

The Joy of Making

The Work of Osa Atoe

by Heidi McKenzie

Osa Atoe can easily be described as a one-woman success story within ceramic circles. She is a functional maker who has set up shop in her garage studio in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Her business, Pottery by Osa, is a virtual affair: Atoe has over 46,000 Instagram followers and a thriving Etsy shop. Despite the fact that Atoe is one of those personalities who relishes the in-person market sales interaction, during COVID-19 pandemic times, all of her pots are sold through her online shop (<https://potterybyosa.patternbyetsy.com>).

Atoe's work has an aesthetic that a lot of people respond to. She's off the charts in terms of her level of success for someone who had never tried making pottery until she happened into a community class in 2013. She first set up a wheel in her kitchen in 2015 with a small Skutt kiln in the back shed when she lived in New Orleans. She has attracted a significant amount of media attention for a relative newcomer. Atoe credits a host of women who have come before her who are "killing it," such as Melissa Weiss, for helping





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pave the way.¹ It certainly doesn't hurt that Atoe caught Martha Stewart's eye, which led to her being featured in an article focused on female ceramic artists in January 2019.

Aspiring to Excellence

Atoe just likes making pots. She doesn't believe that she was particularly gifted in throwing when she started, she just knew that she liked it. Atoe describes herself as driven. She makes what makes her happy, not allowing herself to be pushed by market demand. She works in cycles: make, bisque fire, glaze, fire again, post, sell, package, ship, rest—repeat. As a transplanted Louisianian, Atoe's work is not rooted in the American South. She grew up in the Virginia suburbs of Washington, D.C., the daughter of Nigerian immigrants. Unlike many first-generation immigrant families who settle in Europe and North America, her parents were liberal insofar as they did not impose what I term the two-option career path: doctor or lawyer. They did ask that whatever she chose to do in her life, she apply herself and aspire to excellence.

When Atoe visited her parents' homeland, she found herself surrounded by red clay, on the roads and in the earth. More recently she has begun incorporating handbuilding into her designs, and admits to being fixated on the sphere form. She has been making two pinch pots and attaching them together to create water jugs that are inspired by Nigerian Yoruba head sculptures. Yet, Atoe describes her own sense of aesthetic as internally generated, working from what's inside, not her external environment.

Carving Her Own Path

There's a general tendency in the marketplace to pigeonhole Atoe's work as "African inspired." Atoe resists the absoluteness of this categorization. It is superficial at best. In her words, "It's hard to draw a straight line between what I'm making and anything specifically to do with Africa." She points out that it is impossible to conceive of Africa as a monolithic culture; rather, it is a continent with thousands of distinct tribal identities, each with their own languages and cultural practices. While Atoe is inspired by some subcultures within the African continent and diaspora, she is more interested in prehistoric symbols from all cultures and the universal appeal inherent in these symbols. To that end, Atoe's work draws from all corners of the globe.

One of the motifs Atoe created is a primal mask design. Through her research, she found the exact same mask design in Congolese



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1 Double-handed serving dish, 14 in. (36 cm) in length, slab-built mid-range red stoneware, glaze, fired to cone 5, 2019. 2 Cream and sugar set, 12 in. (30 cm) in length, wheel-thrown and handbuilt mid-range red stoneware, glaze, fired to cone 5, 2019. 3 Osa Atoe pictured in her studio. Photo: Reagan Labat. 4 Group of mugs, to 4 in. (10 cm) in height, wheel-thrown red stoneware, glaze, fired to cone 5, 2019.



5 Butter dish, 6 in. (15 cm) in length, mid-range red stoneware, glaze, fired to cone 5, 2018. 6 Pair of mugs, 5 in. (13 cm) in height, wheel-thrown mid-range red stoneware, glaze, fired to cone 5, 2019.



culture. She was not surprised, rather she found the synchronicity to be affirming of her belief in universal imagery. Her point of view (supported by semiotic specialists around the world) is that many basic graphic, geometric designs are universal in their historic origins—from Ancient Greek to Native American, from a myriad of African cultures to Indigenous Australians, and from ancient Anglo-Saxon to traditional Peruvian (Moche), specifically face jugs.

At the time of our interview, Atoe was researching Inuit body markings for inspiration in her designs. During our conversation, I pointed Atoe to a source book, *Patterns That Connect: Social Symbolism in Ancient & Tribal Art*.² She was immediately attracted to the front cover, which featured a tattooed Indigenous person. In my view, Atoe is one of those rare artists who intuitively understands universality into her work, while at the same time being open to and curious about the world around her.

The work itself has a signature look, but within that look there is a broad range of variation. When I asked Atoe where she feels

her work fits into the contemporary ceramic landscape, I found wisdom in her response, “What contemporary ceramic arts scene? I mean with the vastness of the world and the Internet, I don’t think there is a scene. Everyone is free to carve their own path.” I would describe Atoe’s body of work as earthy, minimalist, yet confident and sturdy, comfortable with a visual sense of tactility, non-figurative with simple graphics. There is a certain sense of folk art coupled with a definite nod to Indigenous cultures. The work is straightforward in its lack of complexity, yet includes highly stylized geometric patterning. The latter is by design; Atoe asserts that she would “like to see my work get even more simple, even though the natural tendency is to get more complex.” She realizes that “it takes a lot of skill and restraint to pull it [simplicity] off.”

Atoe works exclusively in mid-range terra-cotta clay. Many of her works allow part or all of the red clay to speak for itself. Her glazes are minimal, ranging in palette from white and turquoise to soft pastels. She started glazing reductively, in a wipe-away sgraffito technique. Since completing a one-year post-baccalaureate program at Louisiana State University’s College of Art and Design in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, in 2018, she has expanded her visual vocabulary to include surface decoration. Yet, for Atoe, less is more. “I don’t want to pile on surfaces just because I can,” she explains.

Resourceful and Creative Lifestyle

Atoe attributes her resourcefulness to her lived punk sensibility. Atoe’s parents started her on learning Western Classical violin in the school system. By high school she had gravitated to Punk. For Atoe, Punk is more than just the music, it is a lifestyle. Atoe holds a bachelor’s degree in sociology with a minor in women’s studies.

She has always played casually in punk bands. For Atoe, punk is about DIY culture, radical politics, and feminism. Atoe bartered her services as a studio technician loading kilns and prepping glazes at the community school where she began studying ceramics in exchange for the class tuition.

It took Atoe two decades to find her path, having worked a number of different jobs from day care to barista as well as teaching art classes to young people. She doesn't describe having an epiphany moment where the first time she touched clay, she knew it was her calling. It was more of a subtle revelation that this was something she enjoyed doing, and that she both wanted and had the capacity to do at a scale that could make it profitable.

When I asked Atoe if she was thinking of expanding or hiring people to assist with her production, I was surprised to hear a very unambiguous negative. Unpacking her response, it's clear that Atoe has thought this through: she cannot see herself creating a part-time or even low-paying full-time job for another aspiring artist that is never going to be enough to pay the rent. She doesn't want to participate in that economy.

With the recognition Atoe has harnessed through her social-media momentum and widespread press coverage, a next step might be to work with a chef or restaurant as a supplier. Atoe says she's had a few conversations, but "Baton Rouge isn't Soho," meaning the restaurateurs are not willing to pay her what she thinks the work is worth, given a whole host of considerations, including breakage, etc.

Atoe is interested in highlighting the positive aspects of the American multicultural melting pot. She is all too aware of the Trump administration's stance on immigration and its subsequent racialization of persons of color, leading to the reductive ideology that "American means white." Atoe reacts strongly to these lines of thinking, "It's time to start redefining American in a more realistic way, to start looking at our culture for what it is, which is a mix of culture. Let's clear the dust out of our eyes, look at the food that we eat, the music that we listen to, and realize that American means truly multicultural."

Atoe navigates the politics of race, while at the same time she embraces the resources of her Black artist community. Though it may be small, she feels it is a powerful source for networking and inspiration. In particular, she names Afro-Caribbean, New York-based ceramic artist Malene Barnett as an artist that especially excites her.

Ultimately Atoe's goal is to bring the creativity and intentionality of handmade crafts to everyday rituals. She wants her pots to be used, not to be put on a pedestal. She wants them to fit into our modern lifestyles. I believe the world right now, in these uncertain times of turmoil and chaos, can certainly gain a lot from increased intention on the handcrafted alongside a healthy dose of focus on the rituals of our everyday lives.

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1 All quotes from the artist are from an interview between the artist and author on May 19, 2020.
2 Carl Schuster & Edmund Carpenter, *Patterns That Connect: Social Symbolism in Ancient & Tribal Art*, Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, New York, 1996.



7 Pair of pinched mugs, 4½ in. (11 cm) in height, mid-range red stoneware, glaze, fired to cone 5, 2020. **8** Teapot, 7 in. (18 cm) in height, handbuilt mid-range red stoneware, glaze, fired to cone 5, 2020. **9** Osa Atoe's garage studio in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Photo: Reagan Labat.