



# BREAKING THE MOLD

As one of the oldest human inventions pottery has links to ancestry across the globe. Yet like the various countries in which prehistoric vessels are found, every potter's origin story is uniquely shaped. Some are led by spirit, some rooted in technique and others driven by artistic expression. Nevertheless, the shared ritual of forming, firing and finishing creates an unspoken kinship. Take note as HANNAH talks inspiration, art versus craft and creative process with three trendsetters in ceramics, so aligned they unknowingly name-drop one another.

Photo courtesy of Delphine Diallo





Photo courtesy of Lyudmila Zotova

# DENISE MCKENZIE-LEE

ENKEE CERAMICS  
Portland, Oregon, by way of Cincinnati, Ohio

*You started Enkee Ceramics after receiving a gift certificate to a pottery class. Is Enkee a passion project for you, or a career?*

Enkee Ceramics started as a hobby that is quickly morphing into a small business. I was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 2011. Pottery has allowed me to focus on living a creative life, using my brain in a different way. To find joy in making and not to focus on what I can't control.

*Before you began working with ceramics, what were your other artistic outlets? Are you still engaged in those practices?*

I have a Bachelor of Science in fashion design. I did some work as a pattern maker, visual merchandiser. I also received my cosmetology license and was a natural hair stylist for a few years.

*What is the significance of the word Enkee?*

I love the color black. I wear it almost exclusively. And I love being Black, so I looked up synonyms for black. Inky stood out. I played around with the spelling and finally decided that I liked how it looked written. I tweaked the pronunciation to (on-key) because it added a bit more depth.

*Describe your creative process. Do you make your serveware with specific dishes/food in mind?*

My process begins with choosing the clay body, then deciding on the item. I try to allow myself some days of freestyling. That is where I'm truly creative. I like to add different textures to give my work dimension. I find myself thinking how would a food stylist use this piece and that informs how I style them.

*What inspires your color palette?*

Initially when I got into pottery my colorway was matte white, matte black, and matte grey...all colors that food stylists love and

play well with other colors. Lately I have been adding some pops of color and it really brings energy to a table setting. I like having a color palette that customers can build upon in their own way season to season.

*If you were to venture out of serveware, what would you create?*

I plan to work on some art pieces combining fiber and ceramics, like wall hangings...maybe even lamps.

*Anyone you look to as inspiration?*

Dina Nur Satti of Nur Ceramics. I love the quiet elegance of her aesthetic. I also love Roberto Lugo; deeply complex work.

*Can you name some artists in other fields who inspire you?*

Jean-Michel Basquiat...still. Tina Chow, I love me some her. Her design vibe and her jewelry captured my attention when I was in college. Romanian artist Brâncusi. And Kehinde Wiley.

*Do you see your work as art, craft or both? Do you feel that function diminishes or enhances the value of art?*

I see my work as functional ware that brings an artistic vibe to your table. I believe that what your eyes rest upon in your home should be beautiful to you. It feels so much more special to eat off of a beautiful plate.

*Clay can do a number on your hands between constant washing and the residue it leaves. What products are you loving for keeping your hands moisturized nowadays?*

I use a whole lot of coconut oil and some hand creams from Lush. I also always wear gloves, except when working on the pottery wheel, to protect my hands from the chemicals.

# DINA NUR SATTI

## NUR CERAMICS

*Sudanese/Somali, raised in Paris and Nairobi. Lives in Sierra Foothills, CA by way of New York City*

*Before you began working with ceramics, did you have another artistic outlet? If so, are you still engaged in that practice?*

My artistic outlet for years was dance, which I didn't start until I was in college in NYC when I did a work-study at an African dance studio. I like to think that dance has informed by relationship with pottery. So much of my ceramic process is based on feeling, which is something that gets developed through dance. You learn to reflect the visual equivalent of an emotion or rhythm in your body in a sort of exercise in synesthesia. When I'm working with the clay on the wheel, there is a certain rhythm created by the wheel spinning, and when I tune into it my hands move to that rhythm.

*Do you use any of the skills you mastered while working in development, with running your business? If so, which ones?*

The years that I spent working on development challenged me to learn how to relate to people even if there was no clear point of connection. Most of my work required me to interface with donors, which teaches you a lot about putting any ego aside and doing everything you can to accommodate someone other than yourself. It also taught me a lot around the concept of managing expectations and to under promise and over deliver. So much of my business is based on personal relationships with customers and buyers, so these skills are invaluable to my daily business operations.

*In your Vagabond Journals' interview you mention Marla C. Berns' article and her concept of "high art" versus "low craft." Stepping aside from her focus on gender bias, art versus craft is an age-old debate. Do you see your work as art, craft or both? Do you feel that function diminishes or enhances the value of art?*

If you look at art throughout history and culture, for the most part, art and function went hand-in-hand. Function can take many tangible and intangible forms, so that someone looking at the painstaking details of plasterwork on an Andalusian mosque may think it as ostentatious. Although, the plasterwork detail did not have a direct physical function, it served a more subtle intention to inspire awe in the mosque's devotees, and convey an element of the divine. In the same vein, some people may look at a decorative piece and judge it as having no function. However, if the piece brings an element of tranquility and inspiration, it too serves a function. The difference between art and craft can be so subtle and, in many cases, a piece can serve both functions. I think that in our society, we tend to look at something that exists only to be admired and not touched as more valuable, and therefore it becomes 'high art.' While I was studying the politics, history, and culture of Africa and the Middle East in college, I took a course in African Art History where I learned that artifacts that are considered traditional African art were actually functional pieces that were an integral part of these societies' operations. There were of course certain ceremonial or sacred items that might have been reserved for particular rites or times of the year, but even then, they too served a function. When I think of my ceramics, I can't really make a distinction between craft and art, and see them as existing in both spaces.

*Your collection is mainly tableware and accents. Is there anything you haven't made that you're planning to venture into?*

I have always been infatuated with large storage amphorae from around the world that are hand-built using large coils. It fascinates me that all across the world, the indigenous techniques of building these are more or less the same. I'm hoping to travel to East or West Africa or Southeast Asia in the near future to learn these techniques. It's a skill that takes years to master, but the magnitude of what one person can build is truly astounding.

*Your work is very personal to you. You've described it as a calling, something you feel divinely led to and a carrying on of tradition. Does that have an affect on the ways you navigate the business side of having your own ceramics line?*

I treat my art like a practice. It's a space in which many areas of my personal development are intertwined. It's a platform where I am invited to work in a kind of meditation when creating with clay. Like I was accessing and unlocking pre-existing knowledge in my hands, and inviting me to reconnect in a new way to my cultural heritage.

When it comes to my business, one of the ongoing pieces that I am continuously challenged to figure out is how to build a business that can support this unique way that I create, so I have been exploring the possibility of focusing on one-off pieces as opposed to production pieces.

I think proclaiming a mantle of 'carrying on a tradition' is something I don't align with in the context of my journey. People may assume that because my work is inspired by my cultural heritage that I am automatically striving to preserve my cultures' ceramics traditions. However, growing up outside of my respective cultures, I have many other influences, which is evident in the modern aesthetic and styling of my work. I find that my cultural heritage informs my art but does not define it.

*Are there any Black or Brown women in ceramics today, who you look to as an inspiration?*

Magdalene Odundo's work for her dedication to learning traditional hand building techniques from Nigeria and Kenya as well as Pueblo pottery, and incorporating this knowledge into her own distinct contemporary style. The clean lines and forms of her work are incredibly inspiring. I love Kenesha Sneed's ceramics not only because they are beautifully made, but because it's clear that they are an extension of her. The unique design of her pieces and the curation of her aesthetic are a shining example of a ceramic artist that isn't following trends but rather putting into the world their own distinct creative vision.

*Can you name some artists in other fields who inspire you?*

Lina Iris Viktor and FKA Twigs, two exceptional Black female artists that are creating at the intersection of many art forms and cultures.

Photo courtesy of Delphine Diallo





Photo courtesy of Ben Tetro

## KENESHA SNEED

### TACTILE MATTER

From Palmdale, CA. Residing in Altadena, CA

*When did you begin illustrating? What tools/materials do you use? What programs do you use to illustrate digitally?*

I began when I was a kid. You'd always find me drawing and painting, so it's always been an outlet as well as a way to express myself creatively. In 2005, I attended art school in Los Angeles and after graduating in 2009 from the digital design program, I started working at motion design studios. In the few years of working as a designer I really started developing a style and deeper love for illustrating. Now I balance both illustration and ceramics independently. When I'm painting traditionally, I'll use a mix of gouache, pencils, watercolor and have been getting more into oils. My digital tool-box consists of Photoshop and Illustrator.

*You've talked about the importance of your illustrations showing positive images of women of color. Growing up, who were some Black women you looked up to, whether creatively or in general?*

Oprah was a huge role model during my childhood, and still is today. And I'll always look to my mother as an inspiration... she's taught me so much about how to truly look within and navigate through life the best I can.

*Many of your prints have a similar color palette and feel. Are these scenes from your childhood or is this a place you have imagined?*

The more I've designed over the years, the more I've developed a style that I enjoy as well as selecting color palettes I feel complement my work. I always try to come from a place that feels authentic to who I am, not putting too much pressure on the work itself. Highlighting women of color is what I'm most drawn to illustrating, I feel it's so important to show representation through art and it's a fun creative challenge mixing different shades and tones for each piece.

*Ceramics started out as a hobby for you, what other hobbies have you had/do you have?*

Anything from photography, embroidery, knitting, dying, the list goes on...I've always enjoyed trying new things, it really helps to translate thoughts and keep me inspired.

*You've said that art can keep you sane. As a working artist, how do you draw the line between art as vocation, and art as self-care?*

I try as much as possible to make self-fulfilling work whether it be for myself or clients. Finding the balance isn't always easy, there's some projects that you just don't connect with or can be mentally draining. It's always worth taking the time to make work that you feel passionate about, even at my busiest times I try to take a moment to paint, sketch, write or just pause to collect my thoughts. I've found that the more I take time for myself, the more I enjoy the work I create.

*Can you walk us through your process when working with clay? Do you start out knowing exactly what you're making?*

No matter what, I'll plan ahead by sketching out ideas. From there, there's a list of steps in making each piece, firing, packaging, shipping. And this doesn't include the commerce and correspondence side of it all. It takes a lot of dedication to make each piece come together.

*Your collaboration with Saint Heron last year included tableware but also jewelry. Is there anything you haven't made that you're planning to venture into?*

I'd love to keep experimenting with sculpture and different forms. For illustration, I always enjoy collabs and working with prints so that's something I'm always looking forward to doing more of.

*Do you see your work as art, craft or both? Do you feel that function diminishes or enhances the value of art?*

I feel art and craftsmanship can ride safely in the same lane. I really don't put my work into any specific category. I'd say just enjoy what it is you're creating and that's plenty enough.

*What products are you loving for keeping your hands moisturized nowadays?*

I'm obsessed with products that have all natural oils and of course shea butter. I enjoy Folie Apothecary, Balm & Co. & Moon Nectar Apothecary, Joshica Beauty and Body Butter Lady. ■