

Embodying Anew

Simone Leigh, Magdalene Odundo and Thaddeus Mosley

Press View: 6 May 2021, 10am – 1pm

Opening Reception: 6 May 2021, 1 – 8pm

Exhibition Dates: 6 May – 19 June 2021

Maximillian William is proud to present *Embodying Anew* an exhibition of work by Dame Magdalene Odundo DBE OBE, Simone Leigh and Thaddeus Mosley, three artists who engage extensively with international creative practices to synthesize the aesthetics of a vast array of visual traditions within their work. While, like earlier Modernist artists, they engage with the formal elements of vernacular and functional objects from the African continent and diaspora, they reject the condescending ethnographic approach which has tarred the history of African influence on Western art. Instead of decontextualizing their sources, these artists explore and uncover the significance of them, a process which incorporates multiple levels of meaning into their work.

Magdalene Odundo may have started her career with a traditional British studio potter education but has since gone on to assimilate and refine techniques gleaned from her travels, distilling this knowledge into a distinctive approach to her medium. Odundo's sleek rounded vessels might register as purely abstract were it not for the relationship they conjure between the jug and the body of the woman who balances it.

The shape of the water jug is also present in Simone Leigh's corporeal vessels. Her anthropomorphic forms occupy a space between figuration and abstraction which reflects the relationship between the pot and its maker. Her bulbous, bottle-like sculptures can be read in association with the face jug pottery made by nineteenth-century enslaved African Americans in the American South – perhaps the best known being potter and poet David Drake or 'Dave the Potter' – which were believed to have sacred value. Leigh's vast array of references and research creates an expansive practice which brings the echoes of the past into the present.

Thaddeus Mosley animates his weighty materials - great pieces of walnut, cherry and sycamore – into dynamic sculptures. His forms are equally inspired by the thriving jazz scene of his hometown of Pittsburgh, his encounters with the work of internationally renowned artists including Isamu Noguchi and Alberto Giacometti, his collection of art from across the African continent and his admiration of vernacular objects such as the wooden grave markers of Sunbury, Georgia. Like Odundo and Leigh, Mosley is able to create a new sculptural language from seemingly disparate influences.

The works of these three artists expose the overlapping nature of objects traditionally kept apart. Whether labelled as artifact or high art, these three artists appraise all objects in search of artistry, refinement and history, from which they can take inspiration in their own pursuit of form and meaning. Through their abstracted figures, these artists propose what a more fully global history of form might look like.

For further press information please contact:

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Notes to Editors

The exhibition will be accompanied by a publication featuring a newly commissioned scholarly text by Lauren DeLand, Professor of Art History, University of Minnesota.

Simone Leigh (b. USA, 1967) makes work which is defined by a combination of materials—such as clay, bronze, and raffia—traditionally associated with African art, yet which draw from a global array of references. Leigh’s work manifests the experiences and social histories of subjects often omitted from colonial narratives in a kind of autoethnography that is equally attuned to individual perspectives and collective structures. While her ongoing project is broadly concerned with the epistemologies of black women, her figures extend beyond the representational, and result from extended research into her materials and their histories. Leigh will represent the US at the Venice Biennale in 2022 and her 2019 sculpture, *Brick House* will remain on view at New York’s High Line through Spring 2021.

Dame Magdalene Odundo DBE OBE (b. Kenya, 1950) is internationally recognized for her elegant and evocative vessels that straddle the gap between abstraction and subtle figuration. Odundo’s pots are not thrown but built, she uses her fingertips to shape the clay, in a process known as coiling. Her pots are then smoothed, polished, and covered in slip before being fired, giving them their distinctive black and orange markings. Her work features prominently in the permanent collections of the British Museum, London; the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Cooper-Hewitt Smithsonian Design Museum, New York; the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art, Washington D.C.; and the Art Institute of Chicago. Odundo’s works will be on view in London at the Royal Academy as part of *Michael Armitage - Paradise Edict*, 22 May – 19 September 2021

Thaddeus Mosley (b. USA, 1926) is a self-taught artist whose monumental sculptures are crafted from the felled trees of Pittsburgh’s urban canopy, via the city’s Forestry Division; wood from local sawmills; and reclaimed building materials. Using only a mallet and chisel, he reworks salvaged timber into biomorphic forms. With influences ranging from Isamu Noguchi to Constantin Brâncuși—and the Bamum, Dogon, Baoulé, Senufo, Dan, and Mossi works of his personal collection—Mosley’s sculptures mark an inflection point in the history of American abstraction. These “sculptural improvisations,” as he calls them, take cues from the modernist traditions of jazz. Mosley was commissioned for the 2020 edition of Frieze Sculpture at Rockefeller Center, New York and will have a solo exhibition at the Baltimore Museum of Art in Autumn 2021. This will be Mosley’s first presentation in the United Kingdom.

Maximillian William was founded in 2015 with an itinerant model which allowed the gallery to gradually form a roster of contemporary artists. An impulse to expand alongside the advancing careers of these artists led to the establishment of a permanent gallery space in Fitzrovia in 2019. The gallery is artist centric, collaborating closely with those it supports to build their platforms. On occasion, the gallery seeks to produce exhibitions which highlight those who have influenced its creative community, with the aim of presenting pivotal figures to a new generation. Alongside exhibition making, the gallery is committed to publishing, producing a range of publications from artist books to exhibition catalogues and monographs. The distribution of literature is key to the gallery’s commitment to improving accessibility to contemporary art. Publications by the gallery are held in the archives of MoMA and Tate.

Exhibition Design: OK-RM, Exhibition Furniture: Theodore Vass, and Photography: Lewis Roland.

With thanks to Lauren DeLand for her invaluable curatorial support.

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