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Statement of Practice

Black Clay: Black Women, Ceramics and Contemporary Art

Jareh Das

Jareh Das is an independent curator, writer and researcher who lives and works between West Africa and the UK. Das's academic and curatorial practice is informed by an interest in global modern and contemporary art with a specific focus on performance. In 2022, Das curated *Body Vessel Clay: Black Women, Ceramics and Contemporary Art*, Two Temple Place, London and York Art Gallery, an exhibition that spanned seventy years of ceramics and explored how clay has been disrupted, questioned and reimagined by Black women artists. Since 2011, Das has held curatorial and editorial positions with Middlesbrough Institute of Art, Middlesbrough; Etemad Gallery, Dubai; Arts Catalyst, London; MVRDV, Rotterdam; and Camden Art Centre, London and has contributed to a number of publications. Das was awarded a two-year early career fellowship from The Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art as part of their New Narratives Awards.

Abstract

Body Vessel Clay: Black Women, Ceramics and Contemporary Art set out to explore form and function as this relates to object histories. In presenting a range of ceramics and clay artworks by an intergeneration of Black women artists working with clay, the exhibition conveys the material's conceptual, transformative and metaphoric qualities. Additionally, it brings to the foreground a group of Black women artists, in particular a younger generation whose work looks to matrilineal links, black female subjectivity. The exhibition expands on my curatorial position, that of framing ceramics as an expansive and evolving field intersecting with performance art.

Keywords: Ceramics, Contemporary Art, Nigerian Modernism

The exhibition *Body Vessel Clay: Black Women, Ceramics and Contemporary Art* takes as its point of departure, the extraordinary life of renowned Nigerian potter, Ladi Dosei Kwali (c. 1925–1984) who between the late 1950s and her death in 1984 is best remembered for creating hybrid ceramics that bridge methods from indigenous Nigerian pottery and British studio pottery (Figure 1). Importantly, Ladi Kwali was established within

her Gwari ethnic group as a celebrated potter. She was so regarded because of her speed and skill at hand-building and her genius for incised decoration, techniques she learnt as a child from her aunt (Figure 2). She would go on to receive many honours in her lifetime including an MBE for services as a pottery instructor in 1973; an honorary doctorate from Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria (even though she was not formally educated) in 1977; and in 1981 she also received the national honour of the Officer of the Order of the Niger (OON). Alongside these achievements, Ladi Kwali is portrayed,



Fig 1 Ladi Kwali by Kiln. © Doig Simmons Kwali portrait.



Fig 2 *Body Vessel Clay: Black Women, Ceramics and Contemporary Art*, installation view, York Art Gallery, York, UK, 2022. © York Art Gallery.

throwing a pot, on the reverse of the Nigerian 20 naira note. While writing this statement, it was brought to my attention that a limited edition postage stamp (50 kobo) was designed by prominent Nigerian artist, Erhabor Emokpae (c.1973) that also bears her image throwing at the wheel (Figures 3 and 4).

As a young potter, Ladi Kwali's pots took pride of place in the palace of the Emir of Abuja, Alhaji Suleiman Barau, the first western-educated emir in the history of Nigeria. It is where the British studio potter, Michael Cardew (1901–1983) first encountered Ladi Kwali's work in his newly appointed role as Senior Pottery Officer. Cardew under the employment of the Nigerian colonial government stayed in the country for 15 years establishing the Pottery Training Centre (PTC) in Abuja (now Suleja) (Figures 5 and 6). Most of the trainees were men, but Ladi Kwali and other women potters would develop a hybrid ceramics practice, fusing indigenous (hand building) pottery with modern European techniques (throwing, glazing, high-temperature kiln firing) that Cardew introduced as a part of his now controversial

role of transforming and upgrading locally-produced pottery.¹ Ladi Kwali's hand-building in the Gwari vernacular style, use of open-air firing and subsequent staining of work using natural dyes such as locust bean pods, continued alongside her work as a thrower at the PTC, which was dominated by the introduction of western pottery techniques. Ladi Kwali's skills as a handbuilder were, however, respected by Cardew and he took her on tours of England (1962) and of North America (1972). She became known for her demonstrations where audiences would be invited into her processes of making, witnessing her punch into a cylinder of clay, pull up the sides and add coils of clay, walking confidently round the pot, creating by hand and force a thin-walled elegantly symmetrical vessel shaped from earth (Figure 7).

In her 2019 paper, *Writing Black Beauty*, scholar Jennifer C. Nash argues for Black feminist theories to be informed by a new form of writing she calls "beautiful writing," which makes visible the centrality of loss to theorising black female subjectivity.² In this exhibition, I was committed to re-addressing what I see as a loss/absence of Ladi Kwali's important position within Nigerian



Fig 3 Ladi Kwali throwing at the potter's wheel on the reverse of the Nigerian Twenty-Naira Bank Note.
© vkilikov/Shutterstock.com.

modernism and foreground the matrilineal pottery traditions that made possible her celebrated ceramics objects. Ladi Kwali and all the artists presented for this exhibition are informed by personal and communal narratives marked by an attachment to clay and ceramics practices characterised by nonlinearity, resonance, and echoes that reverberate across time and geographies.

Two main themes, of hybridity and performativity, emerged in my survey of the contributions made by Black women rethinking clay from different global locations and individual positions. Clay is not a passive material and it is constantly transformed. Artists in the exhibition span seventy years and situate ceramics in an expanded field; hybridity is reimagined through performative objects, sculptural installations and moving image, subverting both the material and image of the maker. I wanted to highlight a direct line of influence between the women in the show, considering the hand-built traditions passed on from Ladi Kwali to Magdalene Odundo, and then on to the next generation in the researched practice of Bisila Noha who in turn is

informed by an older generation of ceramicists including Kouame Kakaha and Mama Aïcha.³ A new generation working with clay comes together in a contemporary display titled "The Politics of Clay" with works by Phoebe Collings-James, Shawanda Corbett, Chinasa Vivian Ezugha, Jade Montserrat and Julia Phillips. In her performance for the camera, *Clay* (2018, filmed by Webb-Ellis), Montserrat uses clay to reflect on humans gouging the earth and being gouged from the earth, a theme also explored in the series *Neighborhood Gardens* by Shawanda Corbett in 2020. Corbett's interdisciplinary practice spans painting, ceramics, poetry, and performance which interrogates notions of the body in the different cycles of human life.

The Exhibition Narrative

The exhibition began in the Lower Gallery at Two Temple Place with displays of archival material and reproduced by Doig Simmonds giving visual and textual accounts of the PTC when it was founded. Ladi Kwali

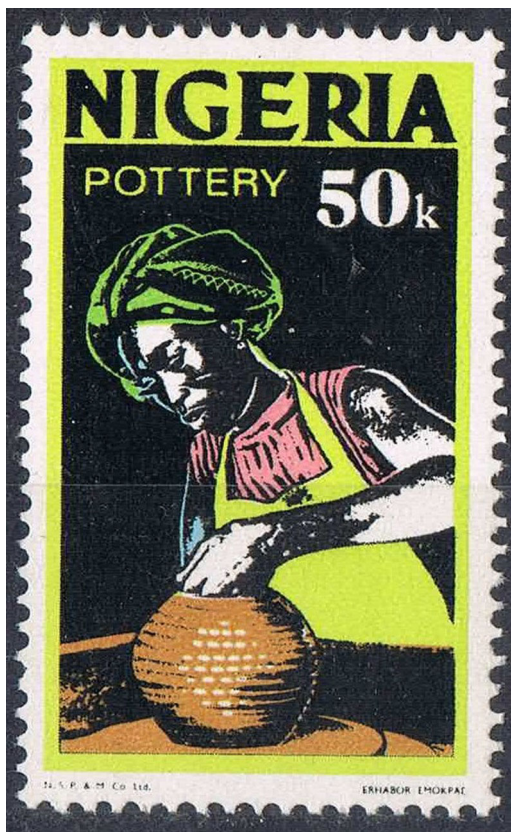


Fig 4 Ladi Kwali throwing at the potter's wheel on 50k postal stamp by Erhabor Emokpae. © Brixton Chrome <https://brixtonchrome.com/blogs/nigerian-stamps-and-postal-history/the-1973-1986-definitive-issue>.



Fig 5 Shop, Pottery Training Centre Abuja, early 1960s. © Doig Simmonds.

became the Centre's first female trainee and its most celebrated ceramicist. She was skilled in traditional Gwari methods of hand-built pottery incised with images, and through

Cardew's training she mastered the throwing wheel, made stoneware bodies and used high-fired glazes. I reflected this in the exhibition with the display of Gwari dowry and



Fig 6 Kiln and Drying House, Pottery Training Centre Abuja, early 1960s, © Doig Simmonds.



Fig 7 Ladi Kwali Trimming Pots, Pottery Training Centre Abuja, early 1960s. © Doig Simmonds.

water pots acknowledging Ladi Kwali's early influences rooted in matrilineal pottery traditions specific to the Gwari (also referred to as Gbagyi or Gbari) ethnic group to which she and other PTC female potters such as Halima Audu, Lami Toto, Assibi Iddo and Kande Ushafa, belong. This display included early works by Magdalene Odundo who has spoken of the profound and lifelong influence of learning Gwari hand building from Ladi Kwali, Lami Toto and Assibi Iddo during the three months she spent in Abuja in 1974. The central display brought together a diverse group of domestic pieces of glazed stoneware by women potters Assibe Iddo,

Ladi Kwali and Halima Audu and male potters, Kofi Athey, Danlami Aliyu, George Sempagala and Bawa Ushafa from regional UK museum collections ranging from plates to bowls; casserole dishes to tankards to lidded jars and screw-top bottles. All these objects use the potter's wheel. This first part of the exhibition ended, however, with an installation of hand-built glazed stoneware water jars in the gallery staircase by Ladi Kwali and Halima Audu, recording a pivotal moment when an object that would have traditionally served as a water-cooling container became an art object. Elevated by a transformation into glazed stoneware but

bearing individualised geometric and zoomorphic motifs indicative of indigenous folklore, and perhaps tattoos/tribal marks, these jars, particularly those by Ladi Kwali are celebrated for their merging of Nigerian and British pottery traditions, decorated by poetically incised geometric lines and symbols ranging from scorpions, fishes, birds, snakes, chameleons, crocodiles and lizards. The second part of the exhibition considered contemporary artists, highlighting the intergenerational influence and the evolution of the vessel from the hybrid water jars by Ladi Kwali and Odundo's early vessels which echo Abuja influences, to Bisila Noha's two-legged vessels from her ongoing research project "Searching for Kouame Kakaha: A Celebration of the Unnamed Women of Clay; Our Shared Mothers and Grandmothers." Noha addresses the fact that pottery, especially if made by women, is largely excluded from histories of art. Her new work responded directly to the legacies of Ladi Kwali and Kouame Kakaha. The exhibition concludes in the Great Hall gallery with new and recent works by Shawanda Corbett, Vivian Chinasa Ezugha, Phoebe Collings-James, Julia Philips and Jade Mosterrat. Form and function implode to convey clay's haptic, conceptual, malleable and metaphoric qualities through film, ceramic sculptures and installations.

Curatorial Position/Reflection

My curatorial approach is research-led and extends beyond exhibition making into writing. I have long engaged with thinking through and making room for overlooked areas of art history. In curating *Body Vessel Clay*, I was motivated by how an extraordinary individual like Ladi Kwali could fade into obscurity over

time, or would only be remembered within specialist circles. In 1950s Nigeria, artist Uche Okeke and members of the Zaria Art Society promoted the concept of "Natural Synthesis" that called for the merging of Western and Nigerian traditions, forms, techniques, and ideas, to birth hybrid art-making practices and a conceptual framework rooted in indigenous way of making. It seems startling that there was no dialogue between Ladi Kwali and trainees at the PTC and artists of the Zaria Art Society who from 1958 were responding artistically and politically to the undermining of Nigeria's artistic heritage in the face of by colonial educational and administrative policies. Ladi Kwali's pots undeniably fall under the remit of "Natural Synthesis," albeit indirectly, reflecting the assimilation of outside influences wed productively to local culture.⁴ Hybridity as a modern condition inside and outside of formal art education.

What was at stake when indigenous Gwari pottery became "hybrid" at the PTC in the 1950s, now largely understood from the vantage point of western museum collections? The hybridity was an effect of colonialism, yet modes, concerns, and exchanges of ceramics in *Body Vessel Clay* highlight both local and global orientations. I worked for two years constructing a narrative for *Body Vessel Clay* that was grounded in researching Ladi Kwali critically, sparked by an introduction to British Studio Pottery during my time as Curatorial Fellow at mima in Middlesbrough (Cardew is well represented in the collection) between 2009–2011. I wanted to keep my curatorial approach on tentative level; to observe, reflect and continually discover, rather than project onto a posthumous legacy.

I wanted the exhibition to begin with a celebration of Ladi Kwali's Gwari matrilineal

hand-building technique, handed down from one generation to the next, and consider how this age-old technique questions the western veneration of the potter's wheel. In doing so, the individualisation of Ladi Kwali is an attempt to remove her historicization from a western patriarchal shadow. How can we individualise her, explore where she is from, and understand, through her pots and objects, stories about her extraordinary life and culture? Beginning with Ladi Kwali and ending with a contemporary generation of ceramicists and artists working with clay also highlighted both the direct and indirect matrilineal teachings which continue to be crucial to global pottery traditions.

I keep returning to the image of Ladi Kwali on the back of the Nigerian twenty Naira note - the image that has immortalised her in history (Figure 3). She is captured from head to torso dressed in a Buba top, wearing a head tie, jewellery, and her Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE) medal visibly attached to the left of her top. She throws at the potter's wheel creating a tall vessel while flanked with other recently made ceramic wares. I think of this depiction and the many things it symbolises, above all hybridity and a collision of Nigerian (Gwari) and European (British) pottery traditions. I think of the hands that made objects that now speak of clay histories and cultures; of women's work, particularly work rooted in an indigenous tradition. I also think of how when I ask people, Nigerians especially, who it is featured on the back of the twenty Naira, many cannot name her still I continue to be inspired by the way Ladi Kwali straddled the Nigerian and the British

studio pottery contexts and I have written about how compelling and also how difficult this transition between cultures must have been. But she took all this in her stride as images and accounts demonstrate. Clay has existed for centuries and has long been used by artists due to its versatility, malleability, affordability, and availability. Ladi Kwali and all of the artists in *Body Vessel Clay* share across time a deep fascination with testing clay's properties to render personal, political, collective, and visionary new aesthetics.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes

- 1 The dialogue between West African and British pottery traditions is explored in Kim Bagley, "Africa and the West: A Contested Dialogue in Modern and Contemporary Ceramics" (PhD thesis, University for the Creative Arts/University of Brighton, 2014), <https://research.uca.ac.uk/2973/> (accessed February 23, 2023).
- 2 Jennifer C. Nash, "Writing Black Beauty," *Signs* 45, no. 1 (Autumn 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1086/703497> (accessed February 23, 2023).
- 3 See, Bisila Noha, "Searching for Kouame Kakaha: A Celebration of the Unnamed Women of Clay; Our Shared Mothers and Grandmothers," *Bisila Noha* website (February 4, 2021), <https://www.bisilanoha.co.uk/blog/2021/2/4/searching-for-kouame-kakaha-a-celebration-of-the-unnamed-women-of-clay-our-shared-mothers-and-grandmothers> (accessed February 23, 2023).
- 4 See Paul Chike Dike and Pat Oyelola eds., *The Zaria Art Society – A New Consciousness*, (Lagos: National Gallery of Art, 1998).