paint that picture." But I don't know. Again, focus and attention. I think those are our superpowers. If we focus and spend our attention on something long enough, I don't know, I low-key really think that I could bend a piece of metal with my mind.

Emily Haidet [\(01:20:00\)](#):

I think that's all the time we have for, but I just want to thank you, Woody and Bre, for such a great conversation. And thank you all for coming. I hope this was rewarding for everybody, and thanks again. Hopefully we'll see you next Wednesday for B. Ingrid Olson.

Woody De Othello [\(01:20:19\)](#):

Okay, I can stay around and ask a question.

Emily Haidet [\(01:20:22\)](#):

Yeah, Woody said he's going to stick around at the front of the stage, so if you want to continue chatting, he can do that for a little bit.