

Body Vessel Clay: Black Women, Ceramics & Contemporary Art

Exhibition runs: Saturday 29 January - Sunday 24 April 2022

Two Temple Place, London WC2R 3BD www.twotempleplace.org #BodyVesselClay

Two Temple Place is delighted to announce its tenth free exhibition **Body Vessel Clay: Black Women, Ceramics & Contemporary Art** opening 29 January 2022.

Body Vessel Clay: Black Women, Ceramics & Contemporary Art will be an exploration of how ceramics have been disrupted, questioned and reimagined by Black women over the last 70 years. The exhibition will bring together more than 80 works by six artists, including ceramics, preparatory drawings, film and archival material, tracing post-colonial, gender and class perspectives on ceramics' manufacture and ownership across continents. On display will be work by Ladi Kwali, Phoebe Collings-James, Shawanda Corbett, Jade Montserrat, Bisila Noha and Dame Magdalene Odundo.

Body Vessel Clay will open with work by the seminal Nigerian potter, Ladi Kwali (1925-1984), and will examine her impact on, and revitalisation of, the industry in Nigeria and beyond. In the 1950s, the Pottery Training Centre in Abuja was set up by British potter Michael Cardew to expand Nigeria's pottery industry and explore new technologies and influences. It was a vital moment of rupture in Nigerian modernism, with the worlds of indigenous Nigerian and British Studio Pottery coming together to galvanise a new wave of creativity. Archival material from the Abuja years will provide an overview of life at the Training Centre at the point at which Nigeria was emerging from British colonial rule and Kwali was achieving international renown. Kwali went on to become such a key figure that she is featured on the 20 Naira note, seen in the process of creating a pot.

Through Kwali and her female contemporaries, this new perspective on one of the world's oldest artforms will reinterpret the line of Kwali's influence. On display will be a selection of pots made by Dame Magdalene Odundo during her time in Abuja. She was introduced to Kwali by Cardew in 1974, and Odundo's work demonstrates the techniques that she learned through her time working alongside Kwali. Odundo said, *"I was in awe of Ladi Kwali – she had an amazing presence. Every time I walk around my work, I think of her. She opened up my horizons. I started appreciating [through her work] the longevity and universality of the art in other African countries. The work of Ladi Kwali was absolutely poetic. She had a sense of geometry in her bones, and could see form as it was being made."* Odundo's work will be shown alongside new and historical work by Bisila Noha including her own research and explorations into Kwali's practice and influence.

Kwali's influence can also be perceived more obliquely, resonating through a younger generation of international contemporary Black women artists working with clay in radical new ways. In a striking contemporary display, the work of Phoebe Collings-James, Shawanda Corbett and Jade Montserrat will be shown together, encompassing performance, sculptural installation and moving image.

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The artists in *Body Vessel Clay* share across geographies and temporalities a deep fascination with testing the medium's properties to render personal, political collective and visionary new aesthetics.

Collings-James will present new work from *The subtle rules the dense* (2021-ongoing), a group of torso casings that resemble Roman armour plates, relics of the reckless pursuit of conflict. The sculptures continue her study of ceramic forms through an engagement with tenderness, eroticism and the haptic qualities of the medium as it transforms, receives impressions, yields to wheel-thrown and hand-built techniques, and layers of slips and oxides.

Noha's project, *Searching for Kouame Kakaha: A celebration of the unnamed women of clay; our shared mothers and grandmother* redresses the fact that pottery, especially that made by women in the Global South, has been ignored, belittled and forgotten. Noha's new work will respond to the legacies of Ladi Kwali and Kouame Kakaha as she searches for her own voice while remaining rooted and connected to earlier traditions.

The exhibition will also include Jade Montserrat's performance for camera, *Clay*, (2015, filmed by Webb-Ellis), in which the artist immerses her body into the landscape in repetitive acts recreating, digging and building with clay, recalling her childhood growing up in rural Yorkshire, and symbolising humans being gouged from the earth.

In a number of recent ceramic sculptures, Shawanda Corbett explores common tropes from "the Hood", in which characters are often invisible or reduced to stereotypes, but are here given a dignity and humanity in the artist's reimagining. Presented in pairs, with the works' surfaces being painted while listening to different jazz music, Corbett's is in an intuitive and improvisational process, created in a dance performed by the artist around the ceramics whilst making them.

Body Vessel Clay: Black Women, Ceramics & Contemporary Art is created in partnership with the Crafts Study Centre, Farnham, Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art, the University of Aberystwyth, and York Museums Trust, with key loans from the Hepworth Wakefield, Bristol Museums Trust, the V&A and a number of Private Collections.

The exhibition is curated by curator, researcher and writer Dr Jareh Das.

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EDITORS' NOTES:

"I grew up in Nigeria in the 1990s and was re-introduced to Ladi Kwali when the 20 Naira note was re-designed to include her image at the throwing wheel on the reverse side. Years later, an encounter with Abuja Pottery at a UK museum spurred a return to Kwali and her astounding achievements as a leading figure existing in the worlds of Nigerian pottery and British Studio Pottery. *Body Vessel Clay* begins with recognising the hybrid and radical practice of Ladi Kwali through to the contemporary generation of Black women artists reimagining the material in new ways as a time-based medium with performative qualities. This exhibition attends to clay's transformative, haptic, malleable and metaphoric potential, whilst situating ceramics as a continually expanding field." Dr Jareh Das, Curator

Phoebe Collings-James (b. 1987) London-based Collings-James works across sculpture, video, sound and performance. She is a recipient of the Freelands Lomax Ceramics Fellowship, and her recent works have been dealing with the object as subject, giving life and tension to ceramic forms through an engagement with eroticism and the haptic qualities of clay, alongside inscribing sgraffito into ceramic paintings, including symbols, African folklore and mythic traditions.

Collings-James founded Mudbelly ceramics studio as a personal practice and research outlet, but it has since grown to encompass a shop and a teaching facility offering free ceramics courses for Black people in London, taught by Black ceramicists.

Shawanda Corbett (b. 1989) New York-born Corbett's wide-ranging practice covers performance and pottery through a 'cyborg' perspective, looking at the relationship between differently-abled and abled bodies. Her vessels are colourful sculptural ceramics featuring paired forms in curious communion. She is currently studying for her doctorate in Fine Art at the Ruskin School of Art and the University of Oxford.

Jade Montserrat (b. 1981) is an artist and writer based in Yorkshire. Her research-led practice excavates shared histories alongside delving into her personal narrative. Montserrat works at the intersection of art and activism through painting, performance, film, sculpture, installation, print and text; she interrogates these mediums with the aim of exposing gaps in our visual and linguistic habits. Montserrat was the recipient of the Stuart Hall Foundation Scholarship for her PhD (via MPhil) at IBAR, UCLan, (Race and Representation in Northern Britain in the context of the Black Atlantic: A Creative Practice Project), and the development of her work from her Black diasporic perspective in the North of England. She was also awarded one of two Jerwood Student Drawing Prizes in 2017 for *No Need for Clothing*, a documentary photograph of a drawing installation at Cooper Gallery DJCAD by Jacquetta Clark. In 2021, Jade participated in a group exhibition titled *An Infinity of Traces* at Lisson Gallery, and opened a solo exhibition titled *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* at Bosse & Baum Gallery, both in London.

Bisila Noha (b. 1988) is a London-based ceramicist of Spanish and Equatorial Guinean heritage. Strongly influenced by Japanese ceramics, she makes 'simple' ceramic pieces that serve as a canvas for abstract landscapes or as the embodiment of reflections and personal life stories. Noha has made her own journey back to forgotten Black (African) female potters like Kouame Kakaha from Ivory Coast and Ladi Kwali from Nigeria through her creative practice.

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Noha's two-legged vessels are a metaphor for the feeling of in-betweeness she often feels given her background: a conjunction of two legs, two parents, two cultures, two races, combined to birth something new. Later discovering this form was previously created by Kakaha in 1995, this led to her current ongoing research and ceramics project, *Searching for Kouame Kakaha: A celebration of the unnamed women of clay; our shared mothers and grandmothers*.

Professor Magdalene Odundo DBE (b. 1950) is a Kenyan-born British studio potter, widely represented in international collections. She combines techniques used by ancient Greek and Roman ceramicists to create exquisite human-like vessels. In 1974 Odundo visited Nigeria at Michael Cardew's suggestion, visiting the Abuja Pottery Training Centre, where she worked directly with Ladi Kwali who taught her Gwari traditional techniques that influenced her developing style. Magdalene has spent over 40 years teaching at various institutions including the University for the Creative Arts, where she is currently the Chancellor.

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Body Vessel Clay – Events & Activities

The exhibition will be accompanied by a wide-ranging programme of cultural events for adults and children including talks, lectures, demonstrations, workshops and Wednesday Late openings until 9pm, and Two Temple programme of schools' workshops for pupils from state sector Primary Schools.

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Opening Times

Monday, Thursday - Saturday: 10am - 4:30pm

Wednesday Late: 10am - 9pm, Sunday: 11am - 4:30pm

Closed on Tuesday, Closed Easter Sunday

ADMISSION FREE

About Two Temple Place

Two Temple Place is a magnificent neo-Gothic mansion in central London, owned and run by charity the Bulldog Trust. Since 2011, a major free annual exhibition programme showcasing regional public collections has invited over 350,000 people to see some of the UK's little-known artworks. This now forms the flagship heart of a programme that will share the hidden gem of Two Temple Place more widely, with more people, for more of the year through cultural and community partnerships. The building inspires, provokes and welcomes creative reimaginings of its spaces, new retellings of its stories, and new artistic responses to its history and craftwork.

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A summary of the impact of Two Temple Place's exhibitions to date can be seen here:
<https://twotempleplace.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/2TP-Exhibition-Report-2011-20.pdf>

Two Temple Place is grateful to the John Ellerman Foundation and the Art Fund's Reimagine programme for their generous support of this exhibition.

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