

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

BODY VESSEL CLAY

BLACK WOMEN,
CERAMICS &
CONTEMPORARY ART

Body Vessel Clay: Black Women, Ceramics & Contemporary Art traces how Black women artists have transformed, questioned, and reimaged ceramics over the past seventy years. The exhibition title—*Body Vessel Clay*—evokes the material’s physical, conceptual, and metaphorical dimensions, foregrounding the evolving forms and meanings of the ceramic vessel. Beginning with the seminal Nigerian potter Ladi Dosei Kwali (1925–1984), the exhibition recognizes and celebrates her matrilineal legacy, both within the Pottery Training Centre (since renamed the Ladi Kwali Pottery Centre) in Suleja (formerly Abuja) from the 1950s onward, and within global histories of modern ceramics and modern art.

Ladi Kwali remains one of Nigeria’s most celebrated artists. She was honored during her lifetime with numerous accolades, including the Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE) in 1963; the Silver Award for Excellence, 10th International Exhibition of Ceramic Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., in 1965; an honorary doctorate from Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Nigeria, in 1977; and the national honor of Officer of the Order of the Niger (OON) in 1981. Her legacy is also symbolically preserved on the reverse of the Nigerian 20-Naira note, where her image affirms her national significance as a cultural icon. Yet, despite these recognitions, Kwali occupies a complex place in collective memory—at once present and absent, remembered and forgotten. While she is lauded in official narratives, her contributions have, until recently, been omitted from global art history and overlooked in dominant modernist discourses.

Body Vessel Clay honors and centers both her legacy and her continued visibility, positioning Kwali not only as a foundational figure in Nigerian ceramics but also as an enduring influence on generations of contemporary artists who engage clay as a site of memory, innovation, and resistance.

The exhibition is conceived and curated by Dr. Jareh Das. It is realized with loans from Brooklyn Museum; Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum; the Crafts Council Collection (U.K.); the Crafts Study Centre and University for the Creative Arts at Farnham (U.K.); The Newark Museum of Art; York Museums Trust (U.K.); and private lenders.

LADI DOSEI KWALI (1925–1984)

The exhibition begins by honouring the extraordinary life and legacy of Gbari potter and ceramicist Ladi Dosei Kwali (1925–1984), expanding outward to consider the historical significance of the Pottery Training Centre (since renamed the Ladi Kwali Pottery Centre) in Suleja (formerly Abuja) from the 1950s onward. Born in the village of Kwali, among the Gbari people of Northern Nigeria, Kwali learned the art of pottery from her aunt, mastering the traditional hand-building technique of coiling that defines Gbari ceramic practice.

Though she had no formal education, Kwali established a strong local reputation for her skill and innovation well before her involvement with the Pottery Training Centre. Her distinctive vessels attracted the attention of Alhaji Suleiman Barau, Emir of Abuja, who collected her pots and displayed them at his palace. It was here that British studio potter Michael Cardew (1901–1983), then working in Nigeria, first encountered Kwali's work. In a notebook entry dated 11 December 1950, Cardew described one of her yamma pots as “the best I ever saw,” noting its elegant form and intricate surface decoration.

Kwali joined the Pottery Training Centre in 1954 and quickly became its most prominent potter. Her pioneering work combined traditional Gbari coiling techniques with Western methods, including wheel-throwing and glazing. These hybrid methods were developed and refined during her time at the centre, first as a trainee and later as a senior practitioner under Cardew's direction. Her ability to merge Indigenous and European ceramic traditions helped shape a new direction for Nigerian pottery in the mid-20th century. Kwali's contributions laid the foundation for generations of artists working in clay and continue to resonate across contemporary ceramics today.



PHOTO SEBASTIAN BACH

William Alfred Ismay (W. A. Ismay)

(United Kingdom, 1910–2001)

Photograph of Ladi Kwali at a pottery demonstration in England, c.1970s

Photograph (color)

Dimensions variable

Courtesy of York Museums Trust. The W.A. Ismay Bequest, 2001

PHOTO W.A. ISMAY, © YORK MUSEUMS TRUST



Ladi Kwali became most renowned, both locally and internationally, for her glazed water pots, which seamlessly combine traditional Gbari hand-building methods with techniques introduced through European studio pottery. These vessels were not intended for everyday functional use. Instead, they reflect a shift in ceramic production initiated by British studio potter Michael Cardew (1901–1983), who introduced glazing and high-temperature firing at the Pottery Training Centre.

Kwali built her pots using the Gbari method of coiling, then incised geometric and symbolic motifs onto their surfaces using wooden roulettes or pieces of string to create rhythmic horizontal bands. For finer detailing, she employed specific tools: a blade-like palm rib for smaller pots and a porcupine quill for larger vessels. To achieve the sgraffito effect, created by scratching through a surface layer to reveal a contrasting clay body beneath, she carefully incised through a white porcelain slip, which was later highlighted by a translucent celadon glaze after firing.

While many of these glazed works bear the marks of Cardew’s influence, some pots were deliberately left unglazed to foreground the tactile presence and natural beauty of the clay. Prior to her time at the Centre, Kwali’s functional Gbari vessels were unglazed, thin-walled, and fired at lower temperatures. In contrast, the stoneware and earthenware developed under Cardew’s direction were heavier and required more intense, high-temperature firings, signalling a significant evolution in technique and form.

Ladi Kwali
(Nigeria, 1925–1984)

Water pot, 1959–1962
Stoneware, transparent and slip glaze, bands of rouletted decoration around the body and on rim, a coiled globular pot with a small, short, incised neck and flared rim
14.25 × 14.375 inches
Purchased from Berkeley Galleries in 1962. The Milner-White Collection. Courtesy of York Museums Trust

PHOTOS SEBASTIAN BACH



Water pot, 1959
Earthenware, large hand-built pot with rim incised and inlaid red pattern with a transparent glaze
13.25 × 14.125 inches
The W.A. Ismay Collection. Purchased from Berkeley Galleries in 1959. Courtesy of York Museums Trust



Water pot, 1959
Earthenware, hand-built, impressed and incised geometric decoration, glaze over red slip, wood-fired
11.75 × 12.625 inches
The W.A. Ismay Collection. Purchased from Berkeley Galleries in 1959. Courtesy of York Museums Trust

POTTERY TRAINING CENTRE & ABUJA, 1960s–1970s

Doig Simmonds captured scenes of daily life at the Pottery Training Centre (since renamed the Ladi Kwali Pottery Centre) in Suleja (formerly Abuja) and the surrounding Abuja landscape in the early 1960s. Reproduced here for the first time, these photographs provide a rare visual insight into the everyday experiences of potters at the Centre during a pivotal historical moment.

The images include close-up shots of Ladi Kwali throwing and trimming pots, male workers filling the kiln with ceramic wares, and a formal portrait of Emir Suleiman Barau, who first introduced Michael Cardew to Kwali's work. Other photographs document the kiln and firing processes, offering a visual diary of the rhythms of studio life during a period when Nigeria was beginning its transition to independence from British colonial rule.

While the Pottery Training Centre was not entirely removed from the broader political landscape, it operated with a degree of insulation from the seismic changes unfolding across the decolonizing nation. These photographs capture both the intimate, skilled labor of ceramic practice and the complex dynamics of artistic production within a rapidly shifting social and political environment.



Doig Simmonds

(United Kingdom, b. 1927, lives and works in the United Kingdom)

Documentary photographs of Pottery Training Centre and Abuja, c. 1960s

Photographs reproduced by permission of Doig Simmonds

Dimensions variable

PHOTO SEBASTIAN BACH

NIGERIAN MODERNISM & THE POTTERY TRAINING CENTRE, ABUJA, 1950s–1970s

From the 1950s onward, Nigerian Modernism emerged as a bold synthesis of Indigenous artistic traditions and European modernist techniques. Artists working across Nigeria and in international centers such as London and Paris engaged deeply with questions of identity, cultural heritage, and the enduring legacies of colonialism. This was a period of intellectual and artistic ferment, shaped by the push for national independence and increasing transcontinental exchange.

A pivotal moment occurred alongside this history in 1951, when British studio potter Michael Cardew (1901–1983) was appointed as Senior Pottery Officer by the Nigerian colonial government. Cardew established the Pottery Training Centre (since renamed the Ladi Kwali Pottery Centre) in Suleja (formerly Abuja) in 1952.

Cardew, a former student of British studio potter Bernard Leach, had previously worked in both Ghana and the United Kingdom before relocating to Nigeria. His curriculum at the centre combined technical training with a philosophy of learning through observation, process, and experimentation. Trainees produced a wide variety of functional forms, including plates, bowls, screw-top jars, lidded pots, oil and wine jars, tankards, and casserole dishes, some of which were inspired by traditional Gbari cooking vessels.

In 1954, Ladi Kwali joined the Centre as its first female trainee. Already a highly skilled Gbari potter with a strong local reputation, her presence at the Pottery Training Centre challenged its male-dominated ethos and helped preserve women-led ceramic traditions. Her contributions and innovations became central to the Centre's identity and lasting legacy.

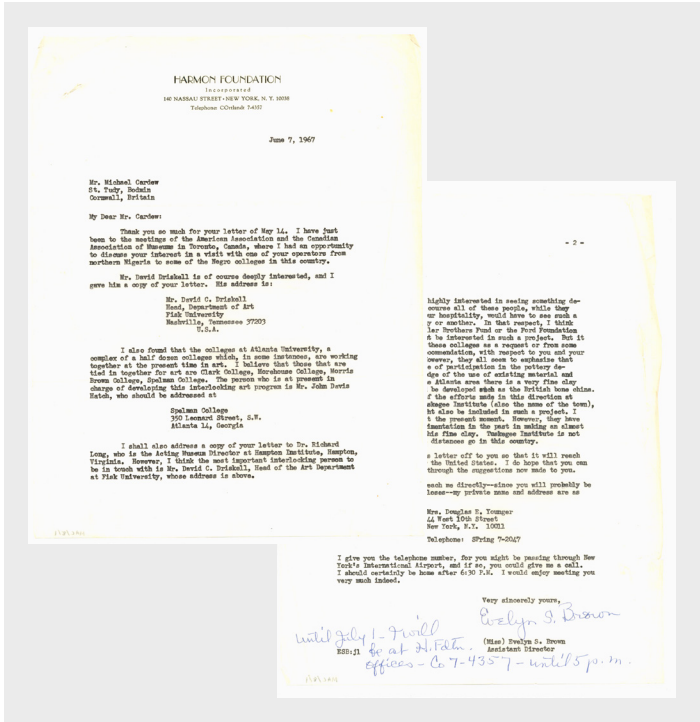
Across these two wall vitrines are thrown wares by Ladi Kwali, Halima Audu, Asibi Ido, and Michael Cardew, as well as George Sempagala. These works demonstrate the technical skill and stylistic diversity developed at the Centre. Many are signed with the artists' initials and bear the Centre's Arabic-inscribed seal, sym-



PHOTO SEBASTIAN BACH

bolizing a balance between individual authorship and collective studio practice. Cardew sought to improve local ceramic production and meet the demands of a new middle class (few of whom, it turned out, actually purchased the wares) that was emerging after Nigeria's independence in 1960.

Although a deeply colonial-informed initiative, Cardew viewed his work in Abuja as complementary to the Indigenous pottery communities, which had been producing functional vessels for centuries.



Evelyn S. Brown
(Papers of Michael Cardew)

Letter, 6/7/1967
10.875 × 8.625 inches
From the collections of the Crafts Study Centre, University for the Creative Arts. MAC/8/1/1-2

IMAGE COURTESY OF CRAFTS STUDY CENTRE,
UNIVERSITY FOR THE CREATIVE ARTS

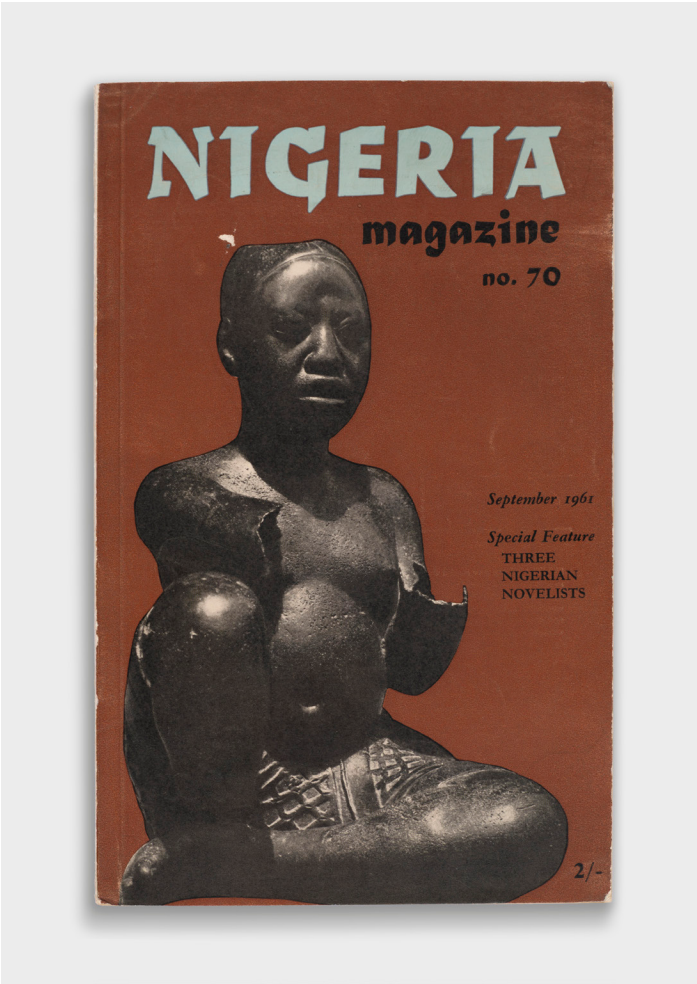
In this correspondence dated 7 June 1967, Evelyn S. Brown of the Harmon Foundation, New York, advises Michael Cardew to liaise with Mr. David C. Driskell, Head of the Department of Art at Fisk University, Nashville, Tennessee, as well as other leading academics at historically Black colleges and universities in the Atlanta area, including Morehouse College, Morris Brown College, and Spelman College. Brown also recommends that Cardew approach the Rockefeller Brothers Fund or the Ford Foundation to support a forthcoming U.S. pottery demonstration tour with Ladi Kwali.



Sylvia Leith-Ross
Nigerian Pottery: A catalogue compiled by Sylvia Leith-Ross MBE,
1970
9.625 × 9.25 inches
Courtesy of York Museums Trust

PHOTO SEBASTIAN BACH

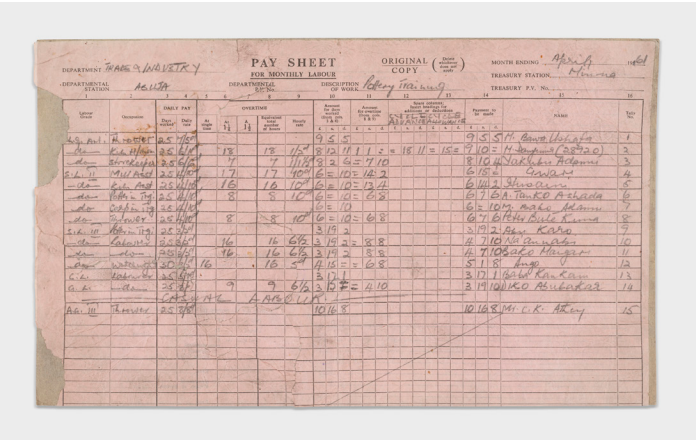
With an introduction by Michael Cardew, this catalogue was published by Ibadan University Press for the Department of Antiquities, Lagos.



Nigeria Magazine
No. 70, 9/1/1961
9.625 × 6 inches
Courtesy of York Museums Trust

PHOTO SEBASTIAN BACH

Contains an article on page 198, “Firing the big pot at Kwali” by Michael Cardew.



Pottery Training Centre
Pay sheet for monthly labor, 4/30/1961
7.875 × 13.5 inches
Courtesy of York Museums Trust

PHOTO SEBASTIAN BACH

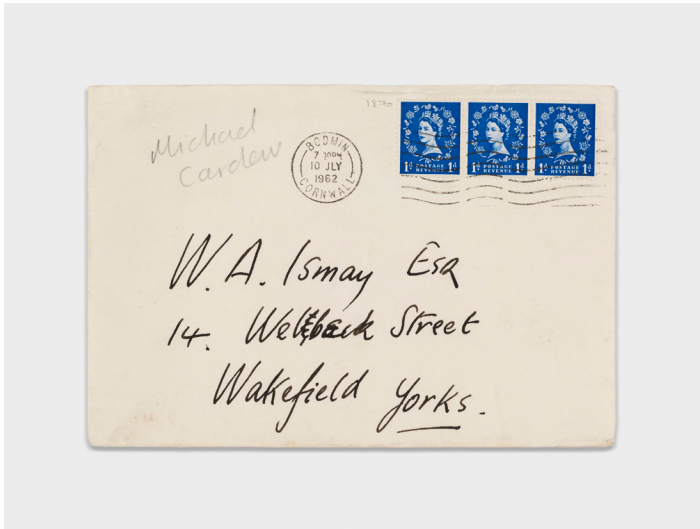
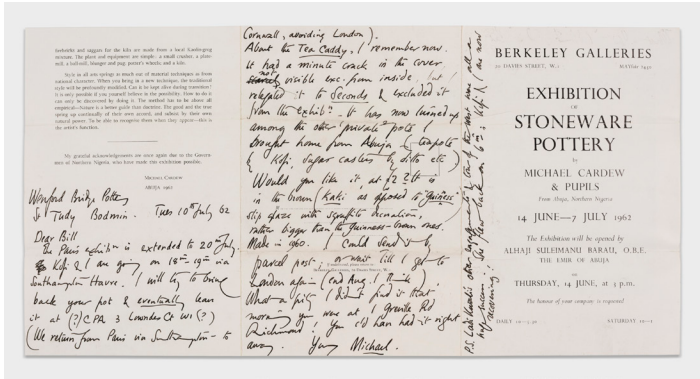
Records hours worked in the Pottery Training Centre, including potters, Clement Kofi Athey and Bawa Ushafa.



Berkeley Galleries, London
Invitation, 6/14/1962
9.125 × 18 inches
Courtesy of York Museums Trust

PHOTO SEBASTIAN BACH

Preview invitation for the *Exhibition of Stoneware Pottery by Michael Cardew and Pupils from Abuja, Northern Nigeria*, dated 14 June 1962 at Berkeley Galleries, London. The leaflet features two black-and-white images by Ismay taken in Abuja, alongside a short text by Cardew.



Michael Cardew

Invitation, 7/10/1962

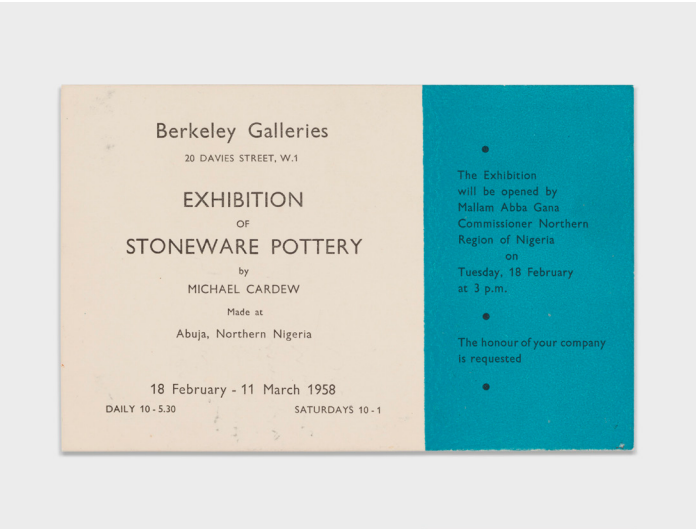
9.125 × 18 inches (letter/leaflet)

9.875 × 6.25 inches (envelope)

Courtesy of York Museums Trust

PHOTOS SEBASTIAN BACH

Notes written on a leaflet promoting the exhibition of Michael Cardew and the Abuja students at Berkeley Galleries, London where Michael Cardew writes that he will try to bring back Bill's pots from the Paris exhibition. He offers Bill the tea caddy, which he refers to as a 'second'.



Berkeley Galleries, London

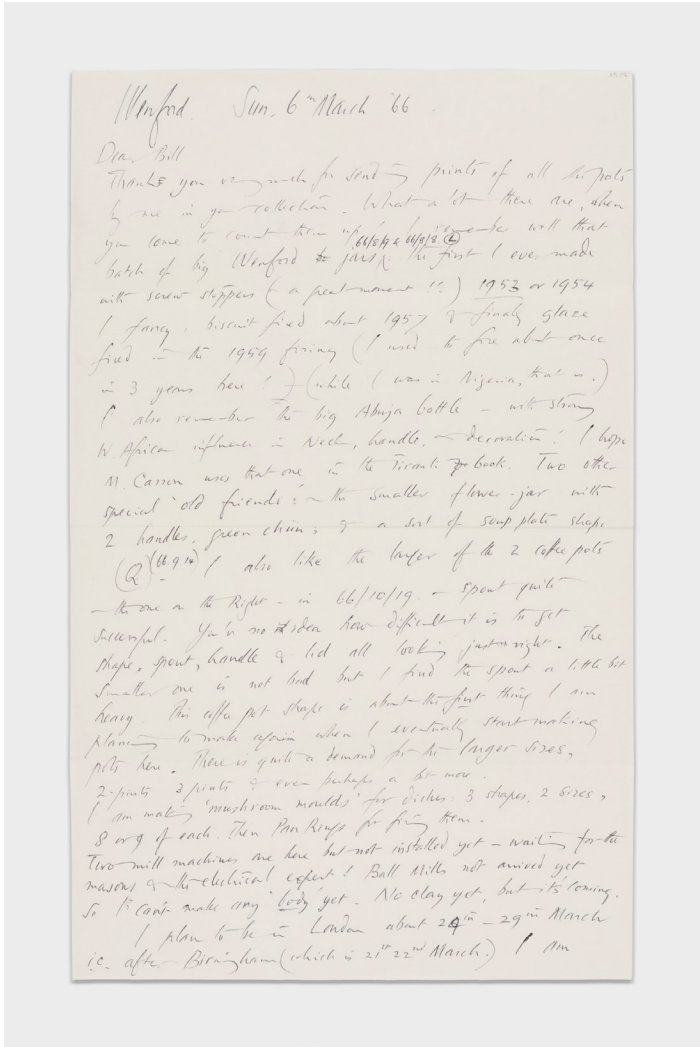
Invitation, 2/18/1958

2.5 × 4.125 inches

Courtesy of York Museums Trust

PHOTO SEBASTIAN BACH

Exhibition of Stoneware Pottery by Michael Cardew made at Abuja, Northern Nigeria.



Michael Cardew

Letter, 3/6/1966

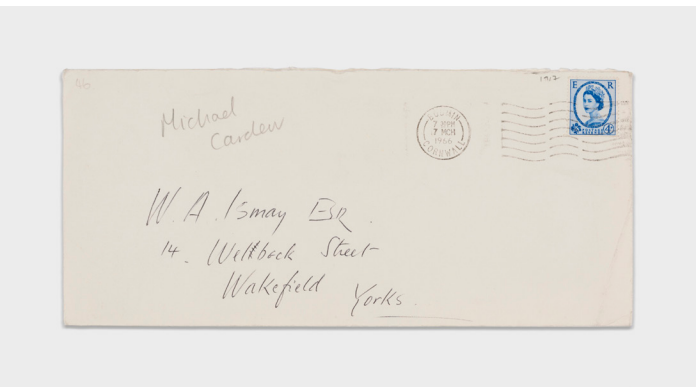
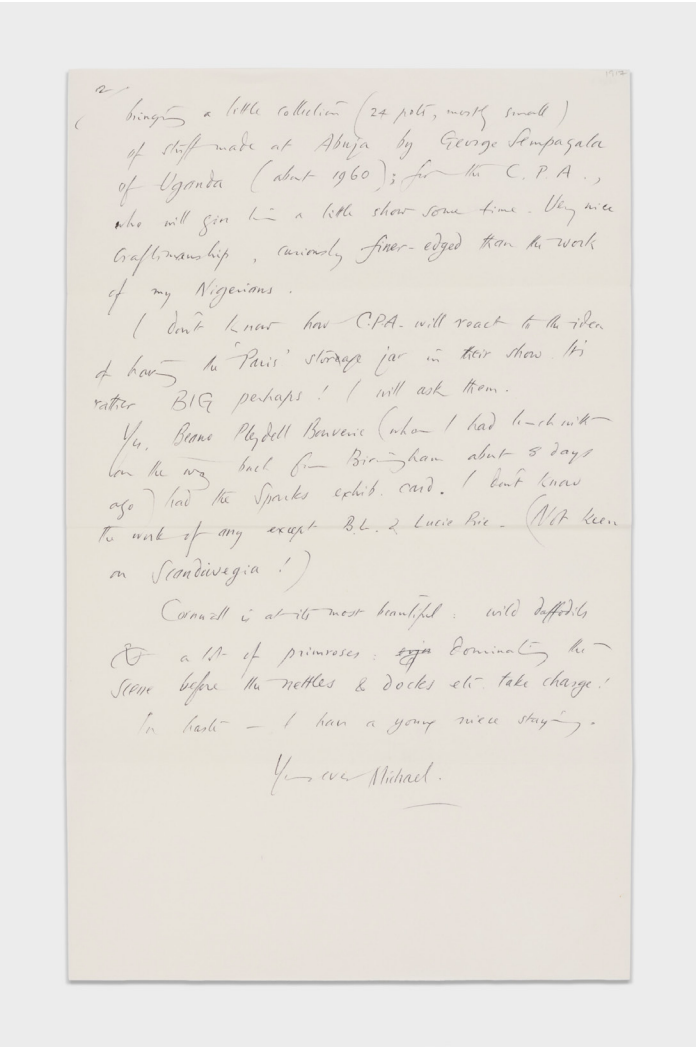
13 × 8 inches (letters)

4.125 × 8.875 inches (envelope)

Courtesy of York Museums Trust

PHOTOS SEBASTIAN BACH

In a letter to W.A. Ismay, Michael Cardew expresses his thanks for the print showing all the pots from Ismay's collection. He recalls the group of works clearly, noting that they were the first pieces he made with screw stoppers, produced around 1953 or 1954. The batch was biscuit-fired in 1957 and glaze-fired in 1959. Cardew specifically remembers the large Abuja bottle included in the collection.





**Asibi Ido (Potter) &
Michael Ambrose Cardew (Decorator)**

(Nigeria, b.1967, d. unknown)
(United Kingdom, 1901–1983)

Dish, 1960–1962
Stoneware
3.125 × 9.5 inches
Courtesy of York Museums Trust

PHOTO SEBASTIAN BACH

Asibi Ido and Michael Cardew collaborated on this piece. Ido formed the dish, while the interior decoration, featuring a painted fish-like motif, was added by Cardew. The work reflects Cardew's emphasis on encouraging trainees to personalize standard ceramic forms through individual aesthetic choices. Like many pieces produced at the Pottery Training Centre, the underside of the dish is signed with both artists' initials and marked with the Centre's distinctive seal, inscribed in Arabic script, highlighting the integration of individual authorship within a shared studio environment.



Halima Audu

(Nigeria, b. unknown, d. 1961)

Lidded Bottle, 1959–1965
Stoneware
5.75 × 2.5 inches
Courtesy of York Museums Trust

PHOTO SEBASTIAN BACH

In this bottle by Halima Audu, the screw-top lid reflects an innovation introduced by Michael Cardew to help preserve the coolness of liquids in the hot West African climate. The making of such lidded vessels required advanced skill and patience, as the clay components had to be precisely sized to account for differential shrinkage during high-temperature firing. The successful alignment of the lid and neck demonstrates a high level of technical expertise, making this an especially accomplished piece of work.

George Sempagala

(Uganda, b. 1942)

Sauce boat, 1966
Stoneware, ash glaze
4.5 × 5.875 inches

Teapot, 1966
Stoneware
6.75 × 8.25 inches

Courtesy of York Museums Trust

PHOTOS SEBASTIAN BACH

Ugandan potter George Sempagala spent a year at the Pottery Training Centre in Abuja between 1960 and 1961 after originally studying pottery at the Kampala Technical Institute in 1957 under Michael Gill. Sempagala later established his own pottery business called Namanve Pottery in Uganda.



LADI KWALI'S INTERNATIONALISM: A RUPTURE IN NIGERIAN MODERNISM



PHOTO SEBASTIAN BACH

Highlighted in this display are thrown wares by Ladi Kwali, presented alongside archival material related to her 1972 demonstration tour in the United States. Organized by Michael Cardew, the tour included major cities including Dallas, Los Angeles, New York, and Chicago. Ghanaian potter Kofi Athey accompanied Kwali and Cardew on the tour, titled “African Craftsmen in America,” sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts (NCECA), the American Craft Council, the World Crafts Council, and the Maryland State Arts Council. The tour aimed to introduce Kwali’s work to new audiences across the Atlantic.

Throughout the tour, Kwali skillfully hand-built pots before admiring audiences in numerous cities, at venues including the 92nd Street Y, New York; Florida State University, Tallahassee; Morgan State College and Montgomery College, both in Maryland; the Museum of African Art in Washington, D.C.; the grounds of the Baltimore Museum of Art; and the portico of the Academy of Art in Memphis.

Notable stops also included historically Black colleges and universities such as Claflin University in South Carolina; the University of North Carolina at Charlotte; Spelman College in Atlanta; and Howard University in Washington, D.C. The tour concluded in Chicago, with final demonstrations at Northwestern University’s Africa House and the Field Museum.

While the demonstrations celebrated Kwali’s artistry and cultural significance, they also raised critical questions. At several venues, concerns were voiced about whether Kwali had participated of her own volition or whether the tour functioned as a form of cultural diplomacy at a time when U.S. interests in Nigeria’s oil industry were growing.

Cardew’s stated intention to connect African American students with African heritage was viewed by some as problematic, given his position as a white colonial authority figure framing and mediating Kwali’s work. In the context of post-Civil Rights America, this dynamic exposed deeper tensions around authorship, representation, and cultural translation.

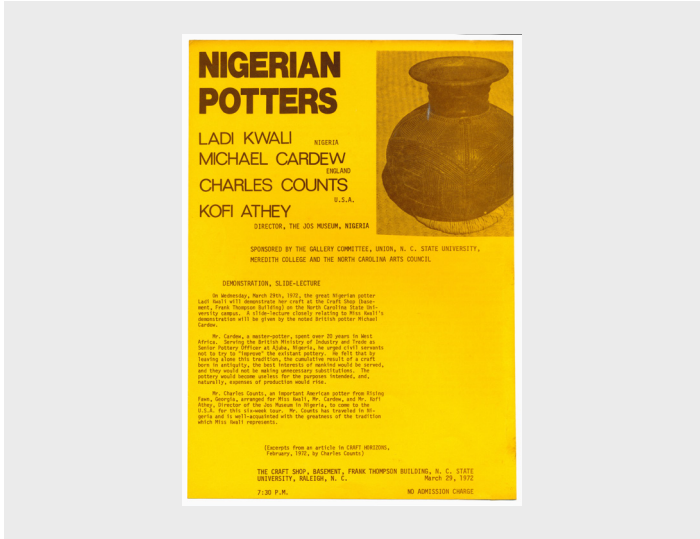


Nigeria Magazine

A Chronicle of Abuja, 1/1/1962
 9.75 × 7.125 inches
 Courtesy of York Museums Trust

PHOTO SEBASTIAN BACH

Translated and arranged from the Hausa of Alhaji Hassan and Mallam Shuaibu Na’ibi by Frank Heath. Published by African University Press, Lagos.



Nigerian Potters, N.C. State University

Poster, 3/29/1972
 11 × 7.75 inches
 From the collections of the Crafts Study Centre, University for the Creative Arts. MAC/8/3/43

IMAGE COURTESY OF CRAFTS STUDY CENTRE, UNIVERSITY FOR THE CREATIVE ARTS



African Craftsmen in America

Pamphlet, 5/1–5/6/1972
 21.875 × 8.5 inches
 From the collections of the Crafts Study Centre, University for the Creative Arts. MAC/8/3/21

IMAGE COURTESY OF CRAFTS STUDY CENTRE, UNIVERSITY FOR THE CREATIVE ARTS

Pamphlet with details of Ladi Kwali’s U.S. demonstration tour schedule, which features her on the cover making a pot. The pamphlet states on the inside:

LADI KWALI
 INTERNATIONAL AWARD-WINNING
 NIGERIAN POTTER
 DEMONSTRATIONS OF COILING CLAY
 INTO HUGE WATER JARS
 DECORATION ADDED IN AUTHENTIC
 ABUJA TRADITIONS



Daily Tar Heel, University of North Carolina

Newspaper clipping: “Nigerian potter to show craft techniques in the pit”, 3/28/1972
 8.175 × 8 inches
 From the collections of the Crafts Study Centre, University for the Creative Arts. MAC/8/3/46

IMAGE COURTESY OF CRAFTS STUDY CENTRE, UNIVERSITY FOR THE CREATIVE ARTS



Unknown Photographer

Photograph, 4/13/1972
 3.5 × 5 inches
 From the collections of the Crafts Study Centre, University for the Creative Arts. MAC/8/3/3

IMAGE COURTESY OF CRAFTS STUDY CENTRE, UNIVERSITY FOR THE CREATIVE ARTS

Ladi Kwali demonstrating in Chattanooga, Tennessee, April 1972.



Rosalind Fox Solomon

Photograph, 1977

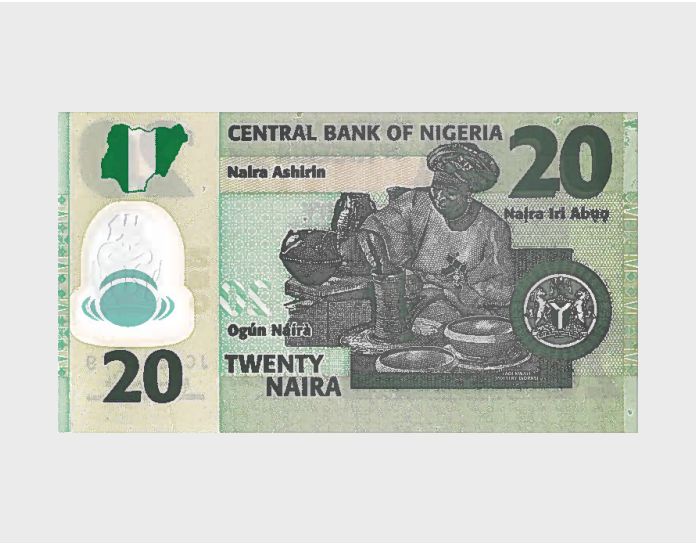
5 × 3.5 inches

© Rosalind Solomon

From the collections of the Crafts Study Centre, University for the Creative Arts. MAC/8/3/66

IMAGE COURTESY OF CRAFTS STUDY CENTRE, UNIVERSITY FOR THE CREATIVE ARTS

Portrait of Ladi Kwali during a demonstration of her work at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.



Ladi Kwali on the reverse of the Nigerian Twenty-Naira note
2.875 × 5.125 inches

First issued in 1977 and re-released in a new color in 1984, the ₦20 note features the late Nigerian Head of State, General Murtala Mohammed (1938–1976), on its front. The reverse depicts a portrait of Ladi Kwali (1925–1984) at the potter’s wheel.



The Atlanta Enquirer
Newspaper clipping: “Artists At Kennedy School”, 4/15/1972
11 × 7.75 inches
From the collections of the Crafts Study Centre, University for the Creative Arts. MAC/8/3/56

IMAGE COURTESY OF CRAFTS STUDY CENTRE, UNIVERSITY FOR THE CREATIVE ARTS



Susan T. McElhinney
Black and white photograph, date unknown
7 x 9.25 inches

© Susan T. McElhinney

From the collections of the Crafts Study Centre, University for the Creative Arts. MAC/8/3/65

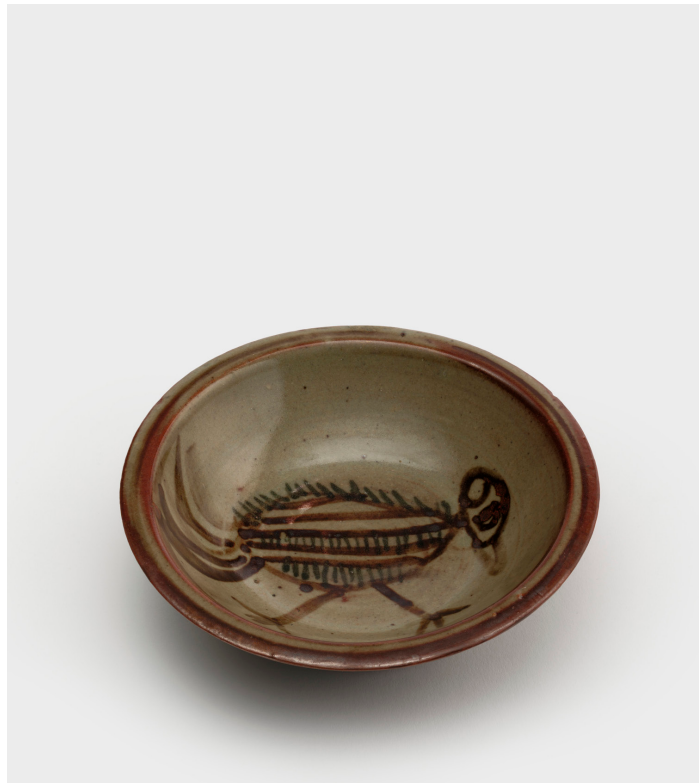
IMAGE COURTESY OF CRAFTS STUDY CENTRE, UNIVERSITY FOR THE CREATIVE ARTS

Ladi Kwali signing her name, Balto, Maryland, USA.



The Observer
Newspaper clipping with photograph of Ladi Kwali at Royal College of Art, 7/15/1962
12.875 × 10.625 inches
Courtesy of York Museums Trust

PHOTO SEBASTIAN BACH



Ladi Kwali
(Nigeria, 1925–1984)

Dish, 1950–1979
Stoneware (glazed)
1.625 × 5.375 inches
Courtesy of York Museums Trust and the Estate of Henry Rothschild

Beaker, 1962
Stoneware, transparent glaze, slip glaze
3.875 × 2.875 inches
Courtesy of York Museums Trust. The W.A. Ismay Collection

Beaker, 1962
Stoneware, transparent glaze, slip glaze
3.625 × 2.875 inches
Courtesy of York Museums Trust. The W.A. Ismay Collection

PHOTOS SEBASTIAN BACH



INTERGENERATIONAL VESSELS & MATRILINEAL INFLUENCES



PHOTO SEBASTIAN BACH

The vessel has existed across time as a central and recognizable form throughout the history of ceramics. It exists materially as a durable container, hand-built or thrown, with its form and function ever-evolving, whether used in daily life for food and drink or ceremonially as part of marriage rites or funerary traditions.

A selection of vessels made by Ladi Kwali and Halima Audu in the 1970s, Magdalene Odundo in the 1980s, and contemporary makers Adebunmi Gbadebo, Bisila Noha, and Anina Major extend and reflect on matrilineal pottery traditions, ancestral lineages, and the legacies and histories of Black (African and Caribbean) female potters.

Kwali's unglazed terracotta pot on display was made during a demonstration tour to Farnham, England in 1962. It is an example of traditional Gbari hand-built pottery, open-fired, that she was accustomed to making before her encounter with modern techniques. Conversely, Halima Audu, from the village of Ido, created remarkable pots that are difficult to distinguish from Kwali's but tragically died young, only two years after joining the Centre.

Adebunmi Gbadebo's work is rooted in materials rich with history and meaning. They include indigo dye, human hair collected across the African diaspora, and soil hand-dug from the former True Blue Plantation in South Carolina, where her ancestors were enslaved. Her ceramics draw on traditional African pottery techniques, including hand-coiling, connecting her practice to her Nigerian heritage. Grounded in research and the archive, Gbadebo's work explores the deep ties between land, material, and memory, weaving together personal and collective histories of Black life. Noha is of Spanish and Equatorial Guinean heritage and is strongly influenced by the histories of African and Japanese ceramics. Clay histories for Noha extend from the personal to the global. For Anina Major, plaiting clay reconnects her with her heritage, while the firing process mirrors personal transformation. As clay becomes most fragile before entering the kiln, it undergoes irreversible change, symbolizing how moments of vulnerability can lead to permanence, even in fragility.

These vessels trace the development of the form across three generations of makers. The display brings together potting traditions from around the globe to showcase their interrelatedness, reflecting on how matrilineal relationships, central to the history of African pottery traditions, have extended beyond kin to an inter-generational group of contemporary artists.

FROM GBARI POTS TO HYBRID POTS: LADI KWALI, HALIMA AUDU & MAGDALENE ODUNDO

Kwali's prominence at the Pottery Training Centre created opportunities for a new generation of women potters, including Asibi Ido, Halima Audu, Lami Toto, and Kainde Ushafa. Audu joined the Centre in 1959, followed by Ido and Toto in 1963, and later by Ushafa. Their work built upon and extended the hybrid approach pioneered by Kwali, blending Indigenous techniques with newly introduced technologies and materials.

In 1974, British-Kenyan ceramicist Magdalene Odundo spent three months at the Centre after Michael Cardew encouraged her to study African pottery techniques in Nigeria. During her time there, she learned hand-building directly from Kwali, Ido and Toto, each of whom brought their own distinct style and sensibility to the medium.

The pots on display by Halima Audu and Ladi Kwali demonstrate the intricate craft and conceptual depth of their Gbari heritage, showing how traditional practices evolved from making unglazed, functional terracotta vessels into glazed, decorative stoneware. Kwali's terracotta pot, built using the coiling method, was made during a demonstration tour in Farnham, U.K. in 1962. Audu's pot, constructed using the same hand-building technique, has been glazed and fired. No longer intended for storing or cooling water, these works now serve as objects of cultural memory, aesthetic exploration, and technical excellence.

The surfaces of Kwali and Audu's pots feature zoomorphic and geometric motifs that resonate with ancestral forms of mark-making, including body scarification, tattooing, and facial patterns common among the Gbari people. Through their artistry, Kwali and Audu preserved these visual languages and reinterpreted them within ceramic forms that continue to speak across generations and geographies. The pot on display by Odundo reflects her early engagement with Gbari hand-building methods, which would go on to deeply inform her distinctive approach to clay.



Ladi Kwali

(Nigeria, 1925–1984)

Unglazed pot from Farnham demonstration, 1962

Earthenware

14.375 × 12.625 inches

Courtesy of BA(Hons) Ceramics Course Collection. From the collections of the Crafts Study Centre, University for the Creative Arts, Farnham. UCA Ceramics Collection. UCA 2011.16

IMAGE COURTESY OF CRAFTS STUDY CENTRE, UNIVERSITY FOR THE CREATIVE ARTS



Magdalene Odundo

(Kenya, 1950, lives and works in the United Kingdom)

Pot, 1979

Coiled pot with pointed base, bonfire fired

15.75 × 12.375 inches

Courtesy of York Museums Trust

PHOTO SEBASTIAN BACH



Halima Audu

(Nigeria, b. unknown, d. 1961)

Jar, 1959

Stoneware

11.375 × 11.375 inches

Courtesy of York Museums Trust

PHOTO SEBASTIAN BACH

Anina Major’s woven and glazed ceramic sculptures reinterpret the Bahamian tradition of plaiting, a straw-based weaving technique passed down through generations of women, including the artist’s grandmother. Drawing on early memories of time spent in the straw market, Major honors this tradition while adapting it to the medium of clay. Through extensive experimentation with clay body recipes, she developed a formula that allows the material to mimic the flexibility of palm fronds, enabling her to create interlaced, plaited forms that move from two to three dimensions.

The act of firing becomes both a technical process and a metaphorical one: transforming fragile clay into a durable material capable of withstanding time and the elements. For Major, this transformation speaks to the preservation of a cultural practice at risk of disappearing, and to the resilience required to sustain heritage through art. Her work is not an exact replication of the objects once made by her grandmother, but rather a reinterpretation of shared gestures, imbued with memory, connection, and continuity.

Nature and landscape also play a central role in Major’s practice. She explores the complex relationship between land, identity, and belonging, particularly in the context of Caribbean histories and diasporic displacement. Major merges traditional craft with contemporary forms, using the visual language of plaiting to evoke shared diasporic experience and the symbolic crossings between land and sea.



Anina Major
(The Bahamas, b. 1981, lives and works in the United States)

Salt Crusted Ribs, 2024
Glazed stoneware, sea glass, and sand
10.5 × 9 inches
Courtesy of the Artist and Shoshana Wayne Gallery
PHOTO ANDREW WHITE

Bisila Noha is of Spanish and Equatorial Guinean heritage. For her, the narrative of clay moves fluidly between the personal and the global. A deep engagement with global ceramics and, in particular, matrilineal African pottery traditions shapes her work. Noha’s distinctive two-legged vessels, created through a combination of hand-building, wheel-throwing, and sculpting, symbolize duality and fusion: two legs, two parents, two cultures, and two races coming together to create something new.

In a significant moment of discovery, Noha later learned that this two-legged form had been previously created in 1995 by Ivorian ceramist Kouame Kakahá. This led to her ongoing research project, *Searching for Kouame Kakahá: A celebration of the unnamed women of clay; our shared mothers and grandmothers* (2020–), which honors the often-overlooked contributions of women in global ceramic traditions. The accompanying display provides insight into Noha’s broader research and the lineages of the clay workers she aims to foreground.



Bisila Noha
(Spain, 1988, lives and works in the United Kingdom)

Water Jug, 2021
Various stoneware clays and porcelain
14.125 × 10.625 inches
Private Collection
PHOTO SEBASTIAN BACH

Bisila Noha
(Spain, 1988, lives and works in the United Kingdom)

<i>Reunion I</i> , 2021 Terracotta 10.625 × 8.875 × 4.375 inches Courtesy of the Artist	<i>Reunion XII</i> , 2022 Terracotta 10.25 × 9.125 × 4.125 inches Courtesy of the Artist
<i>Two-Legged Vessel</i> , 2020 Black stoneware 6.75 × 5.875 × 3.375 inches Courtesy of Victor F. “Trey” Trahan III	<i>Two-Legged Vessel</i> , 2020 Baney clay 6.75 × 5.875 × 3.375 inches Courtesy of Crafts Council Collection

PHOTOS SEBASTIAN BACH





Adebunmi Gbadebo works with culturally and historically charged materials to explore the complex relationships between land, memory, and identity. Central to her practice are materials such as indigo dye, human Black hair sourced from across the diaspora, and, most notably, clay hand-dug from Fort Motte, South Carolina, where her ancestors were once enslaved. By working with soil from this site, Gbadebo directly engages with the material history of slavery in the United States, transforming the land into a vessel for mourning, remembrance, and reclamation. Her ceramic works are formed using meditative African coiling techniques, each vessel becoming a site of spiritual excavation. They honor erased and silenced histories, while asserting a visual and material language rooted in ancestral connection. In *Scott, Ida, 1892–1945, Asleep in Jesus* (2024), Gbadebo memorializes an ancestor through clay sourced directly from her burial site, drawing attention to the ways in which death, faith, and geography intersect. Similarly, *Sam* (2023) honors a descendant of True Blue’s enslaved community, transforming the vessel into both a commemorative object and a record of place-specific memory.

Gbadebo’s work invites viewers to consider how the body and land serve as repositories of memory, and how matter itself can carry stories of people long forgotten or deliberately obscured. Her practice insists on the visibility of those histories and offers a deeply personal yet collective engagement with the legacies of slavery, survival, and Black life.

Adebunmi Gbadebo

(United States, b. 1992, lives and works in the United States)

Scott, Ida, 1892–1945, Asleep in Jesus, 2024

True Blue Plantation cemetery soil, shoe polish, Carolina Gold rice, white rice, pit-fired
23.75 × 16.5 × 16 inches

© Adebunmi Gbadebo. Courtesy of the Artist and Nicola Vassell Gallery

PHOTO LANCE BREWER

Phoebe Collings-James’ anti-disciplinary practice explores the collapse of power structures through the materiality of clay and its relation to personal and collective vulnerability, drawing on Black feminist and decolonial thought. In her ongoing *Infidel* series (2023–), described by the artist as a “heretic anthology,” creature-like forms are arranged in loose procession. Influenced by West African and Caribbean coiling techniques used to make rolling vessels, Collings-James reimagines the *Infidel* as a container of political, spiritual, and ancestral memory. The term “infidel,” historically used to mark the outsider or unbeliever, is reclaimed as a symbol of defiance. These forms loiter and linger, suggesting that stillness, refusal, and doing nothing can also hold radical agency.

This trio of new sculptures on view expands this vocabulary, embodied by armless, fragile figures with protruding beaks, precariously balanced on curves or points. At once unsettling and delicate, they evoke a sense of resistance.

Phoebe Collings-James
(United Kingdom, b. 1987, lives and works in the United Kingdom)

Infidel [Scorpion], 2025
Glazed stoneware ceramic
33.875 × 17.75 × 17.75 inches

Infidel [knot song], 2025
Glazed stoneware ceramic on a blackened steel base
29.5 × 9 × 9 inches

Infidel [virtuosic], 2025
Glazed stoneware ceramic
44.125 × 12.625 × 12.625 inches

Courtesy of the Artist and Arcadia Missa, London
PHOTOS TOM CARTER



Magdalene Odundo's ceramic vessels are renowned for their smooth, burnished surfaces and elegant, often anthropomorphic forms. Using traditional hand-building methods such as coiling and the ancient technique of terra sigillata, where refined slip is layered and polished to create a soft, metallic sheen, Odundo creates works that bridge functionality and symbolism. While her vessels reference utilitarian forms, they are ultimately sculptural, evoking the human body and its capacities for containment, transformation, and expression.

Her practice is deeply informed by a study of global ceramic traditions, shaped by extensive travel and research in Nigeria, Kenya, and among Pueblo potters in the American Southwest. Her time in Nigeria, particularly her visit to the Pottery Training Centre and her engagement with Ladi Kwali, was especially formative. Kwali's mastery of coiling, surface design, and form developed in a context where traditional and modern techniques converged and resonated with Odundo's own approach to clay as a material of continuity and innovation.

The vessel becomes more than an object of use; it is a site of cultural memory, bodily metaphor, and philosophical inquiry. Odundo has spoken of the vessel as a means of exploring what it means to be human, drawing connections between interiority and exteriority, fullness and emptiness. In extending the matrilineal ceramic traditions of Africa into a global contemporary idiom, Odundo's work honors ancestral knowledge while reimagining it across time, geography, and lived experience.

Magdalene Odundo
(Kenya, 1950, lives and works in the United Kingdom)

Untitled #10, 1995
Earthenware
21.25 × 12 inches
Courtesy of The Newark Museum of Art. Purchase 1996 Louis Bamberger Bequest Fund

IMAGE COURTESY OF THE NEWARK MUSEUM OF ART

Symmetrical Reduced Black Narrow-Necked Tall Piece, 1990
Terracotta
16 × 10 inches
Courtesy of Brooklyn Museum. Purchased with funds given by Dr. and Mrs. Sidney Clyman and Frank L. Babbott Fund 1991.26

IMAGE COURTESY OF BROOKLYN MUSEUM

Untitled #2 Vase (England), 1994
Slip-coated red clay
21.625 × 11.4375 inches
Courtesy of Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum. Museum purchase from Charles E. Sampson Memorial Fund, 1997-23-1

PHOTO ELLEN MCDERMOTT © SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION





Simone Leigh’s large-scale sculpture from her *Village Series* (2023-2024) blurs the boundaries between body, dwelling, and vessel. Drawing on vernacular architectural forms, Leigh reimagines ceramic sculpture as both a symbolic structure and a site of embodied presence. The domed, rounded forms evoke ritual vessels, anthropomorphic silhouettes, and ancestral shelters, inviting reflection on how Black femininity, care, and resilience are housed and expressed through material. Her use of bronze and glazed ceramic reflects a deep engagement with the histories and politics of craft. Leigh describes her practice as “autoethnographic,” rooted in Black feminist theory and informed by personal, cultural, and ancestral knowledge systems.

By enlarging domestic and recognizable forms to monumental scale, Leigh affirms the significance of architecture, both physical and conceptual, that has shaped Black women’s lives. The *Village Series* becomes a living archive, one that honors the labor, memory, and structural care carried across generations. In doing so, Leigh reclaims ceramic sculpture as a powerful language of monumentality, presence, and sovereignty.

Simone Leigh

(United States, b. 1967, lives and works in the United States)

Village Series, 2023–2024

Stoneware

59 × 47 inches

Courtesy of the Artist and Matthew Marks Gallery

PHOTO SEBASTIAN BACH



Adebunmi Gbadebo

(United States, b. 1992, lives and works in the United States)

Sam, 2023

Soil dug from True Blue Plantation, South Carolina, human hair, pit-fired
28.5 × 16 × 15 inches

©Adebunmi Gbadebo. Courtesy of the Artist and Nicola Vassell Gallery

PHOTO SEBASTIAN BACH

Chinasa Vivian Ezugha

(Nigeria, b. 1991, lives and works in the United Arab Emirates and United Kingdom)

Uro, 2019/2025

Performance documentation, 60kg mound of clay

Courtesy of the Artist. Photos by Guido Mencari

PHOTO SEBASTIAN BACH

Uro — (clay)

Uro is about the weight of depression, rebirth and awakening from sleep.

Sitting on the body as a weighty, damp material, it becomes a solid foundation and morphs the body.

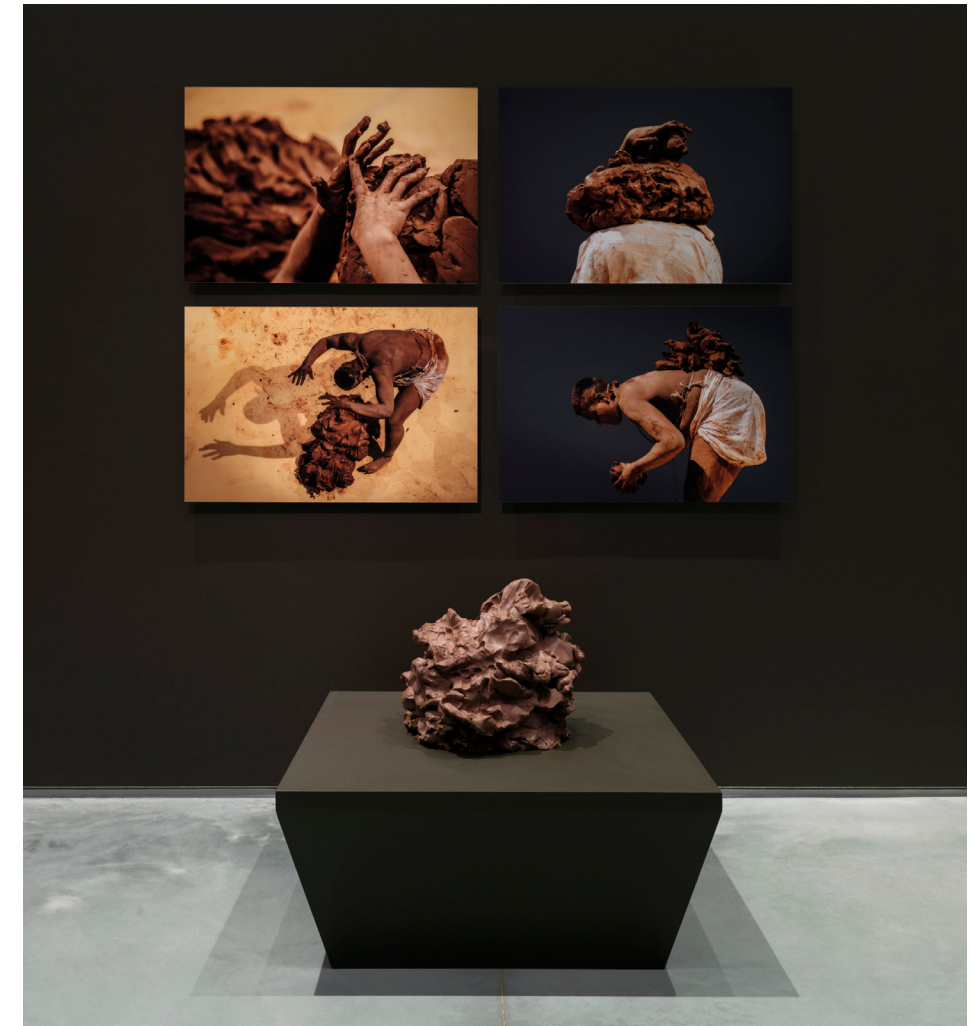
Uro, mortar, material, substance, clay. Life, depression, weight, and confusion.

Breathe, you are still alive.

Up and down, the chest lifts. Reach for heaven.

Breathe, you are still alive.

— Chinasa Vivian Ezugha, *Uro*, 2019



Born in Enugu State, Nigeria, Chinasa Vivian Ezugha creates work that connects her to her cultural heritage and questions about her identity as a Black woman living in England. Presenting performance documentation, photography, and a new immersive clay sculpture derived from the 2018 performance, *Uro*, commissioned by SPILL Festival of Performance Art, the artist showcases clay as a force to be worked with and against over the initial performance's six-hour duration.

In *Uro*, Chinasa Vivian Ezugha interacted with clay and water on her body and canvas. A presentation of a selection of photographs documenting the original performance and a new conceptual clay sculpture focuses on the material and metaphoric potential of clay, rooted in Ezugha's personal narrative, which draws on themes of death, rebirth, depression, degeneration, and regeneration. The sculpture, conceived specifically for *Body Vessel Clay*, is made from 60 kilograms of raw clay and represents exactly double the weight of the mass of clay Ezugha used in her original performance.



Jade de Montserrat & Webb-Ellis

(United Kingdom, b. 1981, lives and works in the United Kingdom)
(United Kingdom, lives and works in Canada and United Kingdom)

Clay, 2015
Video with sound
9:00
Courtesy of the Artist, Webb-Ellis, and Bosse & Baum Gallery

IMAGE COURTESY OF JADE DE MONTSERRAT AND WEBB-ELLIS, [CLAY], 2015, FILM STILL

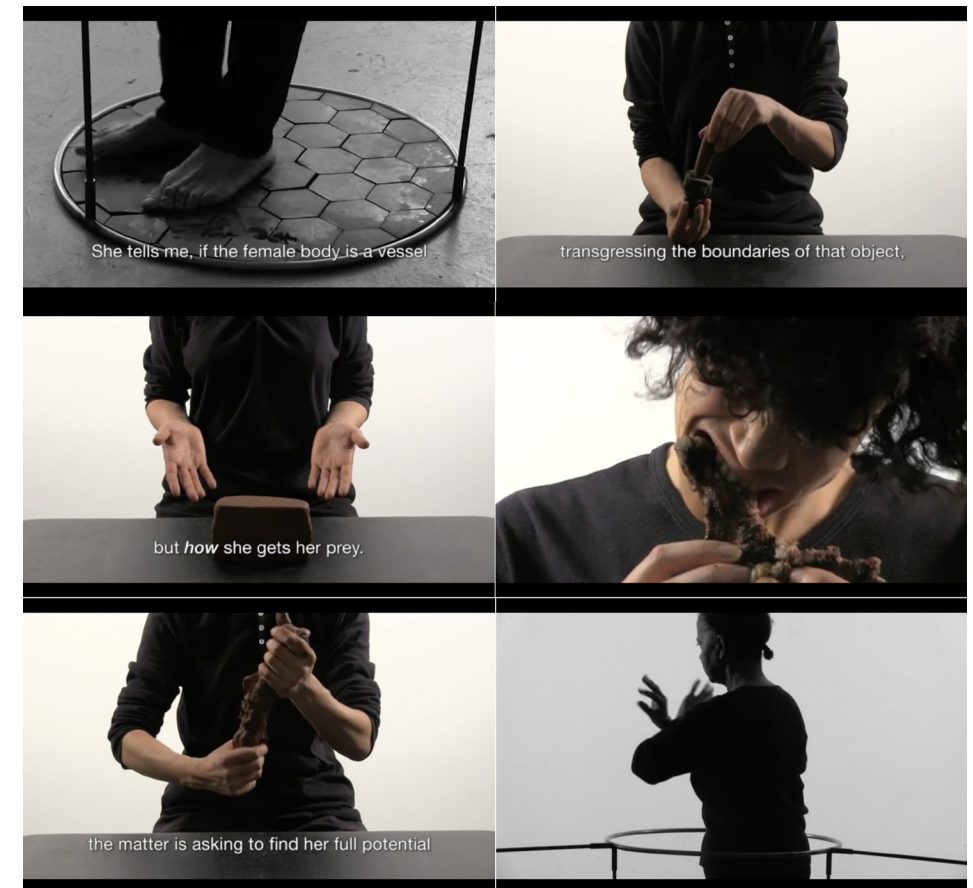
In their collaborative performance for camera, *Clay* (2015), made with filmmakers Webb-Ellis, Jade de Montserrat immerses her body into the landscape in repetitive acts of recreating, digging, and building with clay. These acts reference and recall the artist’s memories of playing with the material as a child growing up in rural Yorkshire. Clay for Montserrat also symbolizes humans gouging the earth and simultaneously being gouged from the earth. It is also about rebuilding and the vulnerability we face in attempting to do this in isolation. Inscribing and retracing histories, and exorcizing myth from a contained space, Montserrat’s body is masked and ‘othered’ in the range of media she chooses to work with. Through performance documentation, *Clay* interrogates projected binaries. Hunter or hunted? The occupier or the occupied? Archaeologist or artefact? Complicit or implicit? Transformer or transformed?

Julia Phillips

(Germany, b.1985, lives and works in the United States)

Becoming (the Hunter, the Twerker, the Submitter), 2015
One-channel HD video
96 seconds
Courtesy of the Artist and Matthew Marks Gallery

IMAGE © JULIA PHILLIPS, COURTESY MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY



Julia Phillips is known for making ceramic and metal sculptures that complicate the relationship between race and power. In *Becoming (the Hunter, the Twerker, the Submitter)* (2015), clay stands in for gendered bodies. At the same time, two figures, the artist and an older woman described as a “matriarchal figure,” embody the roles of hunter, twerker, and submitter through a mix of subtle and expressive gestures. These actions unfold within a tiled circular stage that resembles both a ritual space and a cage. Subtitled text overlays the image, voicing a monologue that reframes the female body as a vessel with agency. The speaker challenges passive notions of femininity, suggesting that power lies not in whether she captures her prey, but in how she does it on her own terms. Through sharp editing, clay manipulation, and symbolic props, the video explores themes of desire, power, and control in a way that remains intentionally open to interpretation.

HISTORY OF CERAMICS

Making objects and art from clay is one of the oldest forms of human creativity, with Indigenous pottery traditions existing almost everywhere in the world. This timeline charts some of the developments of fired clay during its almost 30,000-year-long history.

28000 BCE

The oldest recorded fired ceramic artifact dates from the late Paleolithic period, a statuette known as the ‘Venus of Dolní Věstonice,’ from what is now the Czech Republic.

18000 –17000 BCE

In China’s Xianren Cave, fragments of pots are linked to the earliest rice cultivation.

15000 –10000 BCE

Prehistoric populations in Japan and Siberia were producing ceramics.

Pottery for storing and cooking grain is linked to the development of agriculture and emergence of sedentary communities, around 12,000 years ago.

9500 BCE

Ceramic shards in Central Mali date back to this period. Along Africa’s Nile Valley, early pottery was used by groups of hunters and fishermen, with designs made by impressing fish bones across the clay surface.

7500 BCE

The earliest discovered ‘bricks’ for building are sun-dried mud blocks from Syria.

5000 BCE

The earliest ceramicware in Central Europe is thought to be Neolithic Bandkeramik pottery, known for its linear or banded designs, with unfilled dots and cross-hatching.

4000 BCE

The first known pots in Britain are round-based or carinated bowls used by Neolithic farmers who cultivated cereals for cooking and storing food. They were likely introduced from the continent.

3500 BCE

Mesopotamian potters’ wheels dating from this period made ceramic production faster and easier.

2099 BCE+

Dispersals of peoples across Europe saw the spread of Corded Ware culture—named for its pottery ornamentation—across a large tract of Northern, Central, and Eastern Europe through the late Neolithic, Copper, and early Bronze Ages. They were succeeded in the early Bronze Age by the Bell Beaker people,

1680

In Rouen, France, soft-paste porcelain is made in European attempts to replicate hard-paste Chinese export porcelain, or ‘china.’

1740s

Industrialization of British ceramics began at Staffordshire potteries. By the late 1700s, new canals and roads enabled the transportation of clay and coal to factories and the delivery of finished products to market. By the end of the 16th century, Staffordshire was

recognized as the home of the British ceramics industry.

1884

Britain colonized Nigeria.

1920

Bernard Leach (1887-1979), together with Japanese potter Shōji Hamada (1894-1978), established the Leach Pottery in St Ives, Cornwall, England. Many consider this moment to mark the beginning of the British Studio Pottery Movement. In 1923, Michael Cardew (1901-1983) joined the Leach Pottery as Leach’s first apprentice potter.

1945

Michael Cardew set up the Vumé Pottery in Ghana, returning to the U.K. in 1948.

1951

The Nigerian colonial government appointed Michael Cardew as Senior Pottery Officer; and he established the Pottery Training Centre in Abuja (since renamed Suleja).

1954

Ladi Kwali (1925-1984) became the first female potter at the Pottery Training Centre.

1960

Nigeria gained independence from British colonial rule.

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

EXHIBITION LENDERS

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EQUIPMENT & FABRICATION

Albert Perlman, DFL Interiors, Full Point Graphics, Supreme Digital, SouthSide Design & Building, SmallCorp

SHIPPING

Archive Fine Art, Art Crating, Atelier, Boxart, Dietl, iTransport4U, Maquette, Momart

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GRAPHIC DESIGN

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CURATOR ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My deepest thanks to all the artists, collaborators, and supporters who have shaped this concluding iteration of *Body Vessel Clay*. This project has been a shared journey across geographies, histories, and lived experiences. I am especially grateful to Phoebe Collings-James, Jade de Montserrat, Chinasa Vivian Ezugha, Adebunmi Gbadebo, Simone Leigh, Anina Major, Bisila Noha, Magdalene Odundo, Julia Phillips, and Shawanda Corbett for their trust, their practices, and the conversations that continue to resonate with me. Thank you to my dear friend and collaborator, Antoinette Yetunde Vandy of AYO Design, for your vision and rigour in exhibition design, and to Nontsikelelo Mutiti, Ryan, and Kyla of NMutiti Studio for creating a visual language that astounded and inspired us throughout this process. Heartfelt thanks to Lisa, Jamie, and Mary at Ford Foundation Gallery, to Kris for leading on image reproductions, and to Emily for your thoughtful editing. A generous community has sustained this project across various locations, including Kwali, Suleja, Abuja Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Lagos, Dakar, York (Dr. Helen Walsh, Curator of Ceramics at the Centre of Ceramic Art (CoCA), York Art Gallery), Farnham, London (especially Dr. Tanya Harrod, independent design historian, and Rebecca Hone, Head of Culture & Community, Two Temple Place), Princeton, Warri, Philadelphia, Dallas, Aberystwyth, Atlanta, Middlesbrough, Yorkshire, Wakefield, New York, and New Orleans. I carry your contributions with me. 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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Printed on the occasion of the exhibition

BODY, VESSEL, CLAY: BLACK WOMEN,
CERAMICS & CONTEMPORARY ART
(SEPTEMBER 10 – DECEMBER 6, 2025)

FORD FOUNDATION GALLERY
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