Winnie Owens: Messenger in Clay

Harriet Jackson Scarupa

Follow this and additional works at: http://dh.howard.edu/newdirections

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://dh.howard.edu/newdirections/vol7/iss1/6
"Scream. . . You're Black and in America."

It's the title of a ceramic mask by Winnie Owens, an assistant professor of art at Howard University.

The mask, like its title, demands attention, response. A clay rendition of Owens' own face embellished with decorative accents akin to those found on many African sculptures, the mask seems to thrust itself out of its bowl form to confront the viewer. Thick black streaks cross beneath shiny white, almond-shaped eyes while the open mouth suggests rage, agony, protest. Etched at the base of these black streaks, like some kind of intricate border, are a half-dozen words: "TIME HAS PASSED . . . RACISM HAS NOT."
The mask is part of a series, "an ongoing series," Owens explained as she talked about this work and others, about her messages, her mission, and, above all, that "African connection" so evident in both her work and life.

The "Scream series," as she calls it, "symbolizes how I feel," she said in deliberate tones. "I feel like screaming sometimes about the way I have been treated in this country because of my color. And when I say 'I' I don't just mean me, but all African-Americans. I feel like screaming sometimes not only about racism but about so many negative things in this society—the way human life is denigrated, the way old people are treated, and young people, and poor people... It's just sickening."

The speaker of these deliberate words was sitting in the living room of her small Alexandria, Va., house, an abode transformed from the ordinary by its service and devotion to art. Located near a busy highway, Owens' red brick rowhouse is distinguished from its neighbors by a bright orange awning, in front, a metal shed enclosing a large gas kiln, in back. Crowding the space inside are baskets, bells and pottery from Third World countries; African sculptures; paintings, prints and assemblages by artist friends; and, of course, her own pottery and sculpture. In the basement studio is still another kiln, this one electric, a potter's wheel, bags of clay, boxes of chemicals for making glazes and shelves holding ceramics in various stages of completion.

Juxtaposed against this colorful evidence of artistic vitality, Owens seemed an almost unobtrusive footnote. Dressed in a simple khaki dress and sensible low-heeled sandals, she looked far less "the artist" than many of her Howard students with their penchant for tie-dye outfits, multiples of earrings and beads, elaborate hairdos and/or makeup. Owens, herself, seems far more interested in producing art than in looking arty. And produce art she does.

In one corner of her dining room is a two-sided figure of a woman's head and torso, part of a series she is creating on African-American women. One side, Owens explained, "represents the African woman in her original state—before she was brutally taken from the shores of Africa and brought here. She
had a certain kind of harmony with nature; there was a feeling of 'all's right with the world.' At least, conceptually, that's the way I perceive it.” Yes, it is an idealized interpretation, she admitted. “But I'm talking about that ancestral African woman. I certainly don't mean African women today.”

The sculpture's other side, Owens continued, "represents what the African woman in America has become.” Whereas the African half of the sculpture speaks of pride, the American half speaks of vulnerability. And more. The color now has become a washed-out beige, a hard glaze communicates not only a plastic society but a plastic soul, while the prominent blue slicked over the downcast eyes symbolizes artifice. And the eyes have no pupils, for Owens uses pupils on her ceramic faces to symbolize wisdom.

Owens passed her hand over the sculpture to show how the unadorned clay side merges into its glossy counterpart, how the pure brown/black merges into the pale beige. “I know a lot of African-Americans, with all their socio-political idealism, consider themselves Pan Africans,” she said at the same time. “But what I'm trying to say through this piece is that no matter how much we would like to be pure Africans again, we can never be that way. We cannot erase what happened to us. But we [Black Americans and Africans] are bound together. Even though there are sharp contrasts between us, there is an undeniable, unmistakable meshing. A linkage. And what I'm also trying to do through this piece is to define that link.” (It's also why she prefers the designation "African-American" to "Black.")

African Connection

So far, Owens has completed three works in the African-American woman series and plans many more. In all of them, she uses her own face and body as the starting point. She covers herself with plaster, making a mold. When the mold is hardened, she fills it in with clay, then adds sculptural and decorative touches until the molded figure has been transformed into an original creation ready for the kiln. But even though Owens, herself, is the starting point for the series, she denied any suggestion her modus operandi smacks of egotism. “The reason I use my own body,” she said, “is that I couldn't find anybody else willing to model for me this way. In fact, in terms of making a
statement, it probably would have been better if I had used someone else because people who know me tend to try to read certain personal things into the pieces that aren’t really there."

She also denied the series constitutes a feminist statement. "Basically, I don’t believe the feminist movement as it has been defined in this country has anything to do with African-Americans," she said bluntly. "So I do not involve myself in things that don’t really concern me. The reason I’m focusing on women in the series is simply that I’m a woman and I’m trying to say something about the link between my African ancestry and my American ancestry."

Sometimes, her work expresses that link even more literally. Her “Dogon Images,” with its wooden headpiece in the shape of a Lorraine Cross, is a clay translation of a traditional [Mali] Dogon mask. But the mask’s features, though highly distorted, are Owens’ own. "By using an African-American face on an African concept," she explained, "again I’m dealing with the linkage idea."

Another work, “Variations on a Traditional Nigerian Water Jar,” a round earthen pot with three water spouts on top and stylized figures of animals decorating its sides, is similar to a type produced by traditional Nigerian potters. Instead of being thrown on a wheel, the customary Western way to achieve such a rounded form, it is hand-built. "Yes, the technique was a direct copy," Owens acknowledged. "What I did afterwards was me." Jo Ann Lewis, reviewing a Howard University faculty art show in the Washington Post in March 1978, would concur. Owens is one of the artists she singled out in her review, those she called “highly original and creative American artists who have, in many cases, been to Africa and studied traditional ideas and forms there and are now reshaping these ideas into new, highly provocative amalgams.”

Not all works by Owens show this African connection or carry bold social messages. In her dining room, for instance, is a large ceramic vase with a comical looking bird sitting on top. Title of the work: “He called himself the American eagle … but I knew he was just another gay bird.” She also does utilitarian works in clay that seem little different from those found at many of the country’s better crafts fairs: cups and saucers, mugs, plates, vases, sinks. She feels no need to
apologize for turning out such works, she said, though she admitted few Black Americans appreciate ceramics. ("Given the socio-economic level of the average African-American person in this country, a plastic cup costs a lot less than one of my ceramic cups.") If a Black artist has as his goal simply to create beautiful things, Owens well-understands. "Whether you're a quiet crusader or a very vocal crusader or whatever, you have to have some kind of relief and self-fulfillment to rejuvenate yourself," she observed. "That could come in the form of my throwing at the [potter's] wheel; it could come in the form of my planting daisies; it could come in the form of my riding a horse, whatever."

Of late, both Owens' functional and symbolic works have been well-received by the critics. Wrote Lewis in that Washington Post review: "The range and inventiveness of her [Owens'] work, along with her extraordinary craftsmanship—characteristic of all the work here—are enough to make a pot-lover's heart purr." Later, writing in that same newspaper, Paul Richard used three simple adjectives to describe Owens' works: "piercing, tough and fine."

In addition to exhibiting in Howard University art shows, Owens' works have been shown at the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC) in Lagos, Nigeria in 1977; at the Afro-American Historical and Cultural Museum in Philadelphia; the Scope Gallery in Alexandria; the Dupont Center Gallery of the Corcoran in Washington, D.C.; at Catonsville Community College in Catonsville, Md.; Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, La.; Morgan State University in Baltimore, Md., and the Philadelphia College of Art. In February, her works will be included in an international show at the University of Maryland.

While Owens' works will be represented in the show, she will be far away. She left for Africa in August. And that linkage so reflected in her work is now a physical reality. She is on leave from Howard for a year and is currently apprenticing with the women potters of Ipetumodu, a pottery village near Ife, Nigeria. (A former colleague of hers at the Ellington School for the Arts, Martha Jackson, is teaching Owens' courses.) In addition to working alongside the women, she is photo-
graphing their techniques, interviewing them about their work and lives and collecting samples of their pottery to bring back to the U.S. The result will be documentation of a form of ceramic art that is still intact as it has been for centuries, yet, she believes, has gone unacknowledged and unappreciated far too long by the larger art world.

Her research project, financed by a $4,000 Howard faculty research grant and her own savings, is one that seems natural outgrowth of both her long-held fascination with Africa and her equally long-held romance with clay. "Some of my students think I eat, breathe and sleep clay," she said with wry grin. "That's not always true."

**A Cross on Fire**

Owens grew up in Arlington, Va., the daughter of two government workers, in circumstances she described as "probably considered lower-middle class." Her parents always made sure she and her older sister and brother were well-supplied with clay, pencils, paints and the like and encouraged them in their youthful art projects. Her mother liked to sketch. Her father liked to "build things, fix things and make things" around the house and yard. Owens was his frequent shadow. "I think seeing my father work with his hands so much had a lot to do with my going into art," she observed.

Her interest in art was further strengthened in junior and senior high school, especially after her first experience working at a potter's wheel. Not surprisingly, she decided when she went to college she would major in art. "It's funny," she reflected, "my parents are very practical people. But they let me major in art. My mother felt all her children—if allowed to do what they like—would be happy."

Owens had been planning to go to Virginia Commonwealth College in Richmond, Va., but when the Ku Klux Klan burned a cross on the campus after a Black student was elected homecoming queen, her parents urged her to go elsewhere. She agreed, and went to the Philadelphia College of Art (PCA), one of the nation's better art schools. Her experience there was to set the stage for the exacting technique that characterizes her current ceramics work. It also was to set the stage for the way she often uses her art today to express the things that disturb her.

"At PCA, I learned about racism," she said. "I know this sounds naive, but it wasn't until I got there that I really saw how we [Black Americans] were treated, how a lot of white parents teach their children that Black people are their enemy. I was totally naive about this stuff and I got hurt."

As one of 10 Black students out of a student body of 1,500, Owens found she had to fight to be seen as an individual, instead of a stereotype. She recalled a conversation with one administrator who informed her, "We stopped giving scholarships on merit because you people couldn't make it on merit." "For a long time I was angry with my parents for not telling me about racism," she remarked, reflecting on such incidents. "Why didn't you let me know? I'd say. But I got over my bitterness at them—but not at racism."

She majored in crafts, financing some of the cost of her education by working part-time in the Post Office. She studied metal-working, wood-working, print-making, painting, photography, but ceramics became her favored art medium. Her decision to eventually concentrate her creative energies on ceramics, she said, was not based on any mystical or sensual feeling she had for clay—as it is for some potters—but stemmed from a most pragmatic consideration: "I found that clay was the medium I controlled the best."

Towards the end of her stay at PCA, she sought relief from its lily-white atmosphere at the Ile Ife Black Humanitarian Center in Philadelphia, a cultural center whose founder had been influenced by the Yoruba culture of Nigeria. Owens, herself, had been interested in all things African since childhood. "My parents weren't Pan Africanists or anything, but in school I was doing reports on Africa all the time and I always wanted to go to Africa even though I didn't know anyone who had been there," she recalled. It was to take some African drumming lessons that she initially came to the Ile Ife center. She couldn't afford to buy a regular drum for the class so she made one by stretching a hide over a ceramic base. Meanwhile, at PCA she began to decorate some of her wheel-thrown pottery with Yoruba symbols, much to the disapproval of some of her instructors who felt her decorative accents were not in keeping with the school's clean, conservative style of ceramics.

After receiving her B.A. in crafts in 1971, Owens stayed in Philadelphia for a year working as a ceramics instructor at the Ile Ife center and as an art teacher at the Pennsylvania Advancement School. While there, she read an Ebony article on the "new Black consciousness" permeating Howard University. Impressed, she applied to the university for graduate study in art and received a scholarship.

Once at Howard, though, she found the university's ceramics studio a disappointment. "I came from a school [PCA] that had six different kinds of kilns to a school that had almost none," she noted drily by way of example. Ironically, she observed, "this negative situation had a positive thrust. Because of the situation at Howard, I was forced to set up my own studio. It made me go out and buy my equipment much sooner than I would have otherwise."

On the positive side, at Howard, both as a student and a teacher, she has found "a rich artistic soil, a very rich soil. At Howard, there are artists who are teachers and teachers who are artists—and that means so much." Her master's thesis project was on ceramic instruments, an interest harking back to that initial drum she made for her class at the Ile Ife center.

In the years between Owens' tenure as student and teacher at Howard, she worked as a production potter for crafts shows and shops, a ceramics and art instructor at a community center and public school in Arlington, and for Workshops for Careers in the Arts and the Ellington School of the Arts in Washington. Not until 1976, when she joined the Howard faculty, was she able to hold only one job, revealing testimony to the difficulty of making a living as a ceramist. (This hard financial reality also helps explain why there are so few professional Black ceramists in this country. Owens, for example, often found herself as a "curiosity" at local crafts shows because "people had never seen a Black potter before."

Since she has been at Howard, she has developed a comprehensive undergraduate and graduate program in ceramics and taught all the ceramics courses listed in the catalogue. Explained Stamanda Bullock, chairman of Howard's art department, "We brought Miss Owens on [the faculty] because we felt a need to strengthen our ceramics program. She has carried out this mandate. Because of the structure of the..."
program she has developed, students are exposed to a variety of ceramics techniques. She has brought an awareness that ceramics is more than just throwing a pot. One student, for instance, made elaborate musical instruments from clay, while another, an interior design major, used clay to create her own style of tiles.”

As an instructor, Bullock added, Owens has set an example for her students of what an artist should be: “well-disciplined and extremely dedicated.”

Owens' own assessment: “Some students regard me as very strict, demanding and unreasonable.” And her explanation: “I know they [the students] have talent. If they didn’t, they wouldn’t be in art school. So, I’m not worried about talent. I am concerned that they know all the technical things. If you have a solid technical base, you can have many choices.”

Her mission as a teacher is simple: “to produce more Black potters.” “I’m tired of the myth that crafts is a white thing,” she said heatedly. “There’s a whole tradition of African potters who were making pots for much longer than this country has been in existence.”

Visit to Ipetumodu

Owens' own interest in African ceramics she attributes to “a combination of my being interested in going to Africa to find out the truth about myself and about Black people and the fact I was always interested in ceramics. When I tried to find out something about African ceramics in books and hardly found anything, that just enticed me more.”

In 1971, while in Philadelphia, Owens saw a German film about African pottery. The film showed how traditional Nigerian potters—without a potter's wheel, without a kiln, without the chemicals so utilized by Western ceramists—were able to create handsome, functional works. As she silently watched the film, she thought, “There's something those potters know that I need to find out.” Among the steps in her journey to “find out:” Watching Ladi Kwali, a foremost Nigerian potter, give pottery demonstrations on a visit to the U.S. in 1972; working as an assistant to Abbas Ahuwan, another Nigerian potter, at the Haystack Mountain School of Crafts on Deer Isle, Maine during the summer of 1974; visiting the pottery village of Ipetumodu for the first time during her participation...
in FESTAC, a participation wrought with emotional meaning. (“Yes, I cried during the opening ceremonies.”)

At FESTAC, someone had suggested Owens visit Ipetumodu. Owens didn’t need much convincing. She came away from the village impressed, but unable to put the whole experience in cultural perspective. “I was so stupid when I first went there,” she confessed. “I thought the people lived in these little huts. When I went back a second time, I found that this pottery village was actually a group of cooperative artists working together and the ‘huts’ were the studios where they worked during the day, returning to the main village at night.”

Her second visit to Ipetumodu was for two months during the summer of 1977. It was financed partly by small grants from the Ford Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts, and laid the groundwork for her present research.

Owens was based at the University of Ile and would journey [via taxi] to Ipetumodu, about 20 miles away, whenever weather permitted. Working alongside two women potters, she would try to duplicate the traditional techniques. The women would make their pots from clay which the men in the larger village would dig up from a nearby riverbank.

To make a typical pot, for instance, the potter would take a mound of clay and hollow out a depression in its center with her fist, creating a base that looked like a shallow bowl. To this, she would add coils to form the walls and mouth of the pot, scraping and smoothing it all together as she went. When enough pots reached this stage, the kids would sit up and look at me and say, ‘We can’t use them because if we put water in them, they’ll dissolve,’” she recalled. “And they were right. But at Ipetumodu, they fire pots without a kiln—and have always done it that way.”

Adapting the Ipetumodu experience, then, can be a way to set up low-cost ceramics programs. But there could be other lessons from Ipetumodu for Western ceramists as well. “Technically, everything they do makes sense,” said Owens of the traditional potters. “The way you’re taught to make a coil pot here in art school has a lot of unnecessary steps and the results do not necessarily show all the work you’ve put into it. There, they do everything economically. It takes less equipment and once you learn the technique, it takes less time. Of course, you have to spend the time to learn the technique as you would anything else.”

On her current research trip, Owens is making a more intensive examination of the work and life of the village. Again, she is apprenticing with individual potters. This time she is also visually documenting the whole pottery-making process through black-and-white and color photography—both still and motion. She is also doing in-depth interviews with the potters and collecting pottery samples from the village and other nearby pottery villages which she plans to bring back to the U.S. Upon her return, she will use this information as the basis for lecture-demonstrations and setting up simulated pottery villages where participants can learn not only new techniques but something of the African culture as well.

Before she left for her trip, Owens said she hoped to avoid being “the type of researcher who just goes into a culture, takes photographs and gets a little information but stays outside the circle.”

“I think the most important thing is that they [the Ipetumodu potters] understand what I’m trying to do and that they get to know me just as I hope to get to know them.” This time, she took slides of her own work to show the women and planned to have them visit her at the University of Ile, where she is based, to show them how she makes pots on a wheel. “So I hope there will be a mutual exchange, not just my going over there and reaping benefit from them,” Owens added.

Already, though, the Ipetumodu potters have had an influence on her work. “Seeing what they could do without all the equipment we use in ceramics here gave me a lot of courage to go ahead and do what I want to do with clay,” she explained. This freedom, courtesy of Ipetumodu, combined with another type of freedom, courtesy of Howard, to change her work. “See, many of the things I used to make with clay I did because I needed money to pay the rent,” she pointed out. “The Howard job, with the better salary, gave me freedom to go ahead and do what I wanted to do with clay instead of worrying about whether it would ‘sell.’ So, I began using clay to express the things I felt inside.”

Then she added a postscript that seems to sum up what she’s about as an artist:

“I used to feel guilty about being an African-American and being in something as ‘frivolous’ as art. But I don’t anymore. What I’m trying to do through my art is find some peace in my life as an African-American person in this country and in this world right now. If I could write, I would write. If I could choreograph, I would choreograph. If I could sing, I would sing. Art is what I can handle. So I’m using this, my God-given gift, to express myself—my anger, my hurts, my frustrations, as well as my joys.”

That she succeeds in communicating this seems evident from the vigor of her works. But her works—and her research—go beyond the personal. They speak to us of the heritage of a people.