

30 UNDER 35 2020

WOODY DE OTHELLO MIXES PLAYFUL WITH POLITICAL

ELIZABETH KARP-EVANS

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Oakland-based artist Woody de Othello draws on the city's artistic lineage as well as its political legacy to create his surreal, anthropomorphic sculpture. A ceramist first—although he paints, draws and works with found objects—his sculpture is loose and large, often slumped precariously and fired in a multitude of colors reminiscent of Ron Nagle, though adapting none of Nagle's sleek compact forms. "It's a question of 'how can I afflict the sculptures with a human quality or an emotive quality?'" he says, citing Ruby Neri and others from the Mission School as inspiration. When we speak, he is working on his first institutional solo show at San Jose Museum of Art, which will run through April 2020.

In 2018, successful exhibitions at San Francisco's Jessica Silverman Gallery and Karma in New York saw the familiar arrangement of oversized household objects sporting characteristic arms and legs, ears and lips, but it was at the latter space where a rather symmetric presentation of pared-back sculpture necessitated viewers' acknowledgment that humor isn't always at the bottom of what de Othello creates. Sets of oversized prayer hands and unadorned glasswork paired with ceramic bars, glazed in pewter-like quicksilver and moody blues, were a subdued yet weighty reminder of the futility felt by black and brown bodies within the police state—and of the tenuous political environment within which art is now made. "I hear about the work being cartoonish, I always hear about humor. Those are all legitimate readings," he emphasizes. "But when you look at them formally, outside of some of the color decisions, they are manipulated and slumped over. They're constrained, uneasy." Whether creating life-size figurative work, anthropomorphic everyday objects, or the sober, elegant ceramics of late, one thing is clear for de Othello: "Since the first time I touched the material, it's been this constant in my life. So many other things have changed, but ceramics has always been there, driving my spirit forward."