



Intimate Humanity

Ashley Howard reveals the language of drawing for Magdalene Odundo.

Picasso said: 'I paint objects as I think them, not as I see them.' To me, this serves as the key to the world of enlightening and rich dialogue that Magdalene Odundo has created between her drawing and her making.

When I first saw Odundo working on a piece, I was struck by its profile, its line, which demonstrated a flow of purity that I had not seen before. The memory of that line has remained. That the swollen form was incomplete and beginning to taper into a neck, spoke eloquently of the relationship between the internal and external: here was a perfect example of a thin skin, a three-dimensional line enveloping a predetermined chunk of space.

AN EMPHASIS ON REFINEMENT Odundo does not produce bodies of work in isolation. Before embarking on a new one, she draws ideas, producing preliminary sketches that build on what has gone before. It might be argued that this is the obvious starting point

for any creative process, that previous experience will always nourish and inform further development; the result, however, is unique to each artist. For Odundo, the notion of refinement is crucial, and recognising this facilitates an understanding of the historical context for her drawings and pottery.

Odundo has an extraordinary ability to create drawings that bear the graphic quality of an etching or print, yet on closer examination reveal a raw, almost primal immediacy. However these drawings are read, their extraordinarily accomplished purity of line points to Odundo's early training and work in graphics. Odundo recalls the challenge of communicating advertising messages using symbols and logos. The experience illuminates the thinking behind her use of drawing as language, and helps to explain her emphasis on refinement, her obsession with paring down to an essence. This essence is elusive, but Odundo seems comfortable with this: her life and work is very much a journey.

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1 Vessel, graphite and ink drawing, 2010, H119cm 2 Vessel, ink wash, 2010, H119cm
 3 Unfilled, burnished and oxidised terracotta, 1989, H41.5cm (Photo: Jonathan Lynch). Private Collection: Courtesy Anthony Slayter-Ralph 4 Three Figures, life-size ink wash, 2011



The results of Odundo's emphasis on refinement of line and form continue to speak to those with a heightened sense of materials and process

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THE HUMAN QUALITY OF LINE The lines of Odundo's drawings contain shape and form, resembling divisions of the landscape on a map. They define a sense of containment that is nurturing and calm. It is in the lines themselves that the drawing and pottery are most closely related. Odundo believes that she claims a more fulfilled ownership of her pottery through the dialogue she sets up between her drawings and the clay. Those initial ideas, which are invariably a refinement of what has gone before, help to establish a sense of focus.

The subtleties of spoken language are infinite. So too is the drawn line or the resolved pot. But there is a point of departure at which the untrained eye leaves the work. What, then, remains to be discovered, and by whom? The results of Odundo's emphasis on refinement of line and form continue to speak to those with a heightened sense of materials and process. This remarkable effect is not intentionally exclusive; it is the natural progression for the work of an artist who is deeply involved in its intimate humanity.

In *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt claims:

*The reality and reliability of the human world rest primarily on the fact that we are surrounded by things more permanent than the activity by which they were produced, and potentially even more permanent than the lives of their authors.*²

This seems true of Odundo, who is intuitive and very much in the moment when working with charcoal and clay. When the moment has passed, however, she is content to relinquish control

of its outcome, allowing time to do its work.

As a maker, Odundo is content that her drawings and pottery are her means of communicating her language and her humanity to the world. This attitude chimes with that of American pragmatist John Dewey, who in *Art and Experience* said:

*Because objects of art are expressive, they are a language. Rather they are many languages. For each art has its own medium and that medium is especially fitted for one kind of communication. Each medium says something that cannot be uttered as well as or as completely in any other tongue. The needs of daily life have given superior practical importance to one mode of communication, that of speech. This fact has unfortunately given rise to a popular impression that the meanings expressed in architecture, sculpture, painting and music can be translated into words with little if any loss. In fact, each art speaks an idiom that conveys what cannot be said in another language and yet remains the same.*³

THE SPIRIT OF DRAWING Odundo is also committed to life drawing. These drawings depart from the drawings of vessels in that they are far more lively, skittish, and loose. At first it is difficult to identify a connection between the life drawings and her pottery, but the answer lies less in the struggle to bring the two together than in how they are produced and how they relate to Odundo's whole creative process. Drawing, says Odundo, enables her to 'make through the spirit', and 'breathes life into the idea'. The process of using paper enables her mind to wander freely before she is forced



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Footnotes 1 John Golding, *Cubism: A History and an Analysis 1907-1914*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1959), p60 2 Cited in Matthew Crawford, *The Case For Working With Your Hands*, (London: Penguin Press, 2009), p16 3 John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, (Canada: Perigee Books, 1980), p106 4 Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman*, (Yale University Press: 2008), p40

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5 Magdalene Odundo working at Pilchuck Glass School, Washington, 2011 6 *Two Vessels*, graphite and ink drawing, 2010, H119cm 7 *Vessel Series III, No.2*, red clay, carbonised and multi fired, 2005/6, H52.8cm (Photo: David Westwood)

Magdalene Odundo exhibited and spoke at the International Society for Ceramic Art Education and Exchange in Japan, 2011
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to embrace the technical challenges of working with the clay. Odundo believes passionately that drawing underpins and informs her making, and 'gives humanity to the work'. This remark is crucial in terms of her oeuvre. She remembers young children drawing pictures in the sand in her native Kenya. The instinct to draw precedes speech, but is a form of communication that involves what it is to be human. When all else is removed we can still find a way to draw. The transience of a child's drawing in the sand and the transient nature of human life inform Odundo's approach to her drawing and pottery.

In *The Craftsman*, Richard Sennett says:

When CAD [Computer Aided Design] first entered architectural teaching, replacing manual drawing by hand, a young architect at MIT observed that "when you draw a site, when you put in the counter lines and trees, it becomes ingrained in your mind. You come to know the site in a way that is not possible with the computer...You get to know a terrain by tracing and retracing it, not letting the computer 'regenerate' it for you". This is not nostalgia: her observation addresses what gets lost mentally when screen work replaces physical drawing. As in other visual practices, architectural sketches are often pictures of possibility; in the process of crystallising and refining them by hand, the designer proceeds just as a tennis player or musician does, gets deeply involved in it, matures thinking about it. The site, as this architect observes, 'becomes ingrained in the mind'.⁴

Much has been written and published about Magdalene Odundo. She speaks regularly at conferences and seminars around the world. But it is her work, the work she makes alone in her studio that records and transmits the humanity and spirit that connects us all. Odundo is a maker who successfully crosses the boundaries of communication and reminds us what it is to be both an artist and a human being. Her work, once seen, becomes ingrained in the mind. ■

