BODY VESSEL CLAY

BLACK WOMEN, CERAMICS & CONTEMPORARY ART

SEPTEMBER 10 – DECEMBER 6, 2025
FORD FOUNDATION GALLERY

HALIMA AUDU
PHOEBE COLLINGS-JAMES
JADE DE MONTSERRAT
CHINASA VIVIAN EZUGHA
ADEBUNMI GBADEBO
LADI KWALI
SIMONE LEIGH
ANINA MAJOR
BISILA NOHA
MAGDALENE ODUNDO
JULIA PHILLIPS

CURATED BY DR. JAREH DAS

IN THE BELLY OF THE POT

IMAGE 1
Ladi Kwali at a pottery demonstration in England, c. 1970s, William Alfred Ismay (W. A. Ismay) (United Kingdom, 1910-2001).
Courtesy of York Museum Trust. The W.A. Ismay Bequest, 2001. Photo W.A. Ismay, © York Museum

A REFLECTION BY JAREH DAS

THE SAME SUN THAT MELTS WAX IS ALSO CAPABLE OF HARDENING CLAY.

NIGERIAN PROVERB

When I think of clay in the context of the gallery, I think beyond the limits of institutional space. I return to a network of intersecting experiences and ideas, particularly my ongoing research, now spanning over a decade, on LADI DOSEI KWALI (1925-1984). Her ceramics provide a vital lens through which to examine postcolonial perspectives within both Nigerian pottery and British studio pottery. Kwali's hand-built vessels and thrown objects, often adorned with abstract geometric and figurative decorations that draw from what she saw in nature, embody a sophisticated synthesis of African and European influences. Her relationship with Michael Cardew (1901-1983) reveals the complex power dynamics between Africa and the West within the history of ceramics, a relationship that has since extended to modern art. The Kwali-Cardew interactions have often eclipsed the deeper significance of centuries-old Gbari matrilineal pottery traditions from which Kwali emerged. To uncover the contested and uneven connections between Nigerian and British ceramic histories from the 1950s to the present requires addressing the structural legacies of colonialism while foregrounding the cultural resilience, innovation, and memory embedded in clay moulded by the hands of Black women.

My relationship with clay is deeply personal, rooted in my Nigerian childhood and the journey that first brought me to this material. I remember being in conversation with clay, not as a maker, but as a child playing with it and trying to decipher its material language. I *touched* it, I *handled* it, I *felt* it. I engaged with it visually and sensorially. I registered its smell, its weight, and its texture on my small hands. At times, I imagined I was in dialogue with it. *What is in you? What are you?* Science tells me that clay is a fine-grained, naturally occurring material composed of minerals such as kaolinite, illite, and montmorillonite. It is formed through long geological processes of erosion and sedimentation. It retains the memory of water, touch, and heat. Its plasticity allows it to be shaped, yet its structure is crystalline, complex, and reactive. In the kiln, it transforms irrevocably: from soft, yielding earth into ceramic, a permanent, transformed fired object.

Clay's transformation is both chemical and alchemical, as well as scientific and symbolic. Religion tells me that clay is the substance of origin. In many belief systems, clay is considered the foundational material of life. In the Abrahamic traditions, God forms the first human from clay or dust, breathing life into the formless earth. In the Qur'an, the word *ṭīn* (clay) is used repeatedly to describe the divine act of creation. The symbolism is clear: from earth we are made, to earth we return. Clay is humble, elemental, and sacred.

The ancestral African tradition to which I belong tells me that clay is a portal. It is not inert. It breathes and it remembers. Across many West African cultures, clay is associated with femininity, fertility, healing, and spiritual power. It is used to mark rites of passage, to build shrines, and to connect the living with the dead. In my Nigerian Indigenous group, *Uvwie*, the clay pot is part of the symbol or crest of our Uvwie General Improvement Union (UGIU), composed of three elements: a lion, a hand, and an earthen pot.[1] The hand-built pot here represents collective memory and cultural integrity. The lion symbolizes protection, ensuring that nothing harmful befalls the Uvwie people in their affairs and struggles through time. Clay, in this sense, is more than material. It is a vessel of

knowledge, a guardian of secrets, a keeper of ancestral continuity.

In Yoruba cosmology, on the other hand, clay is central to the creation myth where *Òrìsà Ọbàtálá* moulds human bodies from clay before *Olódùmarè* breathes life into them. In other regions, such as among the Gbari or Nupe, women potters do not simply make vessels; they channel ancestral techniques, speak to spirits through their hands, and ground communal knowledge in their work. Clay is living. It carries cosmologies, land memory, and the touch of grandmothers.[2] Ceramicists have told me that you must listen to clay or it will deal with you.[3] It teaches lessons in the kiln. A rebellion when it explodes, when it cracks, when it resists—because it wasn't tended to, wasn't respected.

In the context of *Body Vessel Clay: Black Women, Ceramics & Contemporary Art*, Ladi Kwali is foundational.[4] In this centennial year of her birth, she poignantly stands as a point of departure for the exhibition—not only for considering clay as a material and a matrilineal legacy, but also for acknowledging that her emergence as the star of Cardew's Abuja project led to a quiet rebellion against cultural and societal odds. Not formally educated, childless, and working within a colonial framework designed to contain her, Kwali nonetheless resisted the limitations imposed upon her. She defied the gaze that has since shaped her historicization. We see this resistance in the visual record: her assured posture and confident presence are captured in the surviving photographs and a few film clips of her, most widely available on the internet, in which she is silent, building a pot. We glimpse it, too, in the diary entries of Michael Cardew, which—despite their colonial lens—have become a partial window through which we encounter her presence. In the absence of direct interviews or personal accounts, these records provide a fragmented insight into her experience at the Pottery Training Centre (since renamed the Ladi Kwali Pottery Centre) in Abuja (now called Suleja), and the role it played in shaping her legacy.

Born in the village of Kwali, she grew up in a community where women routinely made pots for daily use. Kwali learned pottery from her aunt and quickly excelled in the Gbari hand-building tradition. She became locally renowned, with her work often selling out before it even reached the market. Her international career took shape after she joined the Pottery Training Centre in 1954, eventually becoming its star potter. Her time there marked a pivotal moment in the international recognition of Nigerian ceramics. Kwali's U.S. tour lasted over two months, beginning in Chattanooga, Tennessee, and including a demonstration at the National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts (NCECA) in Gatlinburg. She hand-built pots before captivated audiences at major venues such as the 92nd Street Y in New York; Florida State University in Tallahassee; Morgan State College and Montgomery College in Maryland; the Museum of African Art and Howard University in Washington, D.C.; the Baltimore Museum of Art; and the Academy of Art in Memphis. Notably, the tour also included stops at historically Black colleges and universities, including Claflin University, the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, and Spelman College in Atlanta.[5]

While these demonstrations celebrated Kwali's artistry, they also raised questions about agency and intent. Some observers heavily critiqued Cardew's role in mediating Kwali's presence, particularly in light of his position as a white colonial authority figure. These tensions, especially within post-Civil Rights America, highlighted enduring concerns around authorship, gendered representation, and cultural translation. Ladi Kwali's success and legacy reflect not only her own mastery and innovation but also the strength of matrilineal knowledge shared among the women in her community. Her defiance lives on in the coiling and hand-building techniques that modernity, globalization, and migration have tried to overshadow, but could not erase. This legacy continues in the hybrid practices of the Abuja potters, particularly the Gbari women who followed in her footsteps: HALIMA AUDU, ASIBI IDO, Lami Toto, and Kande Ushafa. Through the works they have left behind, they continue to shape a language of clay that resists containment.

We also witness this spirit of rebellion echoed in the contemporary world, in the present. PHOEBE COLLINGS-JAMES and SIMONE LEIGH's ceramic sculptures become sites of refusal and reimagining. These new sculptures from Collings-James's *Infidel*

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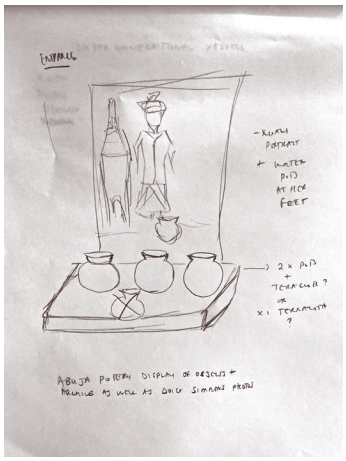

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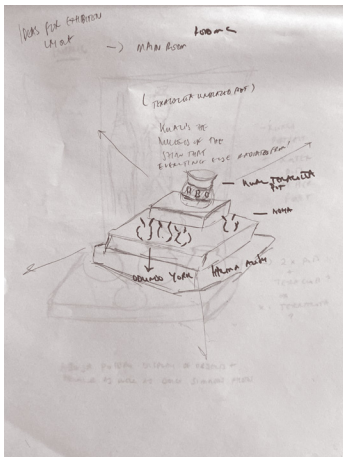

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IMAGE 2
Ladi Kwali's grave, Ladi Kwali compound, Kwali, Nigeria, 2023. Photography documentation for *The Enduring Legacy of Ladi Kwali,* 2024. Directed by Jareh Das. Paul Mellon Centre for the Studies in British Art. Photo © Andrew Esiebo

IMAGE 3
Portrait of Ladi Kwali in her Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Nigeria, honorary doctorate attire, Kwali family archive, Suleja, Nigeria, 2023. Photography documentation for *The Enduring Legacy of Ladi Kwali,* 2024. Directed by Jareh Das. Paul Mellon Centre for the Studies in British Art. Photo © Andrew Esiebo

IMAGE 4
Ladi Kwali presenting a pot in Nigeria, Kwali family archive, Suleja, Nigeria, 2023. Photography documentation for *The Enduring Legacy of Ladi Kwali,* 2024. Directed by Jareh Das. Paul Mellon Centre for the Studies in British Art. Photo © Andrew Esiebo

IMAGE 5
Pottery in the collection of the Jos Museum in Nigeria, researched and collected by Sylvia Leith-Ross. Photo © Andrew Esiebo

IMAGE 6
Ladi Kwali's roulettes, Kwali family archive, Suleja, Nigeria, 2023. Photography documentation for *The Enduring Legacy of Ladi Kwali,* 2024. Directed by Jareh Das. Paul Mellon Centre for the Studies in British Art. Photo © Andrew Esiebo

IMAGE 7
Central plinth and pots, sketch by Jareh Das, January 2025. Courtesy of Jareh Das

IMAGE 8
Kwali image and pots, layout for Ford Foundation Gallery, sketch by Jareh Das, January 2025. Courtesy of Jareh Das

IMAGE 9
Detail of Uvwie General Improvement Union (UGIU) bronze sculpture in the palace of the Ovie (King) of Uvwie Kingdom, Warri, Delta State, Nigeria, 2023. Courtesy of Jareh Das

series (2023–) feature creature-like, armless forms with beaked faces, balanced precariously on curves or points directly placed on the ground or a metal steel base. Drawing from West African and Caribbean ceramic traditions, she reimagines the vessel as a holder of political, spiritual, and ancestral knowledge. Glazed in deep blacks and rich blues, the works evoke moonlight on open water, suggesting water's memory and the dream as a decolonial portal. Her ceramics exist between reality and reverie, linking clay to healing, history, and the unknown. The artist SERAFINE 1369 writes that Collings-James's earlier works have *"always been bodily, visceral, curious about the fleshy material we are made of… curious to the point of violence.… Always this sense of looming threat that I might argue can come from living in a body marked by Blackness."*[6] This new series, for me, extends beyond the physical constraints of the body or what we think we know of it by reaching into the mystical, connecting with the inner self, and leaning into a refusal of capitalist logic, wars, and conflicts, and the devastating impacts of ecological destruction and the chaos of our present.

Vanessa Agard-Jones urges us to "pause with each of Simone Leigh's works; look for the lineage."[7] Leigh's references, she writes, are both intimate and expansive, situated at the macroscale of African diasporic cultural forms and the microscale of her own life's context. She cites "her people" in the broadest cultural sense, as well as those closest to her, the dearly held and proximate.[8] Leigh's *Village Series* (2023-2024) is monumental in scale, often reading as both architecture and fragmented body. A central motif is the "skirted form"—part head, part torso, part vessel—that draws from African and African diasporic artistic and architectural traditions, as well as historical representations of Black women. These sculptures embody resilience, strength, and the female body as a container of lived experience. The voluminous skirt, which anchors many of the works, can be read as an architectural foundation, a protective structure, and an abstracted representation of a Black female form. It intentionally blurs the boundaries between sculpture and structure, body and building, form and function. To my Nigerian eyes, the braided surfaces on Leigh's sculptures recall the *shuku*, a traditional Yoruba hairstyle, grounding the work in ancestral aesthetics and everyday Black cultural practices. In these forms, the vessel and the body become intertwined, each one holding memory and resisting erasure.

This rebellious spirit is reflected in a medley of throwing and hand-building techniques in the vessels of BISILA NOHA, whose practice draws on traditional African women's ceramic methods while adapting them for the present. Her works reference ancestral techniques while layering political and personal narratives through material contrast and form. In MAGDALENE ODUNDO's sculptural vessels, we witness a direct challenge to conventional definitions of the vessel. Her sinuous forms, inspired by the poise of a dancer mid-motion, are meticulously burnished with spoons, pebbles, and simple tools to create a lustrous, sensual surface. Each vessel becomes a meditation on balance, movement, and transformation.[9]

Clay becomes both embodied and archival in the hands of ADEBUNMI GBADEBO and ANINA MAJOR, who root their practices in familial and ancestral memory. Gbadebo works with clay sourced from sites of Black life and death, including earth hand-dug from Fort Motte, South Carolina, where her ancestors were enslaved. Her vessels, often adorned with rice and donated Black hair, honor her family's history and the legacies of enslavement in the American South. Major's woven basket of ceramic strips draws on Bahamian plaiting traditions and the sensory memory of time spent with her grandmother, Mar, at the straw market. Through this, she connects clay to matrilineal knowledge, care, and tactile modes of making.

In the performance-based practices of CHINASA VIVIAN EZUGHA, JULIA PHILLIPS, and JADE DE MONTSERRAT, clay enters the realm of labor, lived gesture, and ritual. Each artist engages the material to explore questions of memory, embodiment, and power through distinct but interrelated approaches. In *Uro*, first presented in 2018 at the SPILL Festival of Performance in Ipswich, U.K., Ezugha appears partially dressed in white cloth as she physically wrestles with a large mound of clay. She lifts, compresses, and bears its weight, allowing it to exhaust her body over

time. This sustained encounter transforms the clay into a potent metaphor for diasporic memory, rebirth, and dislocation. Phillips, by contrast, is known for her fragmented ceramic sculptures and restrained visual language, which interrogate care, control, and the body. In *Becoming (the Hunter, the Twerker, the Submitter)* (2015), a silent video shown on a continuous loop, a dancing figure is visually dissected. Torso, arms, and legs move independently, disrupting bodily cohesion. This segmentation invites reflection on desire, submission, and the complexities of autonomy and objectification. Also working with performance, Jade de Montserrat's *Clay* (2015), created in collaboration with filmmaker duo Webb-Ellis, presents a solitary ritual in the Yorkshire landscape. She applies wet clay to her body in an act of memory-digging that connects her to the land, her ancestry, and the burden of archival erasure. Her performance, like those of Ezugha and Phillips, positions the body as a site of resistance and remembrance, where clay becomes both medium and message.

Together, these artists show that clay is not neutral. It is restless, embodied, and political.

Clay lives. It holds memories. It rebels. It archives.

1 This Uvwie General Improvement Union (UGIU) crest is grounded in a Uvwie proverb, "Aborivwieni Aroto-i," which translates as, "The hand of strangers does not enter a native pot and therefore cannot know what a united community does in private."

2 Babatunde Lawal, *The Gẹ̀lẹ̀dé Spectacle: Art, Gender, and Social Harmony in an African Culture* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996), pp. 43-45.

3 For Magdalene Odundo, clay is a fundamental material and one she enters into dialogue with. She believes that clay responds to the way it is treated; if one tries to impose their will upon it or handle it without care, it will resist. In her view, the material teaches through its own form of rebellion, often revealing its displeasure in the kiln when not treated with gentleness and respect. See Magdalene Odundo, "Roots and Resonances," interview by Ben Okri, in *Magdalene Odundo: The Journey of Things*, ed. Andrew Bonacina, exh. cat. (London: InOtherWords, 2019), unpaginated.

4 *Body Vessel Clay: Black Women, Ceramics & Contemporary Art* brings together over seventy years of practice by Black women working with clay, beginning with the foundational figure of Ladi Dosei Kwali. My curatorial approach was rooted in a desire to reposition Kwali not only within Nigerian and British ceramic histories but also within a global, feminist framework that foregrounds matrilineal knowledge, resistance, and embodied making. Kwali's practice merging traditional Gbari hand-building with studio pottery techniques introduced during Nigeria's colonial period became a point of departure for thinking through clay as a material of continuity and transformation. Her legacy resonates in the work of artists such as Magdalene Odundo, Phoebe Collings-James, Bisila Noha, Simone Leigh, and others. They are united in their use of clay as a living and political archive. Clay is never neutral, and in the hands of Black women in particular, it is a medium they have continually reshaped into narratives of care, labor, and resistance imbued in individual and collective subjectivities. This exhibition is both a tribute to that lineage and a space for imagining new, future-facing forms. See Jareh Das (2023) "Black Clay: Black Women, Ceramics and Contemporary Art," *The Journal of Modern Craft*, 16:1, pp. 63-70, DOI: 10.1080/17496772.2023.2212196.

5 For a detailed account of the Cardew-Kwali demonstrations in the United States, see Tanya Harrod, *The Last Sane Man: Michael Cardew: Modern Pots, Colonialism, and the Counterculture* (Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art by Yale University Press, 2012), pp. 344-52.

6 See SERAFINE1369, "Enough" in *The Subtle Rules The Dense* (Missa Publications, 2023), p. 45.

7 Vanessa Agard-Jones, "Clay's Memory" in *Simone Leigh*, ed. Eve Respini (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston and DelMonico Books, 2023), p. 105.

8 Ibid, p. 105.

9 Magdalene Odundo has described her vessels as part of a quest to understand the significance of making with humble materials like clay. In shaping her forms, she traces the marks of labor and the history embedded in the process. The resulting vessels, though refined, carry the weight of that making and they become embodied objects that speak to who we are as humans. See Magdalene Odundo, "Pots with Structure and Purpose: A Chance Encounter, a Potter by Chance" in *Ceramic Art*, ART/Work series eds. Caroline Fowler and Ittai Weinryb (Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 2023), pp. 86-7.

Ford Foundation Gallery would like to extend a very special thanks to our many partners and collaborators:

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Above all, I believe Ladi Kwali's ancestral presence found me long before I found her. Her ceramics have endured over time and transcended the context in which they originated. She called me to this work—to listen, to gather, and to carry these stories forward so that clay, as both archive and act of resistance, continues to speak.

Jareh Das, September 2025

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