With “Resonance and Inspiration,” the Samuel P. Harn Museum of Art of the University of Florida hosted the first exhibition of Magdalene Odundo’s work in Florida, and the first one-person exhibition of her work in the United States since 1997. This modest but compelling exhibition of the artist’s new work, consisting of eleven vessels, was accompanied by her drawings, a striking foil for the works in clay. As a complement to “Resonance and Inspiration,” curator Susan Cooksey added a show titled “Ceramic Reflections” that included works from the Harn’s collection of ceramic vessels from Asia, the Americas, Europe, and Africa, thereby gently nodding to Odundo’s importance and influence within that tradition.

The visitor to the museum was welcomed into “Resonance and Inspiration” after progressing down a corridor with new ceramic acquisitions to the door of the Harn Rotunda—the gallery par excellence in the museum—and was received by Odundo’s most recognizable shape, an asymmetrical ceramic vessel that tenderly recalls the female form and alludes to early twentieth century Mangbetu forms. This work in profile stood alone in the round, inviting the viewer into the show.

Cooksey installed each pot, except for two, in its own vitrine just below eye level, allowing each to command individual contemplation. Odundo’s new works possess solemnity and grace, yet each seems to emanate a vibrant inner energy. They recall historical notions of form and function in the ceramic tradition, but incorporate a sculptural dynamic to create unique works of art.

The works in the show seem to explore two different symmetric forms, though both play on an idea of reception. Cooksey juxtaposed objects so that they seemed to call to each other across space. One form suggests the graceful contours of an elongated calabash and at the same time the body of a woman. The curving sides of the vessel move in and out and gently in again at the top of the form to close the mouth of the vessel slightly. Small nodules on the surface bring to mind body parts such as umbilicus or breast. A second form, perhaps more dramatic, has a rounded belly and its neck flares dramatically to create a wide mouth, echoing vase shapes from European antiquity as well as African forms that the visitor could see in the pendant exhibition, such as a Ga’anda spirit vessel or a Tutsi bottle. The play between these forms, organic and figural, African and European, epitomize Odundo’s inventive ability to reconfigure familiar forms and create salient works of art.

Two vessels with greater diameter and wide, open mouths were placed together at a much lower level than the other pots. Odundo’s subtle play of form was evident through the pairing of these vessels: The contrasts of rounded and angular, convex and concave were immediately noticeable in these forms. Additionally, the viewer was given a privileged vantage point and was able to peer into the wide mouths, gaining visual access to small nodes on the interior. The personal discovery of these forms allowed the viewer to relate them to those that adorn the outsides of other vessels. Odundo successfully reveals the hitherto
and is currently working at the University of Florida. He is co-author of A History of Art in Africa and is currently working on the revised edition, anticipated to be available Fall 2007, with Monica Blackmun Visona and Robin Poynor.

MacKenzie Moon is a graduate student in African art history at the University of Florida, studying with Victoria Rovine and Robin Poynor.

Magdalene Odundo
Vessel Series, no. 1
2004
Red clay, carbonized and multi-fired
16 1/4 x 13 3/4 in. (41.8 x 35 cm.)
Museum purchase, funds provided by friends of the Harn Museum
Collection of the Samuel P. Harn Museum of Art, 2006.36
PHOTO BY DAVID WESTWOOD PHOTOGRAPHY

Breath and Dust,” is based on interviews with Odundo and provides insight into the artist’s influences and creative process. Casely-Hayford affirms Odundo’s place as an artist, stating, “[She draws] on something of the wisdom and experience of Leach, or a line borrowed from ancient European antiquity, to create a trans-global, trans-temporal visual system of her own; modern, yet simultaneously old, African yet resolutely European....”

Magdalene Odundo has certainly created a space of her own, and this exhibition of new works stands to affirm her place in the historical ceramic tradition.

Robin Poynor is professor of art history at the University of Florida. He is co-author of A History of Art in Africa and is currently working on the revised edition, anticipated to be available Fall 2007, with Monica Blackmun Visona and Herbert M. Cole. rpoynor@ufl.edu

MacKenzie Moon is a graduate student in African art history at the University of Florida, studying with Victoria Rovine and Robin Poynor. mmoon21@ufl.edu

Magdalene Odundo
Vessel Series II asymmetrical, no. 1
2005/06
Red clay, carbonized and multi-fired
22 x 11 3/4 in. (56.4 x 29.7 cm.)
Collection of the artist. Courtesy Anthony Slayter-Ralph
PHOTO BY DAVID WESTWOOD PHOTOGRAPHY

forbidden sacred space of the ancestors inside the pot, ideas that she alludes to in the discussion of her work.

In addition to the works’ strength in form, they are also strong in color. From a distance many appear deep black, but upon closer inspection, they reveal subtle nuances of color, some revealing touches of red ochre or bright orange, some tinged with an alluring mother-of-pearl sheen. Odundo’s signature arresting orange, represented by a single vessel, becomes more brilliant when viewed intimately. Dark grey cases set Odundo’s works off agreeably, lighting the long history of ceramics, with which Odundo is in constant dialogue. In discussing her work while at the Harn, Odundo cited numerous historical influences. In the exhibition, viewers were led to discover these influences for themselves. Physically set in the periphery of the main exhibition, yet connected to it through identical presentation, the selection of Asian, African, ancient American, and Mediterranean ceramic vessels underscored the historical dimension of Odundo’s work.

Text was minimal in this exhibition, appearing briefly to give an overview and then gracefully retreating to the background. An accompanying catalog, Resonance and Inspiration: New Works by Magdalene Odundo, (Harn Museum: 16 pages, 25 full-color illustrations, soft cover, $9.95) elaborates on Odundo, her new work, and the resonances between the two exhibitions. The catalog includes eleven photographs of Odundo’s vessels, six of her drawings, and four of the vessels from the “Ceramic Reflections” exhibition.

Three essays broaden the viewer’s grasp of the two exhibitions. Susan Cooksey addresses the historical inspirations Odundo received from her early years in Kenya, India, and England, as well as those she gained through her studies in England, Nigeria, and the American Southwest. In her essay Cooksey connects the vessels in the pendant show back to Odundo’s work; while acknowledging many differences, Cooksey does well to highlight affinities, similarities, and likenesses. Though Cooksey’s curatorial goal was no doubt to highlight resonances between Odundo’s work and the historical vessels in the Harn collection, the outcome seems more to affirm Odundo’s place in the art historical record.

Ceramic artist Linda Arbucket’s essay, “The Alchemy of Magdalene Odundo,” is an appreciation, poetically written and alluding to the control Odundo has over her medium and the facility with which she masters her craft to attain technical elegance. Augustus Casely-Hayford’s essay, “Magdalene Odundo: