

23 JULY 2025

**Ford Foundation Gallery presents**  
**Body Vessel Clay**  
**Black Women, Ceramics & Contemporary Art**



William Alfred Ismay (W. A. Ismay). Photograph of Ladi Kwali at a pottery demonstration in England. 1970s. York Museums Trust. The W. A. Ismay Bequest, 2001.

Photo: W. A. Ismay, © York Museums Trust.

**Ford Foundation Center for Social Justice | 320 E 43rd Street, New York**

On View September 10–December 6, 2025

Opening Event: September 10, 2025 | 5–7pm

Gallery Hours: Monday–Saturday | 11am–6pm

**New York, NY** – The [Ford Foundation Gallery](#) is pleased to present *Body Vessel Clay: Black Women, Ceramics & Contemporary Art*, opening on September 10th with a celebration from 5 to 7 p.m.

*Body Vessel Clay* brings together three generations of groundbreaking Black women artists whose work with clay explores the medium's multilayered cultural and political significance. Featuring over fifty works across ceramics, film, photography, and archives, the exhibition draws connections between the legacy of renowned Nigerian potter **Ladi Dosei Kwali** (1925-1984) and contemporary artistic practice. Through these lines of influence and innovation, the show traces how Black women artists have transformed the field of ceramics over the past seventy years—disrupting conventions, challenging hierarchies, and expanding the possibilities of clay as a medium.

Following critical acclaim at Two Temple Place in London and York Art Gallery in 2022, this landmark exhibition makes its U.S. debut on the centenary of Kwali's birth, honoring her powerful work's deep and broad influence over time and place. Curated by **Dr. Jareh Das**, this iteration of the exhibition features new works and includes three U.S.-based artists: Adebunmi Gbadebo, Simone Leigh, and Anina Major. It challenges dominant narratives in ceramics history by celebrating matrilineal, Indigenous African pottery techniques and clay's enduring presence as both an artistic and functional form of expression. Dr. Das's revelatory curation will immerse visitors in a contemplative space for reflecting on the layered histories of ceramics and the radical potentials of form, gesture, and the material memory of clay. The transformative qualities of the featured works become amplified in conversation with each other across generations, redefining and pushing the boundaries of ceramics.

The exhibition begins with Ladi Kwali, whose pioneering work revolutionized ceramics in West Africa and beyond. In 1954, Kwali joined the Pottery Training Centre (since renamed the Ladi Kwali Pottery Centre) in Suleja (formerly Abuja), established by British potter Michael Cardew (1901-1983), as the first female trainee. There, she was introduced to modern techniques of glazing and high-temperature kiln firing, transforming once-functional objects into collectable decorative works. Kwali is most celebrated for her hand-built Gbari water pots. She also created various thrown objects, including tankards, plates, dishes, bowls, and more, a range on display in the selection of her works featured in the show.

This meeting of British studio pottery and Indigenous Nigerian hand-built pottery traditions marked a pivotal moment in Nigerian modernism and craft history. Through a presentation of ceramics, archival photographs, press clippings, letters, and publications, this exhibition offers a rare insight into life at the Pottery Training Centre, its legacy, and the international

acclaim Kwali achieved during her lifetime, including her appearance on Nigeria's 20-Naira note.

Kwali paved the way for other women from her community to join the Pottery Training Centre, including Gbari potters **Halima Audu** and **Asibi Ido**, both of whom developed distinct artistic voices. Like their mentor, they continued to produce hybrid ceramic forms that combined traditional hand-building techniques with modern methods, as seen in their displayed works. An early vessel by ceramic artist **Magdalene Odundo** featured in the exhibition reflects the lasting impact of her formative 1974 visit to Nigeria and her direct encounter with Kwali. At the recommendation of Michael Cardew, Odundo interned at the Pottery Training Centre, where she worked alongside Kwali and other potters, learning Gbari hand-building and burnishing techniques and key practical skills. These methods became foundational to her evolving practice. Over the past four decades, Odundo has developed a singular approach that weaves African and ancient Greek and Roman ceramic traditions into refined, anthropomorphic vessel forms—works honoring matrilineal knowledge while forging new sculptural languages.

Kwali's presence is also felt obliquely as her influence resonates through a younger generation of international contemporary Black women artists who work with clay in radical, experimental, and deeply personal ways. **Bisila Noha's** thrown and hand-built two-legged vessels stem from her project, *Searching for Kouame Kakahá: A celebration of the unnamed women of clay; our shared mothers and grandmothers* (2020–), which redresses the fact that pottery, especially that made by women in the Global South, has been ignored, belittled, and forgotten. **Adebunmi Gbadebo** uses culturally and historically imbued materials, including clay, hair, and rice, to craft vessels from soil sourced at Fort Motte, South Carolina, where her ancestors were enslaved. These works embody mourning, memory, and reclamation to honor erased histories through meditative African coil techniques. Each vessel becomes a site of spiritual excavation, connecting land, lineage, and the enduring impact of slavery across generations. **Phoebe Collings-James's** ongoing *Infidel* series (2023–) draws on West African and Caribbean ceramic traditions of coiled vessel-making, reimagining the “infidel” as a container for national, political, and spiritual knowledge. Described by the artist as a “heretic anthology,” these ceramic sculptures, presented in procession, are ambiguous, creature-like, and vessel forms with mouths that seem to speak or shout. At once unsettling and fragile, they evoke vulnerability, resistance, and transformation, reclaiming the figure of the “infidel” as a potent symbol of defiance.

Clay is both a material and a metaphor in performance, as its malleability evokes transformation, memory, and resistance. In performance, it becomes more than a medium; it becomes a collaborator, a force to shape and be shaped by. In *Clay* (2015), filmed by Webb-Ellis, **Jade de Montserrat** uses her body to engage directly with the land in repetitive digging, building, and submerging. Her gestures, rooted in childhood memories of rural Yorkshire, speak to the human body's elemental connection to the earth, symbolising both creation and extraction. **Julia Phillips's** *Becoming (the Hunter, the Twerker, the Submitter)* (2015), a silent video loop, isolates and fragments a dancing figure into disjointed body parts. This deconstruction evokes themes of desire, predation, and submission. Through ambiguous choreography, Phillips probes bodily autonomy, objectification, and power. In her six-hour durational performance, *Uro* (2018), **Chinasa Vivian Ezugha** physically labored with 30kg of raw clay, applying it to her body and canvas in a visceral exchange of resistance and collaboration. For *Body Vessel Clay*, Ezugha revisits this performance through photographs and a new sculptural work that remembers clay not as static, but as a dynamic presence, material witness, weight, and memory all at once.

Works in the show embody innovative material strategies for preserving cultural knowledge and histories. **Anina Major's** woven and glazed ceramic sculptures, like the one presented, reinterpret the Bahamian tradition of plaiting, a straw-based weaving technique, drawing on early memories and a desire to preserve her cultural heritage. Adapting this technique to clay by altering clay body recipes, Major achieved the elasticity needed to mimic the interlacing forms of plaited palm, transforming an ephemeral tradition into enduring ceramic form. For Major, firing the work is both an act of remembrance and resistance to preserve the fragility of straw through the permanence of clay. **Simone Leigh's** sculpture on view from her *Village Series* (2023-2024) blurs the boundaries between body and structure, referencing African architecture, ritual vessels, and ancestral presences. Her glazed ceramic and bronze sculptures often draw inspiration from vernacular architectural forms and aesthetics in African art traditions. Leigh's work asserts ceramic form as both symbolic architecture and embodiment, materializing histories often excluded from dominant narratives. The artist describes her practice as autoethnographic, rooted in Black feminist thought and explorations of Black female-identified subjectivity.

The artists in *Body Vessel Clay* share a deep fascination with testing the medium's properties to create new, personal, political, collective, and visionary aesthetics across geographies and temporalities. By tracing lines of continuity between past and present, *Body Vessel Clay* repositions clay not as peripheral but as central to global art histories and as a vessel for memory, defiance, and transformation.

The exhibition features work by artists including **Halima Audu, Phoebe Collings-James, Jade de Montserrat, Chinasa Vivian Ezugha, Adebunmi Gbadebo, Ladi Kwali, Simone Leigh, Anina Major, Bisila Noha, Magdalene Odundo, and Julia Phillips**. It also includes a rich selection of Abuja Pottery ceramics (**Michael Cardew, Asibi Ido, and George Sempagala**), and archival material—correspondence, press clippings, and photographic documentation—related to the Pottery Training Centre in Abuja, drawn from the collections of Doig Simmonds, the Crafts Study Centre, and the W.A. Ismay Archive at York Museums Trust. Exquisite, research-led exhibition design by **Ayo Design** and graphic design by **NMutiti Studio** invite visitors into a dynamic, contemplative journey across the show's layered themes and interconnections.

*Body Vessel Clay 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.*

## About the Curator

[Dr. Jareh Das](#) is an independent curator working between the UK and West Africa. Her work explores the intersections of modern and contemporary art, as well as performance. Das holds a PhD in *Curating Art and Science: New Methods and Sites of Production* from Royal Holloway, University of London, where her research explored live art practices within the context of visual arts. Her curatorial and writing practices privilege embodied knowledge and move fluidly across exhibitions, performance, and critical texts. Between 2020 and 2024, she developed and led curatorial research projects with institutions across Europe and West Africa, including Camden Art Centre, Deptford X Festival, and Galerie Atiss Dakar. Her writing spans exhibition catalogues, academic journals, magazines, and artist monographs, engaging closely with the practices of living and overlooked artists, as well as experimental forms of criticism. Das is currently working on her first book on Black women ceramicists and artists who work with clay.

## About the Ford Foundation Gallery

Opened in March 2019 at the Ford Foundation Center for Social Justice in New York City, [the Ford Foundation Gallery](#) spotlights artwork that wrestles with difficult questions, calls out injustice, and points the way toward a fair and just future. The



gallery functions as a responsive and adaptive space and one that serves the public in its openness to experimentation, contemplation, and conversation. Located near the United Nations, it draws visitors from around the world, addresses questions that cross borders, and speaks to the universal struggle for human dignity.

The gallery is accessible to the public through the Ford Foundation building entrance on 43rd Street, east of Second Avenue.

## About the Ford Foundation

[The Ford Foundation](#) is an independent organization working to address inequality and build a future grounded in justice. For more than 85 years, it has supported visionaries on the frontlines of social change worldwide, guided by its mission to strengthen democratic values, reduce poverty and injustice, promote international cooperation, and advance human achievement. Today, with an endowment of \$16 billion, the foundation has headquarters in New York and 10 regional offices across Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East. Learn more at [www.fordfoundation.org](http://www.fordfoundation.org).

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