

Black Artists Are Reshaping How We Think About American Ceramics



substack.com/home/post/p-148194941

Contemporary ceramicists are continuing a long legacy of Black Americans working in clay. As they find new ways to tell their stories, the art world is finally catching up.

Aug 30, 2024

Craftsmanship Magazine



“Timeline Strip Pieced Quilt: for Frances Ellen Watkins, circa 1857...”
(earthenware, porcelain, stoneware; Chotsani Elaine Dean, 2023)

by

Ruth Terry

As a Black art student at a predominantly white, Midwestern college in the late 1990s, I rarely saw people or studied artists who looked like me. White men taught my art history courses, which were focused on pale, male painters and sculptors. I learned that ceramics was not fine art; it was a craft. And despite loving the muddy alchemy of shaping clay into vessels, I left college believing that fine artists didn't work with clay, and neither did Black people.

In actuality, Black Americans have used clay to tell their stories for centuries. Many enslaved craftspeople worked in industrial potteries like the Edgefield District in South Carolina, which proliferated due to the region's rich clay and mineral deposits, and local plantations' ever-increasing demand for utilitarian wares. Black artisans churned out thousands of items, helping to perfect the region's signature style of alkaline-glazed stoneware while still finding ways to leave their own artistic marks.



An alkaline-glazed stoneware storage jar, created—and signed—by David Drake (aka “Dave the Potter”), circa 1858. From the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY.

David Drake, aka “Dave the Potter,” worked in various potteries, including Edgefield, from around 1820 through the 1860s. The first known enslaved potter to sign his work, Drake also wrote poetry on his mammoth storage jars, defying antebellum anti-literacy laws. Other enslaved artisans made face jugs: large vessels embellished with stylized facial features that look strikingly similar to West African *nkisi* sculptures (which are believed to contain spirits or spiritual power).

Today, a groundswell of contemporary Black artists are continuing this legacy, and finding new ways to tell their stories through clay.

"I'm very, very encouraged by how many Black contemporary artists are working in clay," says Syd Carpenter, a prolific multimedia artist who has been working with clay for five decades. "I'm just so encouraged by seeing so many people doing this, and doing it beautifully and innovatively.... I'm so glad to be a part of it."

Things were very different when she was an undergrad at the Tyler School of Art in the 1970s.

"At that time, I can't even count on one hand how many Black women were there in art school. I was a rarity," says Carpenter. "[M]ost of the teachers were older white males. And that's important, because they're coming out of a generation of folks who had preconceived notions about where I belonged.... There was no one I could identify with."

Also, ceramics "was taught as utilitarian and functional," Carpenter continues. "If you were a serious artist, you certainly weren't making pots."



↙ ↗
Multimedia artist Syd Carpenter in her clay studio.

"I had no idea about clay in terms of content, but that would evolve over the decades," she says. "I [found] how rich a medium it would be, all of the amazing things that other artists were doing with clay, in terms of narrative, of performance, [and] just presenting this material as an ideal location for storytelling."

Carpenter's work of the last decade focuses on African American farms and gardens, she tells me on a Zoom call from her eclectic home office in Philadelphia, PA. Behind her, myriad potted plants thrive in the generous light streaming into the room, their green foliage contrasting with the jewel-toned paintings on the walls.

"It's about legacy," Carpenter says. "It's thinking about my past, how I helped my mother in the garden, how she must have helped her mother in the garden. Being on the land is essential to your sense of place.... your ability to maintain and sustain yourself, your culture, and your identity."

Carpenter is probably best known for her "farm bowl" series: clay portraits of Black-owned farms that have been featured on the award-winning PBS show, "Craft in America."

"For the most part, the average person would not envision a Black person or woman as a farmer," she says. "And that's more and more something that is being rethought. Some of the most enduring and persistent people on the land are women, and are Black people coming back to the land, establishing urban farms... and educating our children about it."

Many people also wouldn't necessarily envision a Black woman as a ceramics artist, a perception that Chotsani Elaine Dean struggled with when she was deciding on a career path.



↙ ↗
Chotsani Elaine Dean, artist and Assistant Professor of Ceramics at the
University of Minnesota

Dean says she considered going to school for journalism or becoming a translator, because "I really didn't think Black people were in clay," she tells me. "For a long time, it was a very curious thing; it felt like it was a mistake, that [clay] was something I was so interested in."

Dean, who ended up going to Hartford Art School, uses familiar forms like tea cups, sugar jars, spoons, and quilts made from clay tiles to unpack Black Americans' historical relationship to commodities, including cotton.

"I try to find the things... that are more obscure... using objects that are part of the domestic [sphere], which then connect to labor," she explains. "And at the center of that: cotton... What is my relationship to this commodity, living in the wealthiest country on the planet?"

While living in South Carolina, Dean successfully grew her own cotton from heirloom seeds. She incorporated pieces of the plants into small spoons that she sculpted from paper clay, a material made by adding cellulose fibers to clay bodies.

"Flora and fauna are extremely important because they say something about where you are," Dean says. "We have GPS now, right? That's how we locate ourselves. But before, people located themselves by the plants they saw. They understood time by what was coming up, what was ripening, what was maturing and what was fading out."



'bleached antiquity' (slip cast porcelain, paper clay, mirrored acrylic, wood;
Chotsani Elaine Dean, 2023)

Over time, a number of factors have helped increase the visibility of work by Black artists like Carpenter and Dean.

In the 1980s, the art world began to shine its light on Black painters like Basquiat, a pioneer of neo-expressionism in the New York art scene. Later, the presence of multidisciplinary ceramic artists such as Theaster Gates and Simone Leigh helped pave the way for the next generation, through their studio practice and their tenure as art professors.

More recently, social media has also made it easier for artists to share their work and find community, says Dean.

"Being seen and being able to represent is so critical," says Carpenter, who taught studio art at Swarthmore College from 1991 to 2022. "The more you see other folks doing it, the better. And when I look at the numbers and how many [Black people] are identifying as artists—it's working."



↙ ↗
Power Figure: Male (Nkisi), a wooden figure, adorned with nails, cloth, beads, and other materials, created in the Democratic Republic of Congo,

circa 1800-1950. From the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY. *Image by shooting_brooklyn, CC BY-SA 2.5.*

When the Black Lives Matter movement and the police killing of George Floyd forced a global racial reckoning, American arts institutions finally began to reconsider whose work was in their collections and exhibitions—and who was being left out.

Against a backdrop of pandemic and protests in 2020, Dean, who had just relocated to Minnesota, was working hard on a book project that would also raise the profile of Black artists in clay. Collaborating online with long-time ceramics collector donald a. clark, Dean connected with more than 30 artists who are profiled in the book, "Contemporary Black American Ceramic Artists" (Schiffer Publishing, 2022).

"After [Floyd's] murder, more and more creative Black people began to emerge," says clark. "And we were able to do more research and find people who, before George Floyd, we would not have had access to."

From a renewed interest in the work of Dave the Potter, whose pieces recently sold for record-breaking prices at auction (in 2021, for example, a Drake jar sold for \$1.5 million), to exhibitions focused on African American ceramics, the art world is increasingly holding space for Black people who work with clay. Dean and clark's book inspired a landmark traveling exhibition called "A Gathering: Works from Contemporary Black American Ceramic Artists." The Met's exhibition "Hear Me Now: The Black Potters of Old Edgefield, South Carolina," also showcased the work of enslaved artisans and contemporary Black ceramics artists.

"This is a history that should have been told a long time ago, and so we're... telling it now," says art historian Maggie North, former curator at the Springfield Museums.

"There's great importance in this... I think clay, in its material quality, in the way it is actually shaped by human hands, there's a[n] immediacy... that allows us to access histories or relationships with stories or makers, that might feel more abstract in other media."



↙ ↗
Farm bowl with chicken, by Syd Carpenter

Back in Philadelphia, Carpenter is juggling multiple projects these days: She is working on a large-scale installation at Rowan University in Glassboro, NJ, and preparing for an expansive retrospective of her work that will be exhibited across three Pennsylvania museums.

As we chat, I tell her how struck I am by the way she subverts stereotypes, first by just showing up as a Black woman in clay, and also in the themes of farming, labor, gender, and domesticity that she so deftly navigates in her pieces.

"It's all of those things, because I am part of a narrative," she says. "I am trying to fill in blanks where I see [them]... That's what I want my work to be about: Look who is here, and who has been. It's an uninterrupted story."

4 Likes

.

2 Restacks