

Magdalene Odundo

Magdalene Odundo's career and life trajectories contain several seemingly paradoxical elements that she has been able to integrate skillfully and transform into strengths. These elements include her Kenyan heritage, art education in ceramics within the context of British studio pottery, and international exhibition history in both fine art and design. As a contemporary British artist of African descent, Odundo moves within these multiple contexts as formed and framed by a series of contrasts: local/global; European/African; ancient, inherited traditions/modern art history; and craft techniques/industrial technology. The early prominence she attained as a ceramicist after finishing her postgraduate degree, as well as her subsequent tenure as a Professor of Ceramics at the Surrey Institute of Art and Design, could have precluded her inclusion within exhibitions of contemporary fine art, but she has repeatedly stretched the boundaries within which her work is classified. She has, for example, participated in multiple residencies and exhibitions in which she creates and exhibits not only pottery, but also prints, glass sculpture, and installation art. She enjoys playing with people's interpretations of her work, and exhibiting in diverse spaces, which—as she says—“elicit their own intrigue” (Odundo 2002).

In 2001, Odundo had the opportunity to create an installation for *Acknowledged Sources* at the Russell-Cotes Art Gallery & Museum in Bournemouth. Odundo was first introduced to the museum through her activities as a founding board member for Southern Arts, a regional arts development agency based in Winchester. As a result of the Southern

Arts Residencies Scheme (1995–1996), the Russell-Cotes hosted glass artist Sasha Ward, which combined the showcasing of Ward’s contemporary work with the Victorian setting of the museum’s galleries and rooms.

Acknowledged Sources grew out of a project designed by Southern Arts Crafts Officer David Kay, in collaboration with Russell-Cotes staff, to combine the work of other contemporary practitioners with historic museum collections from world cultures. The project sought to explore “the relationship and difference between genuine artistic influence and recognition to acquisition and appropriation of symbols and identity of diverse cultures” (*Acknowledged Sources* website). Eight artists participated in conjunction with three museums: the Hastings Museum, the Nottingham Castle Museum and Art Gallery, and the Russell-Cotes. In the Russell-Cotes, Odundo was invited, along with textile artist Deirdre Wood and textile artist and designer Steve Wright, to interpret the collections and the roles that institutions play in their local communities.¹

Through her participation, Odundo had the opportunity to experiment with the museum context and to express her perspective on collection practices and objects as markers of identity. In her installations, she explored her conceptualization of museums and galleries “as a starting point for acquiring knowledge through which one would seek enlightenment” (Odundo 2002). For Odundo, the path to “enlightenment” includes reclaiming a heritage “lost to Africa,” an empowering sense of re-connection with a continent and its cultures that grounds her in a strong self-identity (Odundo 2002). The loss of such a heritage is not only historical, in the sense of heritages and histories erased by imperial and colonial enterprises such as slavery, but is also personal. Born in Nairobi and now living in England, for Odundo this loss is part of her experiences living under colonial rule in Kenya as a child and in Britain since her days at university.

In *Acknowledged Sources*, Odundo’s exploration of her personal history included a confrontation with the colonial past. For the museum’s dining room table, she produced a Crown Derby fine china dinner service adorned with smiling images of herself and her family members as children (Fig. 2.1). The central images on the plates, bowls, and tea cups are photographs of the colonial offices in Kenya where her family had to

¹Lubna Chowdhary, Lynn Settrington, and Jivan Astfalck exhibited at the Hastings Museum, and Ali Pretty and Dawn Dupree at the Castle Museum.



Fig. 2.1 *Acknowledged Sources* installation (2002) of Magdalene Odundo, Crown Derby China set (2001). Courtesy of the artist and the Russell-Cotes Art Gallery & Museum, Bournemouth, UK. Photograph by John Martin

apply for travel documents, her mother's passport photo, and a snapshot of Odundo and her brothers taken in New Delhi, India, when her family lived there for three years. Victorian china has particular resonances with Odundo's childhood memories:

The first china I recall in our house was heavily decorated with portraits of King George and the Queen Mother. These images told a history of imperialism, colonialism, and triumphalism. What was being celebrated however was the glory of Victoria and Victoriana. Africa was apparently "discovered." Everywhere and everything was being named Victoria and was awash with pink. There was Lake Victoria, Port Victoria where my

parents were born ... Victoria Falls, Queensway, Lake Albert, King George Hospital and even dukes and earls had streets named after them. It is hard to imagine a more enslaving environment and power. Victorian colonialism and its history had such an impact on Africa, to fail to understand this impact is to fail to understand history. (*Acknowledged Sources* exhibition text)

With this installation, Odundo rejects the superimposed imagery of the benevolent Empire, and deposes the King and Queen of England in favor of herself and her family members.

Odundo's personal history is not limited to Kenya and her childhood stay in India; she has also lived in England since she was a young adult. In another installation for *Acknowledged Sources*, she displayed various African cloths, including East African printed *kanga* textiles, folded in a basket next to a suitcase packed with Land's End fleeces among the luxurious paintings and case displays of one of the galleries. The juxtaposition of these two different modes of dress suggests vast differences in climate and culture, and gestures at Odundo's migratory experiences across both continents. For the accompanying text, she used the device of letter-writing to revisit her state of mind upon arriving in England from Nairobi. She remembers that writing to her family would alleviate, but not eradicate, her homesickness, which in fact has never gone away (Odundo 2002). In the letter, Odundo imagines herself arriving in Bournemouth to stay in the room that has become the museum's Gallery IV. She expresses shock at the cold temperatures and lack of sunshine, and describes the impression she and other Africans made on the locals: "We were stared at everywhere we went. Maybe because most of us are wearing very bright colors. I personally think it is because we are black and different" (*Acknowledged Sources* exhibition text).

Odundo describes settling into her new "lodgings" in East Cliff house (now the museum), and indicates that the basket and trunk of clothing in her room have not been completely unpacked in the hope she will return home soon and "not be in exile forever" (*Acknowledged Sources* exhibition text). She goes on to describe her interaction with the art objects in the room: covering the cold nude marble statues with warm, colorful cloth, hanging *kangas* to brighten the dark walls, and juxtaposing photo screen prints of three Maasai girls with a Victorian painting called *Going to Church*, in order to make the comparison that both the prints and the painting depict people observing a belief ritual. These

interventions with the gallery displays express how integrating familiar images and objects with her new surroundings allows Odundo to assimilate the two experiences, simultaneously invoking the reassuring presence of her old environment while coming to terms with the new one.

Odundo's installations for *Acknowledged Sources* represent an opportunity for deep engagement and intervention with the interpretive qualities of the Russell-Cotes as an institution. The various objects and artifacts of the museum's collection, amassed during the Victorian age, were the backdrop for Odundo's displays of her own vessels and personal possessions; both collections express the unique concerns of their owners. Her interpretation of material culture incorporates her colonial Kenyan background, her residence in England, and her contemplation not only of the exhibition, valuation, and contextualization of her pottery, but also of museum collections and displays around the world. She observes, "Making objects is ... common to us all. What is different is the diverse way in which we depict and interpret what we make because of diversity within our cultures" (Odundo 2002).

Magdalene Odundo was born in 1950 in Nairobi, the second of four siblings. They were especially close to her aunt, uncle, and her three cousins, and together they formed an extended family in which the children moved freely between both sets of parents (Cooper 2004). In 1954, her father began working in India as a journalist for the Swahili papers and broadcasting in Kiswahili on the home services, and Odundo and her family moved to New Delhi for three years.²

Odundo's memories of this period of her youth are good ones. Her father's work was interesting and brought him into contact with important people, such as Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. It was in New Delhi that Odundo first began her primary school education, at the Convent of Jesus and Mary. Her Catholic school had many international pupils, and Odundo made good friends there. She remembers the beautiful pageantry of First Communion and other rituals. Of New Delhi, she recalls hot days, traveling on the train with her family, and an entourage of assistants and servants. The Indians were

²The Swahili connection between East Africa and India dates back to sixteenth-century trading activities across the Indian Ocean and Arabian Sea, when Kiswahili was a lingua franca among East African, Arabian, Indian, and Portuguese traders. In the 1950s, British colonial rule in Kenya, combined with post-colonial ties in India, meant there were Kiswahili speakers in Kenya interested in Indian news.

generous and hospitable. There was also a significant and noticeable disparity between the wealthy and the poor in evidence around them.

After Odundo returned to Nairobi with her family in 1957, she attended another Catholic primary school, Our Lady of Mercy in Nairobi. Choosing a school was difficult for her parents, because they wanted the best for their daughter and, until independence from British colonial rule in 1963, Kenyans lived “under an apartheid system” that was both segregated and hierarchical. There were schools with excellent facilities for white children. Next in line were “half-castes,” a term used to denote those of mixed race. Then came Asians. Africans were on the lowest rung on the ladder (Odundo 2004). Her father searched in vain for a non-segregated school.

Tragically, Odundo and her siblings suffered the death of their father the following year, in 1958, followed just two years later by the death of their mother, in 1960. Odundo and her siblings went to live with their aunt in Mombasa, where Odundo attended Marycliff Tudor School. She returned to the Nairobi region for secondary school at Loreto Convent, Limuru, followed by Pangani Girls, Nairobi, until the age of eighteen. At Pangani Girls, she studied art with Dora Betts, who herself had trained at Dartington Hall School.³ At this time, Odundo had the opportunity to exhibit some of her paintings in Nairobi.

Upon finishing school in 1968, Odundo secured an apprenticeship in graphic and commercial arts with the S.H. Benson Advertising Agency in Nairobi. After three years, she went on to work as Assistant Sign Designer for the Neon & General Sign Design & Manufacturing Ltd, in Nairobi, where she stayed until 1971. She also attended evening classes in graphic arts, layout, and design at Nairobi Polytechnic from 1968 to 1971. Her foster mother in Nairobi, Isabel Beverley, felt that Odundo should further her education in an environment where she would be free from the demands and duties of her extended family, and sought sponsorship to send her to England (Cooper 2004, p. 10). In 1971, Odundo arrived in England to continue her studies with the Foundation Course at the Cambridge College of Art, and to pursue a career in advertising.

³Dartington Hall was an experimental and progressive boarding school in Totnes, Devon, open between 1926 and 1987; it was characterized by its then-radical promotion of coeducation, the absence of corporal punishment and uniforms, student self-governance, and a pupil-defined curriculum.

Odundo says she did not feel frightened or overwhelmed in her new surroundings, as she had some sense of what to expect from her experiences working in advertising in Kenya. She did, however, find that people's accents sounded strange (Odundo 2003). One of her first impressions of school in England was that her education in Kenya and India was much more rigorous in terms of assessment. In her first year at the Cambridge College of Art, her Foundation Course covered a range of different artistic disciplines. These included ceramics and printmaking, which Odundo especially enjoyed. She had already begun to show an aptitude for creative endeavors, studying jewelry-making with an artist in Cambridge and dabbling in welded metal and wire to create geometrical and abstract sculptures. Her ceramics tutor was Zoe Ellison, a Zimbabwean-born potter who ran the Cross Keys Pottery outside Cambridge. In her class, Odundo produced both functional designs and more abstract sculptures, such as a black incised minaret-like form with white glazing (Cooper 2004, p. 11).

While she was a student in Cambridge, Odundo used the Africa Study Centre library and attended lectures with other African students to explore the ideas and writings of Léopold Senghor, Frantz Fanon, James Baldwin, and Uli Beier, as well as Angela Davis and the Soledad brothers (Odundo 2003). Together they debated African politics and self-government, nation-building and Negritude. Odundo became familiar with ideas about "double consciousness,"⁴ civil rights, Black Power, and identity politics. She also became acquainted with local museums, such as Kettle's Yard, the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, and the Fitzwilliam Museum. At Kettle's Yard, there was a varied program of contemporary art exhibitions, including the sculptures of Gaudier-Brzeska and British studio ceramicists. During this period, curator Henry Rothschild organized regular exhibitions of modern pottery; these included works by Lucy Rie and Hans Coper (Cooper 2004, p. 54). Odundo was especially interested in non-Western art and studied it independently. She visited the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology to study pre-Columbian pottery and Sepic artifacts from Papua New Guinea (Cooper 2004, p. 11).

In the Fitzwilliam, Odundo filled her sketchbook with drawings, especially of seventeenth-century slipware such as that of Staffordshire

⁴See p. 3.

potter Thomas Toft. She noticed the way that the art was “centralized in buildings,” that is, collected and displayed in specific institutions to be presented in a historical or ethnographical context (Odundo 2003). In Kenya, Odundo had experienced indigenous artistic and creative traditions as woven into the fabric of daily life, where functionality and utility were as much of a consideration as aesthetics and art history. She had previously seen exhibitions and installations similar to those in the Cambridge museums in Nairobi at the National Museum, such as Louis Leakey’s collection of anthropological artifacts, as well as when she exhibited her own work in Nairobi during secondary school. Through her growing familiarity with Cambridge’s museums, Odundo began to understand the analytic and didactic traditions of Western institutions and academic disciplines—especially the way in which fine art was separated from daily objects—as the structural basis for these various exhibitions (Odundo 2003).

After the first year of her course, Odundo chose not to continue with the second year, opting instead to move on to the vocational commercial art course in order to continue the training she had begun in Kenya. However, perhaps as a result of her art experimentation and independent study in her first year, she soon realized that she did not find commercial art very interesting. Reflecting on her work experiences in Nairobi, she concluded that she did not want to continue a career in advertising; she seriously considered studying ethnography (Odundo 2003). Zoe Ellison suggested making objects, and Odundo began thinking about art school.

Although Odundo loved the city of Cambridge, she began to look further afield for better opportunities in art education. She applied to Newcastle for painting and sculpture, and with Ellison’s encouragement, met Henry Hammond, then Head of Ceramics at the West Surrey College of Art and Design (now the University for the Creative Arts) in Farnham. Hammond was in Cambridge to see an exhibition of ceramics at Kettle’s Yard. After this meeting, Odundo was subsequently invited for a formal interview at the college. Despite her limited practical experience, Hammond was impressed with her interest and her sketches, and offered her a place. She returned to Kenya for a few weeks and consulted her family and friends, including her former headmistress, Fiona Evans. They encouraged her to stay in England and continue her studies. Once again Isabel Beverly organized sponsorship and bursaries from Kenya. Odundo took up the offer in Farnham in September 1973.

It was after her serendipitous move to Farnham that Odundo began to develop an affinity for ceramics. The ceramics department was headed by Henry Hammond and his deputy, Paul Barron, both of whom had trained under proponents of British studio ceramics based in traditions of East Asian aesthetics. Hammond had studied under William Staite Murray at the Royal College of Art in London, while Barron had studied under Norah Braden, an apprentice of Bernard Leach, before studying at the Royal College (Cooper 2004, p. 12).⁵ Both developed a ceramics practice based on high-fired thrown forms in stoneware and porcelain (Cooper 2004, p. 12). The course also included a number of part-time and visiting lecturers, including Vera Acheason, Gemma Bontempo, Ron Hackney, Anita Hoy, Mo Jupp, Siddig el Nigoumi, Helen Pincombe (who taught hand-building), Walter Keeler, and Ann Shepley (Cooper 2004, p. 54). Odundo began to familiarize herself with clay as a medium and to learn the necessary skills in the studio. She found throwing particularly difficult:

I had no co-ordination of the wheel and found it difficult to understand the practical idea of having to center a lump of clay. The experience reminded me of the desperate attempts to learn to ride on my uncle's full-sized bicycle when I was young, falling off every time my brother pushed me forward. I had not understood that peddling was essential. Kicking the wheel and holding on to a lump of clay seemed a daunting exercise. (Cooper 2004, p. 14)

After eleven weeks of practice, Odundo managed to center the clay on the wheel.

In the spring of 1974, Odundo and fellow students traveled down to Cornwall to tour the china clay outcrops and visit Bernard Leach's Pottery in St. Ives. Leach spoke to the students about his work and his combining of a Japanese-influenced philosophy with a Western

⁵William Staite Murray (1881–1962) and Bernard Leach (1897–1979) were key figures of British studio ceramics in the 1920s and 1930s. Murray created pots as works of art that were not at all functional. He was influential during the 1920s and 1930s, when he was Head of Ceramics at the Royal College of Art. Leach studied ceramics in Japan with master potter Shoji Hamada. In 1920, with the help of Hamada, he set up the St. Ives Pottery in Cornwall to produce wares embodying East Asian techniques and a philosophy that balanced functionality and aesthetics.

understanding of ceramics, which made an impression on Odundo. She explains,

Coming from a family where, for my dad, traveling had been a part of work, it seemed that Leach was describing a very enriching culture ... I thought the philosophy Bernard Leach was advocating, which I understood to be about being engaged in making objects or making art, was sound and relevant. (Cooper 2004, p. 15)

She was also introduced to his ideas about the enclosed inner space of a vessel and the purity of a sparsely decorated surface, which were strongly influenced by Japanese aesthetics. These ideas resonate with her mature practice, as Odundo describes an interest in the relation between the formal interior and exterior qualities of her pots as she creates them (Odundo 2003).

Later that spring, Hammond arranged for her to return to Cornwall with three other students. It was during this second trip that Odundo met Michael Cardew at the Wenford Bridge Pottery.⁶ She noticed various African artifacts in his house and Nigerian pots in the showroom. She learned more about his work in Abuja, Nigeria, where he had founded the Pottery Training Centre in 1951 and been its supervisor until 1965. Cardew had originally been asked by the British colonial government in Nigeria to set up a vocational ceramics training center for local residents. In reality, the center was more artistic than commercial. Odundo says that speaking with Cardew “increased my interest in West African art. In Cambridge I had already made friends with people from this part of Africa and they had offered invitations to go to Ghana and Nigeria. Meeting Cardew helped in my decision to travel to Nigeria in particular” (Cooper 2004, p. 15). Cardew gave Odundo the address of Mallam Shaibu, who was in charge of the pottery at the time. She arranged to visit Nigeria later that year during her summer holidays.

At this time, the Pottery Training Centre in Abuja was producing a range of stoneware fired in a wood kiln. Cardew had developed a unique hybrid of British studio techniques and forms with shapes and patterns directly borrowed from local Gbari motifs (Cooper 2004, p. 18). He

⁶Michael Cardew (1901–1983) was an apprentice of Bernard Leach in St. Ives from 1923 to 1926. He opened the Wenford Bridge Pottery in Cornwall in 1939, and spent many years living and working in Ghana and Nigeria between 1942 and 1965.

introduced the potter's wheel, high-temperature kiln firing and chemical glazes to traditional Gbari potters such as Ladi Kwali, one of the Centre's original apprentices. These contrasted with Gbari traditional techniques of hand-building, open-air low temperature firings, and the finishing of surfaces by burnishing and coating them with a liquid vegetal mixture. The clay of hand-built pots is coarser than that used in throwing, which makes them better able to withstand thermal shock when used over open fires; the treated surfaces retain a degree of porosity that makes them useful for water storage in a hot climate (Johnson 1984, p. 209).

When Odundo arrived, the male potters were all throwers, while the women hand-built their pots in the Gbari tradition. Odundo worked in a two-week rotation with each of the eight potters at the Centre. She explains that, "I literally did a mirror image learning with them" (Cooper 2004, p. 18). Working with the throwers Peter Bako, Bawa Ushata, Abu Karo, and George Garba greatly improved her throwing abilities. With their help, she learned how to make all the items of domestic tableware. She remarks that, "These individual and intensive lessons taught me humility for clay" (Berns 1995, p. 3).

From the female potters Asibi Aidoo, Lami Toto, Ladi Kwali, and Kainde Ushafa Odundo learned hand-building. Starting with a lump of clay, the potter would begin by hollowing out and pulling the clay to build walls, and then adding short coils to build up the vessel's shape. The Gbari women potters in Abuja have traditionally hand-built their pots using shorter and thicker sections of clay than a fully circular coil, a method referred to as "sausage building" by researchers (Simmonds 1984, p. 55). The Gbari technique of pulling and smoothing the clay differs from hand-building as taught in English art schools, which usually involves adding longer coils to a flat, pancake-like base (Cooper 2004, p. 19). In her final two weeks, Odundo also helped pack, fire, and unpack the kiln, which had originally been designed by Michael Cardew. Odundo appreciated her training at the Abuja center for its emphasis on practice and technique. Afterward, Odundo traveled around Nigeria, observing potters in Ekiti and Ilorin. She concludes that, "For me this had been a wonderful apprenticeship; I had learned a lot. I had acquired new skills, gained more knowledge of the arts and crafts made in Nigeria and after traveling in the country had learned some sentences of Hausa" (Cooper 2004, p. 19).

Upon her return to Farnham, Odundo continued her studies. Along with pottery, she took supporting subjects in printmaking and

photography, as well as art history and complementary studies courses. In printmaking, Odundo enjoyed the processes of etching and mezzotinting (Cooper 2004, p. 68). She particularly liked rucking and polishing the copper plates, which fed into her future practice of burnishing her pots to a fine, smooth luster. Twice weekly, Odundo attended lectures and wrote essays on topics ranging from classical architecture to modern European and African art. She read Claude Lévi-Strauss and Maoist philosophy. In a course called "Primitive Art," she studied West and Central African traditions such as masquerade and wood sculpture.

Odundo also continued her ceramics training, creating the foundations for her mature body of work. In the first term of her second year, she practiced her new throwing skills, producing tableware with her own abstract decorations and finished with Oriental temmoku and ash glazes (Cooper 2004, p. 19). In the second term, Odundo decided to experiment with hand-building large pots. She combined European, Oriental, and Nigerian techniques, making rounded jugs with glazed interiors, tall necks, and handles incised with geometric designs, as well as rounded bowls with carbonized markings on their surfaces. Some were fired at high or earthenware temperatures in wood-burning kilns, while others she put through sawdust and pit firings (Cooper 2004, p. 21).

In her final year, Odundo continued to refine her ceramic techniques and experimented with forms influenced by her admiration for seventeenth-century English slip-decorated ware as well as pre-Columbian, ancient Egyptian, Mediterranean, and Middle Eastern ceramics. She also went back to Wenford Bridge several times for firings at Michael Cardew's invitation. As part of her course requirements for graduation, she began working on her dissertation. Odundo's subject was the ceremonial use of vessels in funerary rituals and customs among the Abaluyia people of Kenya and Uganda, of which Abanyala is a subgroup (Berns 1995, p. 5). Focusing on the Abanyala community, in which her parents were born, as a case study, she returned to Kenya in 1975 to interview and observe potters. She conducted a comparative study of women's pottery techniques and their ceremonial uses by studying the ways in which vessels were used in ritual contexts to mark the transitions associated with important rites of passage (Berns 1995, p. 5). As she describes,

They were about celebration, appeasement, and pleasing. They were the vessels from which the living partook and shared the passage of the dead person to continue with life among the ancestors; they were the chalices

and fountains that offered sustenance for those rejuvenation ceremonies and the vessels that offered the gods the sacrifice. (Cooper 2004, p. 41)

Although raised primarily in the cities of Nairobi and Mombassa, it is the Bunyala community of her Abanyala heritage that Odundo most identifies as “home” (Berns 1995, p. 5). Both her parents were from there, and only moved to Nairobi as young adults to find work. She explains, “the concept of ‘home’ for me, as for many Africans, originates in the birthplace of my parents. My response to ‘Where do you come from?’ is the connection I feel with my ancestry and the land of that place” (Odundo 2004). Despite years living in other places, both in childhood and adulthood, Odundo views the Bunyala community as the touchstone of her roots and her cultural identity.

Odundo completed her BA degree in 1976. After graduation, she traveled abroad and observed various pottery traditions. She went to California to visit a cousin studying at Stanford University. During her stay, she went to Los Angeles and Palo Alto to see friends, who took her out to Idyllwild in the mountains of southern California. The local summer arts program had organized workshops with famous Native American Pueblo potter Maria Martinez. Odundo was so impressed with the dark, smooth, black-on-black ware that she went to New Mexico to study the coiling, burnishing, and reduction firing techniques in Pueblo, especially San Ildefonso. Her experiences made a startling impression. She says, “When I finished at Farnham I really had thought I knew a lot and it took me being in America, traveling around, talking to potters, to realize that I actually knew very little and there was much more to learn” (Cooper 2004, p. 22). She also traveled to Ghana and Zimbabwe. Not only was she influenced by the ceramics she encountered, she made sketches of the flora and fauna of these landscapes, as well as local fashions and traditions.

Upon returning to England, Odundo settled in London. After meeting the Commonwealth Institute’s education officer at a writer’s conference, she became a Commonwealth Fellow in the education department for six months. Afterward, she taught in the Department of Museum Education at the Commonwealth Institute in Kensington from 1976 to 1979. The Institute’s program was aimed mainly at schools and teacher-training colleges, and Odundo had her first experiences as an instructor. She worked on projects about the cultures of the different Commonwealth countries and introduced instruction in clay and ceramics to the Institute

(Cooper 2004, p. 22). Her position also involved visiting museums; Odundo saw collections she had not seen before, such as those in the Museum of Childhood in Bethnal Green and the London Museum in Kensington Palace. It was in the London Museum that she became fascinated by Elizabethan costume (Cooper 2004, p. 22). While attending dance rehearsal and performances at the Institute, Odundo sketched the performers, attempting to capture their movements and gestures in her drawings.

Odundo translated these forms and experiences into her studio work. At his invitation, she worked at a pottery in Leatherhead run by Michael O'Brien, a student of Michael Cardew's whom she had originally met during her visits to Cornwall. She produced pots with rounded bellies and small necks, some of which she decorated with raised lines and flattened pellets; she experimented with firings and glazes. Her first solo ceramics exhibition was held at London's Africa Centre in 1977. The following year, Odundo participated in the Commonwealth Arts Festival in Canada and an exhibition at London's Commonwealth Institute with three other artists. She received commissions from the Institute for their Kenyan exhibition. At this point, Odundo realized that she "ought to give ceramics a go," and applied to study for her MA at London's Royal College of Art (Cooper 2004, p. 23). She was drawn to the program because of her interest in and appreciation for the work of Hans Coper, who had been teaching at the Royal College since 1966. Odundo explains,

My admiration for Coper was not particularly because he was producing the sort of ceramics I wanted to make, for I did not want to produce glazed wares or, indeed, hard stoneware and high-fired work. What I admired was the simplicity of his forms, his clarity of line, his rhythmical and restrained approach and the fact that he was not afraid of repetition. (Cooper 2004, p. 24)

Unfortunately, Coper had retired the year before due to ill health. Nevertheless, Odundo began her course in 1979.

Compared to the Surrey Institute, the Royal College has a stronger emphasis on fine arts. Odundo maintains, however, that she did not experience a hierarchical attitude to art production at the Royal College that denigrated ceramics at the expense of painting, drawing, and sculpture (Odundo 2003). Her ceramics tutors were a mix of commercial and studio artists. David Queensberry was a Professor of Ceramics at the

time, and a founding member of the design firm Queensberry Hunt; David Hamilton was the other Professor of Ceramics. Sculptor and print-maker Eduardo Paolozzi and sculptor Graham Clarke also taught in the department.

During her MA, Odundo conducted an extensive investigation into the working qualities and physical compositions of different clays. Her original intent was to create a knowledge base to inform research on clays in Kenya, where she eventually wanted to set up a pottery. She performed chemical and physical analyses, and discovered a particular blend of seventy-five percent Etrurian marl, a smooth red clay from Stoke-on-Trent, England, and twenty-five percent brick, a sandy yellow clay from southern England (Berns 1995, p. 7; Cooper 2004, p. 24). This became Odundo's preferred blend of clay and remains so to this day. This mixture gives Odundo the right amount of elasticity and control when hand-building her vessels, as well as creating the desired texture and colors in the finished product.

After her first eighteen months at the Royal College, Odundo had extensive discussions with David Hamilton in which he urged her to change her focus from an MA by project to a regular MA, in order to combine her clay research with studio ceramics work. Odundo began working with hand-building techniques in the studio and studied Kerma pottery from ancient Sudan, as well as early Egyptian, Minoan, and Mediterranean pottery and figures. Eduardo Paolozzi also introduced her to curators from London's Museum of Mankind whom he had met as a result of his interests in African art (Cooper 2004, p. 26). These contacts gave Odundo special access to a wide array of ethnographic objects, displays and archives. She also had regular tutorials with David Queensberry, who encouraged her to learn about developments in contemporary ceramics as well as these more ancient traditions.

At this time, the activities of Eddie Chambers, Lubaina Himid, and other young British artists of African descent were gathering momentum.⁷ Odundo, however, did not participate in debates concerning "black British art" at this time, nor was she pressured to do so by her tutors (Odundo 2004). Having explored issues of African politics and

⁷Eddie Chambers' *Black Art An' Done* opened at the Wolverhampton Art Gallery in 1981. Two years later, the Black-Art Gallery held its inaugural exhibition, *Heart in Exile*, in London's Finsbury Park and *Five Black Women Artists* opened at the Africa Centre in Covent Garden. See pp. 8–12.

identity when she was at Cambridge, she did not feel the need to further discuss her emerging artistic practice in terms of her African heritage or race. Instead, she focused on her interests in ceramics and art history.

One of Odundo's tutors from Farnham, John Donne, had an active interest in African art and took her regularly to Portobello Market in Notting Hill to search out pieces for sale. A group of African art scholars and dealers used to congregate in the area, and it was here that she met William Fagg, John Picton, Paula Ben-Amos, and Hebert Cole, as well as Anthony Slayter-Ralph, who would later represent her through his commercial galleries. Trawling Portobello market with Donne and discussing African art with this group of experts and scholars gave Odundo the opportunity to expand her knowledge of and familiarity with a range of African artistic production, and revived her enthusiasm for African art.

Back in the studio at the Royal College, Odundo began to refine a myriad of ancient and contemporary techniques to develop her unique creative method. Instead of throwing her pots on a wheel, Odundo uses a technique she calls "coil pull building": she feeds clay from her hand onto the body of the pot, pulling up as she proceeds around the circumference. Related methods of coiling and ring-building are literally thousands of years old and are still used worldwide. Odundo refined her own hand-building technique from observing West African and female Native American potters, especially during her apprenticeship at the Abuja Centre.

Odundo begins by pulling a cone of clay into a concave form, then hollowing out the interior with gourd and coconut shell scrapers. The rest of the vessel is then built up by pulling lengths of clay around the circumference of the piece. After completing the base, which is usually full and round, Odundo begins to develop the vessel's neck and mouth. She describes the process as a dialogue between the clay and her hands, both equal sources of creative expression (Berns 1995, p. 7). Often, she works on several vessels simultaneously; they take days, sometimes weeks, to complete. During this period, they are kept under wet cloths or refrigerated to prevent them from drying out.

Once the neck and mouth are fully sculpted, the pots are left to dry until they are leather-hard. Then Odundo burnishes their surfaces with smooth stones. The next stage in the process is the application of a slip instead of a glaze. Odundo observed potters in Nigeria and Kenya using cakes of red ochre-colored clay to make a fine slip, which led her to

research the use of slips in ancient pottery (Cooper 2004, p. 26). She discovered *terra sigillata*, first developed in classical Greece for black- and red-figure pottery in the seventh to fifth centuries BC, and employed by the Romans of Arezzo around the first millennium AD (Berns 1995, p. 9; Cooper 2004, pp. 26–27). The same very fine clay used in building the pot is suspended in water and thinly applied, which blends into the surface when fired and creates a high gloss finish. Initially, Odundo applied the slip by pouring and dipping; more recently, she has begun to spray the slip onto the works (Cooper 2004, p. 40). After the application of the slip, the pot is burnished again before firing.

The firing process initially takes place in a gas kiln—an oxidized or smokeless atmosphere that produces a bright red-orange color (Fig. 2.2). Often, Odundo will decide that a vessel needs a secondary firing in a reducing atmosphere, which creates the charcoal black hues that comprise the other half of Odundo’s ceramic palette (Fig. 2.3). For the reduction process, or carbonization, the vessel is placed in a container called a saggar, which is packed with wood chips and shavings, then fired in an oxygen-poor environment (Berns 1995, p. 9). The metal oxides from the clay and slip drawn out by the fire cause the surface to turn black.

While the gas kiln is a Western device, the oxidization of the reduced firing is a centuries-old technique used by African and Native American potters to achieve similar effects. Odundo observed the oxidization firing technique among Ekiti and Ilorin potters in Nigeria. She witnessed the carbonization firing process during her research with Pueblo potters in the USA, although she also learned of similar techniques used in the Kerma culture to produce black-topped ware in ancient Sudan, and later in the production of Aegean pottery. Ilorin potters also use a carbonization firing process to produce black-on-black ware like that of San Ildefonso. The use of the saggar was inspired by potters in Stoke-on-Trent, who sought to protect their pots from the dust and grit of coal-fired bottle kilns. For Odundo, the saggar creates a perfect enclosed, carbonizing atmosphere. She arrived at this solution after many experiments with kiln firing: first building a brick chamber in the kiln inspired by the pit/tunnel-like kilns used for black Buganda pottery in Uganda, then trying a type of raku buried in tea leaves in an appropriation of techniques used in Congo by the Chokwe and in Ekiti, Nigeria, by the Edo (Cooper 2004, p. 27). None of these methods achieved the desired effect until Odundo began to use the saggar.



Fig. 2.2 Magdalene Odundo, *Teardrop I* (1996). Terracotta and slip, 50.8 × 40.6 cm (20 × 16 in). Harriet A. Fox Endowment 1997.63, The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, USA. © Magdalene Odundo. Photograph courtesy of The Art Institute of Chicago/Art Resource, NY



Fig. 2.3 Magdalene Odundo, *Untitled* (2003). Carbonized terracotta, 47.5 × 25.7 × 26.8 × 25.7 cm. Courtesy of the artist and the Gardiner Museum, Toronto, Canada. Purchased with a gift from the Neal and Marci Roberts Foundation

The alchemy of the firing process is paradoxical for Odundo; she hates the loss of control involved, but she loves the surprises that can result (Odundo 2003). She says,

The kiln became a tool in the making process and pieces may be refired several times to get the desired effects. Firing is an essential and integral part of my making process, and my work would not be what it is without this chosen method. Fire and flame fascinate me, the flame colluding with the metals in the clay to achieve a black luster metallic or matte black; it is like alchemy. The process is arduous and my least favorite aspect of making ceramics. I spend a lot of time deliberating and prolonging the actual task of firing, and am a nervous wreck when the kiln is on. (Cooper 2004, p. 29)

The strength and maturity of Odundo's vessels were widely recognized when she was still a student at the Royal College. Visiting tutor Janice Tchalenko commented that Odundo "should be out exhibiting this work" (Cooper 2004, p. 30). Her graduation show was a great success, and UK firm Dairy Crest bought her pots for its 1983 calendar. The show also led to a solo exhibition later that year at Rosenthal Studio-Haus in Hamburg, Germany, which subsequently toured to their galleries in Dortmund, Germany and London. Odundo received a 1982 Crafts Council Setting Up Grant to build a studio at the back of her residence. Odundo exhibited in association with the Craftsmen Potters Association both at the Victoria and Albert Museum (1983) and in their own gallery space (*Individual Eye* 1984), as well as in three consecutive exhibitions entitled *Modern British Ceramics* at Queensberry Hunt Studio (1983, 1984, and 1985), where her pots were showcased alongside the work of Hans Coper, Lucie Rie, Bernard and David Leach, and Elizabeth Fritsch, among others.

In 1984, just two years after graduating from the Royal College, Odundo was the subject of a feature article in *Crafts* magazine, which described the "striking ... powerful simplicity of her pots" ("Kenyan Heritage" 1984, p. 24). She continued to exhibit throughout the 1980s, and had solo shows in both museums and commercial galleries in London, Manchester, and Wales. By 1987, her pots were selling for four-figure sums. David Briers' review of her show at Glynn Vivian Art Gallery and Museum in Swansea praised the "sumptuous richness" of her "stunning" ceramic forms, and commented that "Odundo's prices, averaging £1700 per pot, seem entirely reasonable—and her London dealer is, after all, a fine art dealer" (1988, p. 49). Briers' comment that her

works were being sold as fine art draws attention to the ways that, even this early in her career, Odundo pushed the boundaries between fine and applied arts.

Bolstered by funding, patronage, and critical acclaim, Odundo focused on developing her professional ceramic practice. She describes her state of mind: “For me it seemed more like a beginning, a realization that this chosen *métier* was going to be a way of life” (Cooper 2004, p. 32). Odundo concentrated on a limited number of forms and slight variations on these, expanding her repertoire as she became more experienced. While the pots she made during her MA were rarely over fifteen centimeters high, her work began to grow in height to an average of sixty centimeters. Elements like nodules, looped handles, and seams (Fig. 2.3) began to embellish the smooth, lustrous forms of her pots. None of these serve any functional purpose. Instead, they accent the expressive qualities of the curves, swells, and bends of the pots’ forms. Odundo created vertical necks with widely flared mouths (Fig. 2.2), as well as necks that bend to one side and end in thin spouts or wide flares, sometimes articulated in two sections.

Throughout her career, Odundo has continued to study, sketch, and appropriate a variety of forms for her ceramic work. She cites the formal influence of vessels and “earring figures” from ancient Cyprus, Cycladic figurines, Attic vases, pots and figures from the Jomon period in Japan (14,000–300 BC), Ganda pots from Uganda, Nupe vessels from Nigeria, and Pokot pots from Kenya, to name a few (Berns 1995, p. 13). Beyond ceramics, she has derived inspiration from Fang masks from Gabon, Dan masks from Liberia, and modernist sculpture by Brancusi, Arp, and Gaudier-Brzeska (Berns 1995, p. 13). Not limited to art objects, Odundo has also been inspired by organic forms such as the unfurling of a plant, the falling of a sleeve, the belly of a pregnant woman, the posture of a dancer, and even the profile of women gossiping (Berns 1995, p. 25). Since 2000, she has created vessels up to ninety centimeters high. She relates these grand and statuesque shapes to the funerary posts, called *vigango*, that are erected as abodes for the spirits of the deceased by the Giriama people and neighboring groups in East Africa, which Odundo remembers from her childhood in Kenya (Odundo 2004). Odundo’s memory draws out essential details to incorporate into her work. Interestingly, the distillation of these disparate forms and artistic traditions has resulted in a range of very fine variations on relatively consistent forms over the course of Odundo’s career. Within these recurrent

forms, the slightest and most subtle alteration can produce a monumental aesthetic effect.

Although Odundo has said more than once that she is ultimately striving to achieve perfectly harmonious form, she also allows the clay to pull her into experiments of asymmetry and geometry. In 1995, when asked to characterize her development over the course of her career, she responded,

I still make vessels, this has not changed, and this is strictly a deliberate choice. It helps me avoid being distracted from my quest to one day make the piece that achieves perfect harmony—having perfect symmetry and perfect balance. However, this is not to say I am not tempted to digress. I have considered sharp geometric shapes, which I have encountered in my teaching. Indeed, I openly encourage my students to hand build asymmetrical pieces. But perfect harmony is much harder to achieve and that is the challenge. It is like trying to make a good teapot. Everything about it has to work. (Berns 1997, p. 13)

Odundo has remarked that she often deliberately subverts the utilitarian nature of the pot's form, playing with the boundaries between applied and fine arts (John Picton, personal communication to author, 2004). *Orange Narrow Necked* (1987) demonstrates this ambiguity: the vessel's generous round belly contrasts with the sleek, pinched neck, whose lip takes a 90-degree turn and opens no wider than a drinking straw. Odundo explains,

In Africa, functionality never has a one-dimensional meaning. An object could be used in a ritual for the dead, which is a utilitarian purpose, for instance; then given to the king or chief who, as guardian of the people, may posit the objects on a shrine, thus imbuing it [*sic*] with sacredness, rendering it fit for the gods, untouchable for the living and later to be used as part of worship or in healing. These different meanings are preserved in the object. They become part of its history. (Cooper 2004, p. 48)

Yet this seamless connection between aesthetics and functionality, between making art and making craft, and between sacred and profane, is not restricted to African contexts. Odundo sees the same dynamics operating between objects and people in the West. She says,

The debate between function and non-function, and utilitarian and non-utilitarian is a fake one because aesthetically work that is made to be put in a house to be looked at *is* a form of function ... I know someone in Newark [NJ] who told me that looking at [my work] enabled him to play classical music. That is a function; that is a utility that my work has. (Odundo 2005)

Odundo wants her work to “amuse, enchant, please, entertain, and delight” (Odundo 2003). She describes her repertoire of forms as having “sexy, gestural” qualities (Odundo 2003). She says, “An object and vessel made in clay has nuances and gestures ... A lot of my early work referred to movement and gestures people made, often abstracting these in sketches and then trying to capture their essence in clay” (Odundo 2001). Much of their sense of movement and energy is accented by the varieties of solid color and swirling, floating permutations that are the effects of reduction firing. Upon seeing Odundo’s work at a lecture, Zimbabwean artist Locadia Ndandarika stood up with a spontaneous expression of joy, waving her arms in a Shona manner of celebration and asking, “How is it possible that you can make pots look like that, like they are dancing, contorted in one direction and then the other way?” (Cooper 2004, p. 44). Odundo’s pots bend, sway, and curve like dancers motionless, yet full of contained energy and captured movement (Staal 1994, pp. 15–19).

Odundo is fascinated by the suppleness of the human body; she is

attracted to something that is almost a kind of electricity in how pliable the body can be. Thus with plastic, malleable clay, which, while it is capable of being shaped to capture that mesmerizing, hypnotic achievement, the pot ends up in a motionless state. This is what I try to capture. (Cooper 2004, p. 44)

Displayed alongside one another, her vessels seem to interact and communicate, even narrate; Odundo regards them as “performers” (Berns 1995, p. 27). In an installation of her 1995 solo exhibition *Ceramic Gestures* at the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art in Washington, DC, her pots were all grouped close together in one huge vitrine. The display emphasized their anthropomorphic qualities and created relationships that made them look as though they were

communicating with one another through gesture, a type of ceramic “body language.” At the private viewing of her solo exhibition *time and again* in July 2004 at the Crafts Study Centre in Farnham, Odundo remarked that she has become more concerned with relating the pieces together in their installation and presentation, further shifting the emphasis in her practice away from simply making objects (Odundo 2004). Odundo says they are “able to hear each other, speak to each other and create friction while intimating—don’t touch” (Cooper 2004, p. 45).

Odundo’s vessels make obvious references to bodily form; her unique repertoire of forms alludes to a head, neck, spine, collarbone, or navel. Bernard Leach expressed the view that pots were best understood in terms of their similarity to the human figure, through an appreciation of neck, shoulder, belly, and foot (Cooper 2004, p. 44). Odundo has been especially interested in the metaphor of vessels as women’s bodies. One aspect of this is her ceramic translations of the modifications of the female form to conform to standards of beauty. Some of her works evoke the corseted waists of nineteenth-century European women, the emaciated figures of twentieth-century fashion models, or the triangular hats worn by married Zulu women (Berns 1995, p. 17). She has also appropriated the stiff ruffs and bell sleeves of Elizabethan costume into ceramic forms like those she dubs “wings.” She is particularly captivated by the elongated, wrapped, and elaborately coiffed heads of Mangbetu women from the Democratic Republic of the Congo. For Odundo, the act of coiling the flared shape as she builds the pot mirrors the labor-intensive process of head wrapping and hair styling of Mangbetu women. These pots’ silhouettes evoke the profiles of the women who inspired them (see Fig. 2.3).

Through her ceramic work, Odundo not only explores the physical metaphor of woman as vessel, but also the historical, social, and religious relationships of women to pottery (Berns 1995, p. 19; Lucie-Smith 1999, p. 18). There is an age-old association of women, pottery, and procreation in Africa whereby women are perceived of as progenitors in the same way that the earth provides sustenance and life, and are thus linked with the clay and the soil itself. According to Nigel Barley, “In sub-Saharan Africa, the earth is commonly regarded as female and potters may have a special relationship with it” (Barley 1994, p. 52). Throughout the continent, collecting clay, molding it into pots, and firing them is a particular manipulation of earth and its properties usually involving specific

rituals and prohibitions. In this context, “earth is often ... associated with female creativity and fertility” (Barley 1994, pp. 57, 63).

Often, vessels are metaphors for women’s bodies, especially wombs, and the alchemy of the process whereby clay becomes terracotta when transformed by fire is linked to the mysterious and powerful forces of life that grow within a pregnant woman. In urban parts of North Africa, potters who use an updraught kiln (a tall, rounded cave-like structure) conceive of the kiln as the body of a pregnant woman and the process of firing the pots as giving birth (Barley 1994, p. 44). The word for “belly” is commonly associated with a water-jar, while those for “stomach” and “womb” are often the same in many parts of Africa (Barley 1994, p. 88). For Odundo, this history has profound ramifications in her creative practice, giving her anthropomorphic vessels an unmistakable femininity (Fig. 2.4).

Odundo’s ceramic references to fashion and image consciousness suggest women’s bodies are in some ways a site of contestation. The vessel as a procreative metaphor is especially poignant in the light of contemporary political, religious, and cultural connotations. The contours of a pregnant woman’s belly, represented in the swell of her pots, allude to conceptualizations in West Africa of a woman’s role as a vessel for the molding of a child (Barley 1994, p. 52), as well as debates surrounding the assertion, particularly by Europeans and Americans, that childbearing is a personal choice. Odundo’s experiences as a Catholic schoolgirl, a potter researching in West and East Africa, and as a professional artist living in Britain have given her a unique perspective that informs her ceramic practice. Her vessels resonate with multiple and conflicting interpretations of women’s reproductive capacities and individual civil liberties versus community morals, religious beliefs, and political stances on fetal constitutional rights.

Odundo’s accomplishments as a ceramic artist are not limited to her pots, but are also represented by the diverse contexts in which they are appreciated. Her exhibition history demonstrates the fluidity with which her work moves through and beyond categorizations such as fine art versus craft, or African versus British art. As she says, “One thing about my work is that it has defied people putting it into various boxes” (Odundo 2005). While some exhibition curators have emphasized Odundo’s applied arts training and her position within British studio ceramics, others have placed her in contexts that showcase her as a contemporary fine artist. 1991 was a landmark year for Odundo in terms of this diversity. Her work was featured in *Colours of the Earth—Twentieth Century British Ceramics*, a British Council exhibition touring India and Malaysia



Fig. 2.4 Magdalene Odundo, *Untitled* (1994). Earthenware, 45.1 × 30.5 cm (17³/₄ × 12 in). Courtesy of the artist and the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri. Purchase: acquired through the generosity of Estelle and Morton Sosland, F95-21. Photograph by Robert Newcombe

of modern British clay artists. The same year, Odundo had her first solo show in New York City at the Anthony Ralph Gallery, a fine art dealer. She was also included in 1991's *Africa Explores: 20th Century African Art* (Museum for African Art, New York).

Odundo's participation in *Columbus Drowning* (Rochdale Art Gallery, Lancashire) in 1992 signaled yet another contextualization of her work. *Columbus Drowning* featured five female artists of non-European descent: Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, Lubaina Himid, Magdalene Odundo, Robyn Kahukiwa, and Veronica Ryan, and was conceived as a creative response to colonial exploitation and oppression. The gallery guide proclaimed that "the immorality of imperialism and colonialism finds itself drowning under a tidal wave of rebellion. The beauty and sensitivity of the works in *Columbus Drowning* belies their powerful chant for equal rights and justice." Curator Maud Sulter and participating artists Lubaina Himid and Veronica Ryan had been participants in previous exhibitions associated with black British art.⁸ In the exhibition, Odundo's work was seen as a reclamation of African traditions as well as an appropriation of European ones, and interpreted as a form of rebellion against oppression.

Throughout her career, Odundo has continued to build upon her layered artistic identities. Her curriculum vitae lists her participation in numerous ceramics exhibitions as well as exhibitions of African art and artists. She has also been honored with several important solo shows. The first was an early career retrospective, *Magdalene Odundo: African Beauty—A Retrospective*, at Het Kruithuis, Stedelijk Museum voor Hedendaagse Kunst, 's-Hertogenbosch, the Netherlands in 1994. That Odundo received such critical attention just twelve years into her professional career is testament to the strength and influence of her growing body of work at the time. The following year, she was the subject of a major solo exhibition at the University Art Museum of the University of California Santa Barbara entitled *Ceramic Gestures: New Vessels by Magdalene Odundo*, which subsequently toured to venues in California, Missouri, New Jersey, Indiana, and Washington, DC.

Odundo's exhibition history, recognition, and success demonstrate a broadening of her audience and patronage, and she has continued to teach as well as exhibit. Between 1983 and 2003, she taught part-time at several universities throughout the UK, including at Goldsmiths

⁸See pp. 8–9 and Chap. 3.

College. In 2002, after two years as a faculty member, Odundo was made Professor of Ceramics at her alma mater, the Surrey Institute of Art & Design in Farnham.⁹ She taught glass and metalworking as well as ceramics in the Department of Three-Dimensional Design until she retired in 2014 and was made Emerita Professor.

Over the course of her career, Odundo's multiple and frequent research, lecture, residency, and teaching activities have continued to promote her work internationally, and in diverse contexts. In 2003, she traveled to Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, on the invitation of Professor Juliet Armstrong at the Centre for Visual Art, where she led student workshops, and to Newtown for a residency at the Fordsburgh Artists Studios. Afterward she visited ceramics studios and weavers' workshops in KwaZulu-Natal, including the pottery of the locally renowned Magwaza family, and conducted research on Zulu ceramics funded by the Director's Research Award from the Surrey Institute. An exhibition of her new and recent ceramics, *time and again*, took place in the temporary gallery of the newly opened Crafts Study Centre at the Surrey Institute in June 2004. *Resonance & Inspiration: New Works by Magdalene Odundo* opened at the Harn Museum of Art in Gainesville, Florida, in 2006, and subsequently toured to the Hood Museum in Dartmouth, Connecticut, to coincide with her artist residency at Dartmouth College in 2008. She has also held residencies in Chile (2009), Scotland (2010), Northern Ireland (2011), and Tacoma, Washington (2011). Not all of these have focused on ceramics: at the University of Ulster in Belfast, she worked in printmaking and in Tacoma, in the Museum of Glass Hot Shop, on glass. Working with glass blowers, Odundo created the work for an exhibition, *Metamorphosis and Transformation*, which was later installed in another version, *Transition II*, at the National Glass Centre in Sunderland, UK, in 2014. The repeating teardrop vase-like forms in the installation were inspired by ancient Egyptian glass ear studs (Odundo 2016 and "International Artist Exhibits Largest Ever Glass Installation at UCA Farnham"). In 2016, she installed *Transition II* (Fig. 2.5), over 1000 pieces with the same forms hung in sweeping undulations to imitate flowing water,

⁹In 2005, the Surrey Institute of Art & Design merged with the Kent Institute of Art & Design to become University College for the Creative Arts at Canterbury, Epsom, Farnham, Maidstone and Rochester. It was granted full university status in 2008 and changed its name to the University for the Creative Arts.



Fig. 2.5 Magdalene Odundo, *Transition II* (2016). Glass installation in James Hockey Gallery, University for the Creative Arts, Farnham, UK; dimensions vary. Courtesy of the artist. Photograph by Steve White

especially the Nile River, at the University of Creative Art in Farnham. Taking the earrings as a starting point, the work evokes both archaeological and anthropological inquiries into human history, and specifically “how traditional cultures explore rites of passage and how adornment plays a role in life and death” (“International Artist Exhibits Largest Ever Glass Installation”). These themes are connected to her early interest in ethnography and her fascination with Greco-Roman and Mesopotamian ceramics when she was still a student. Reflecting back on her career, Odundo remarks upon how her work crosses cultural boundaries and defies labeling (Odundo 2016).

Odundo’s ceramics are in the collections of leading art institutions, including the British Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art, and the Victoria and Albert Museum, where they are interpreted in various contexts. One of her vessels featured prominently in the Sainsbury African Galleries at the British Museum, when they opened in March 2001. It was positioned centrally in a display case in the first gallery, the first object in sight. At the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art, as in the British Museum, Odundo’s vessels have been exhibited alongside other art objects from the African continent. At the Victoria and Albert Museum, her work has been displayed in their “British Pottery” gallery alongside work by Michael Cardew and Ladi Kwali. Most recently, the museum installed her piece with Ai Weiwei’s and Picasso’s work under an “International” label (Odundo 2016).

In many settings, Odundo’s work is branded “contemporary” because it was made by a professional, academically trained artist for the international art market. This term is contrasted with “traditional,” which is used to describe objects produced in conjunction with indigenous, local methods. For African art, these prove to be highly problematic categorizations, as “contemporary” simply means “at the same time as.” Equally problematic, “traditional” implies a stasis with regards to longstanding African art forms, when in fact many of these forms continue to be produced in the present day and have evolved over years. In addition, many African artists who have not received a university education nevertheless undergo extensive apprenticeships with local masters. Odundo’s vessels thus call into question these specious and ultimately faulty categorizations by their very presence in galleries of African art. In applied arts or design contexts, details of Odundo’s Kenyan heritage are downplayed in favor of her academic training in British studio ceramics. Odundo’s work

is collected within a context of British or “international” design history at the Victoria and Albert Museum, while the British Museum holds her vessels in two departments: the national collection of modern British ceramics in the Department of Medieval and Later Antiquities since 1982 (now the Department of Europe); and the African collection of the Department of Ethnography since 1991 (reinstalled in the Sainsbury African Galleries in 2001).

For Odundo, such ambiguities and multiple interpretations of her creative practice are strengths. She comments,

In my case, there are no restrictions. Restrictions are based in the categories of Western critics. Developing countries have a broader, more eclectic view, like the Swahili concept of *sa-na*, which simply means something that has been created or made. [Western] writers have agendas, like presenting “traditional” and “non-traditional” as preconceived categories in Africa. This creates lots of problems ... They’re looking superficially. (Odundo 2003)

Odundo recognizes the shortcomings of Western art historical categories. Concepts like *sa-na* encompass a broad range of creative practice and supersede notions of fine art versus craft or traditional versus contemporary. She explains,

Debating who or what culture or nation or ethnicity one is for purposes of exhibiting is a non-starter, because one is who one is. Critics are the ones who pigeonhole the art and artists by calling art “primitive,” applying an anthropology that’s fifty years out of date. [African] artists are fed up with being seen as exotics. It is a curator’s problem, and it has made people of African descent wary of how they are perceived ... The work is interesting regardless of where it’s reviewed! (Odundo 2003)

Odundo does not play into such spurious debates. Her exhibition history defies the limitations of stereotypical categorizations, and prevents the critical segregation of her body of work from that of artists of European descent. She says, “I don’t mind being represented as [an artist] from Kenya or Africa, but I’m not totally pleased if [my work] is always next to a mask!” (Odundo 2003).

Odundo’s reputation has grown steadily over the course of her career. She has enjoyed commercial success and wide exposure since her earliest

days as an emerging artist, and the prices of her pots have continued to increase over time. Her first solo exhibition in 1991 at Anthony Ralph Gallery in New York City completely sold out. In a review of the show for *American Ceramics*, Judith Schwartz praised Odundo for her “wonderful forms with arresting aesthetic purity, vitality of spirit, and recognition of the medium, which sets them squarely at the forefront of art” (1991, p. 51). Louisa Buck was impressed with the way Odundo’s vessels “generate a presence so strong you can almost hear it, or feel it” (1992, p. 20). The work reminded Buck of Brancusi “at his most streamlined and provocative; it appears simultaneously archaic and modern, eastern and western, while having its own unmistakable identity ... Only a few artists have ever said so much with such rigorous economy” (1992, p. 20).

Odundo has even been seen as over-appreciated by some critics. While praising her talent and “tremendous command of form,” Paul Rice commented in 1989 that even as a student she was the subject of a massive amount of media coverage and hype unusual for any ceramicist, and this acclaim raised the prices of her works higher than those of any other potter of her generation (Rice and Growings 1989, p. 217). Rice continues, “Although Odundo has not yet lived up to her promotion, she certainly has the potential to do so” (Rice and Growings 1989, p. 217). In 2002, Rice concluded that “Odundo’s output has been surprisingly small and sometimes surprisingly uneven in quality but, in general, she has lived up to her promotion and been one of Britain’s finest potters” (Rice 2002, p. 187). Odundo has continued to garner honors in recognition of her talent and her cultural contributions from national and local institutions. At the 2008 Queen’s Birthday Honours, she was named Officer of the Order of the British Empire for her artistic achievements. In 2014, she was named “Visual Artist of the Year” by The Journal Culture Awards for her installation in Sunderland’s National Glass Centre.

In her exploration of a variety of creative influences, Odundo expresses universal yet also personal diasporic experiences: “a sense of belonging ... tempered by the ambiguity of a sense of belonging elsewhere at the same time” (Picton 1994, p. 46). Odundo has been living and working in England since 1971. She has decided that practically and professionally, it is better to stay, yet she says she will never feel “at home” in England (Odundo 2003). She integrates her background, training, and influences into a body of work that effectively celebrates the diversity contained within it. As she describes,

I was very confused for a long time, but you gradually realize how privileged you are in Great Britain to come from a part of the world which you can continually look at in a different light. The riches that gives you! You can work from the African tradition and also view it from a distance. That was my culture shock: I thought I had left behind something that was mine, whereas I had actually gained something new. (Staal 1994, p. 18)

Odundo's vessels embody a host of paradoxes: they are containers, but non-functional; they are still while suggesting movement; they recall ancient methods yet reside resolutely in the contemporary. Her methods of ceramic production, as well as the pots themselves, interrogate notions of nationality, race, gender, and art versus craft. Furthermore, Odundo counters restrictive categorizations by participating in exhibitions and other activities that showcase her alternatively as a craftswoman, a fine artist, traditional, contemporary, African, and British. As a British resident of Kenyan nationality, she might be categorized as a black British artist in a context similar to that of Eddie Chambers or Lubaina Himid. Yet her professional trajectory is far from limited to that category. Instead, she challenges the art world to experience her pots and her world on her own terms. As she says, "I have never been afraid of gender, politics, [or] art media hierarchy, never had to spell it out, to fight with it. I love the humanity of what clay does. It's a very healing type of art" (Odundo 2016).

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