reviewed by Haley Jones and Elizabeth Caris

The High Museum of Art’s Universal and Sublime: The Vessels of Magdalene Odundo exhibition traced the contemporary Kenyan-born, British-based ceramicist’s decades-long career through a collection of nineteen large clay vessels, eight sketchbook pages, three complete sketchbooks, and two sets of silk-screened china. Carol Thompson, the museum’s curator of African art, elegantly displayed Odundo’s ceramic output chronologically throughout three sections in the exhibition’s main gallery. In two smaller adjoining rooms, Thompson invited visitors to explore Odundo’s process, influences, and nonceramic work. Although the display allowed ample space for viewing and contemplation, experiencing Odundo’s organically shaped ceramics is more than a visual activity. With gleamingly smooth surfaces, the vessels almost demand to be touched and embraced.

Odundo’s strong voice pervaded the exhibition, guiding viewers’ understanding of her art. Three quotations affixed in large print on the wall prompted viewers to draw connections between the artist’s words and work on display. A quotation at the exhibition’s entrance explained, “Clay is such a special, seductive material, very sensuous. You want to touch it.” This statement underscored the tantalizing physicality of the ceramics the viewer encountered throughout the gallery. In the adjoining room nearest the exhibition’s entrance, an eleven minute interview with the artist by Anthony Slatyer-Ralph, her dealer, illuminated the artist’s process and intentions. In the interview, Odundo explained that she wanted her vessels to encourage contemplation, expressed her desire to pursue perfect forms, and reflected on the tactile nature of her process. The main gallery reinforced her goals, offering few distractions so viewers could dwell on the vessels’ shapes and surfaces.

The collection of vessels assembled together in Universal and Sublime demonstrated Odundo’s mastery. As demonstrated in the video, Odundo coils and shapes clay by hand. She uses a mixture of clay and water to seal her works before laboriously burnishing them to a shine, enhancing their tactile quality.

Odundo remains secretive regarding specific firing techniques, but clearly employs multiple methods to achieve such a variety of finished surfaces. Removing oxygen creates blackened surfaces, while exposing the clay to oxygen produces vibrant oranges. The artist also uses other techniques to generate metallic, opalescent, and matte surfaces in black, gray, and orange.

The room featuring the interview also addressed artworks Odundo has studied or referenced in her work. Two of Odundo’s sketchbooks in this space displayed her 2011 and 2012 drawings of two works in the museum’s collection, a Mangbetu stringed instrument from approximately the late nineteenth century and a terracotta female torso from the medieval Empire of Mali. Including these drawings in the show highlighted the artist’s connections to the High Museum and demonstrated her attention to wide range of time periods and places. As evidenced in her interview and sketchbooks, pottery from Japan, Kenya, and the ancient Mediterranean as well as modern European art and Elizabethan costume inform Odundo’s methods and forms. Untitled (1989) immediately confronted the visitor at the exhibition’s entrance, suggesting Odundo’s global sources of inspiration (Fig. 1). With its wide rim and high handles, the dark vase cut an elegant silhouette. In the recorded interview, Odundo credits Victorian gowns, which became fashionable in Kenya under British colonial rule, as her inspiration for the work. However, the vessel also recalls the ancient double-handled Greek amphora, indicating Odundo’s merging of diverse influences.

Eight charcoal and watercolor sketchbook drawings punctuated the main gallery. At first glance, the drawings seemed to correspond directly with forms of nearby vessels, but they were not sketches of specific works. In the interview, Odundo described a sketchbook as a “memory,” “dictionary,” “diary,” or simply “drawing for the sake of drawing.” Her characterizations suggest that drawings did not always precede particular forms, indicating a nonlinear progression from sketch to vessel. Although Odundo’s drawings engaged the viewer, they did not demand the same physical participation as the vessels, whose three-dimensionality required moving one’s body around the ceramic whenever possible, an unnecessary action when looking at wall-mounted drawings. Charcoal shading and watercolor provided depth and sensuality to the drawings, although they perhaps lacked some of the physicality of the ceramics.

Odundo often incorporates other elements into her vessels, including small bulges and spine-like protrusions. The features interrupt the smooth surfaces and recall anthropomorphic or zoomorphic features. Located in the middle section of the main gallery, Untitled...
(1995) is one such vessel that exemplifies Odundo’s skill (Fig. 2). Three bumps punctuate otherwise smooth curvatures, suggesting a spine-like configuration down one side of the vessel. The juxtaposition of bumps and smooth curves provokes in viewers an urge to run their hands along the surface. Unfortunately, the installation at times obscured these details. Another vessel featuring bumps, *Kigango cha Baba* (2013) in Odundo’s *Kigango* series, includes protrusions that faced the gallery wall. *Untitled* (1995) also reflects the way Odundo entices viewers to follow a vessel’s form and consider its interior. In the featured interview, Odundo says, “If you wanted to make a sculptural piece of work, you had to have a clear line between the space that is void and the space that is solid, which is your work, and that line continues on the inside.” Because *Untitled’s* opening tilts downward, the interior is not immediately accessible. But just enough of the smooth opening was visible on display to allow an adult viewer to stoop and peer curiously inside.

Like *Untitled* (1995), the interior of *Untitled* (2016–2017) appears as carefully smoothed as its exterior, demonstrating Odundo’s commitment to achieving the perfect form (Fig. 3). The flared neck of the vessel, made during the artist’s recent residency at North Carolina’s Center for Craft, Creativity, & Design, offers another example of Odundo’s experimentation with interior and exterior space. Akin to other works in the exhibition, the base of the vessel seems improbably small compared to its full body and long neck. Indeed, Odundo’s ceramics suggest both precariousness and stability. Many are imposing and solid, but others include delicate curves that appear to defy gravity. This precarious balance lends itself to understanding these vessels as organic forms rather than static, symmetrical objects of function.

Odundo presents unsteadiness not only in her hand-built ceramics but in two sets of silk-screened china she produced from her childhood photographs. In a second room adjoining the main gallery, *Autobiography* (Fig. 4) featured saucers and bowls stacked unsteadily by the artist herself. The instability revealed the artist’s touch, reminding viewers that the objects are meant to be handled. Moreover, this choice of display highlighted the unstable political situation that marked Oduudo’s childhood. The images on the china reflect her family’s move to India in the 1950s, when Kenya was a British colony and victim of apartheid policies. Thus, an art form of the oppressor became a conduit for the personal experiences of the oppressed.

The High Museum’s *Universal and Sublime* offered visitors a sensory journey through Odundo’s remarkable artistic career. The exhibition showcased Odundo’s varied ceramic forms and surfaces as well as her multicultural influences. With its spacious layout and reliance on artist quotations and audiovisual content, the exhibition provided the intimate opportunity to observe Odundo’s carefully cultivated sensual surfaces strongly guided by the artist’s process and perspective. *Universal and Sublime* served as a fitting precursor to *Making Africa: A Continent of Contemporary Design*, an exhibition that opened at the museum on October 14, 2017, and explored over 120 artists linked to Africa participating in the increasingly global contemporary art world.

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3 Magdalene Odundo (British, b. Kenya, 1950) *Untitled* (2016–2017) Burnished and oxidized terracotta; 62.3 cm x 32 cm Photo: Elizabeth Caris

The flared neck references Odundo’s concern with both interior and exterior elements.


The artist’s hand is evident in her personal, precarious stacking of the china in *Autobiography*. This installation plays with balance while revealing Odundo’s family history.