

ceramics

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THE COOKOUT

Radical Equity in Action

by Yinka Orafidiya

“This residency was, for me, a rebirth and recommitment of my work further ignited by the camaraderie of working with other Black artists,” said Edna Knox-Davin, who was recommended for The Cookout by renowned artist Winnie Owens-Hart. “I feel like we, as Black artists, have created a safe space, a family, where we will always be a part of each other’s creative life.”

In the summer of 2023, OYA Studio (pronounced “Oh Yah”) invited fourteen Black ceramic artists to participate in a two-week wood-fire residency and retreat at the Hambidge Center in Rabun Gap, Georgia.

OYA Studio

OYA Studio launched through a GoFundMe campaign in October 2021 and the very next year welcomed its first long-term resident artist, acquired its first artwork for the permanent collection, and debuted its first exhibition, a show that featured over twenty Black ceramic artists in the Philadelphia region in which OYA’s physical studio space is located.



1 Freshly unloaded wood-fired pots. Photo: Hambidge Center staff. 2 The Cookout residents and friends celebrating Juneteenth with a potluck dinner. Photo: Addis Alemu.



3 The Cookout 2023 artists (left to right). Seated: Sharon Norwood, Stefani Threet, Dom Venzant, Edna Knox-Davin. Middle row: Ife Williams, Kemi Schleicher, Angelique Scott, Addis Alemu, Diana Adams. Top row: Johnnie Bess, Rich Brown, Yinka Orafidiya, Wayne Perry, April Adewole. Photo: Photophobic Images.

Radical equity is the driving force behind the organization, whose mission is to amplify Black ceramic artists and become custodians to the definitive collection of their artwork. In its second year, OYA Studio increased its presence within the ceramics field by hosting events at the National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts (NCECA) conference and also expanded its programming, which included organizing The Cookout residency.

Intention and Connection

In planning this groundbreaking program, Juneteenth had always been the natural choice for when The Cookout would occur. In Black American culture, a cookout is as ubiquitous in summertime as hot dogs on the 4th of July. As there are numerous rituals and cultural traditions associated with these social food gatherings, what better time for Black ceramic artists to meet up than over Juneteenth, the national holiday on which we celebrate our freedom?

The Cookout was designed as a predominately self-directed ceramics residency, but we also intentionally centered the program around a communal wood firing to facilitate connections between the participants because, as many of us clay folks can attest, there's nothing like stoking flames for 60 hours to make fast friends out of strangers.

Fostering cross-generational bonds between Black ceramic artists is a core value of the OYA Studio. We believe that networking

across generational lines is both invaluable and mutually beneficial to artists' professional goals. Hence, when Bobby Scroggins, practicing ceramic artist and professor of ceramics and sculpture at the University of Kentucky, pulled up, we made certain to emphasize how his presence marked four generations of Black ceramic artists who attended The Cookout.

Although we already had a sense of how special The Cookout was going to be, with over 40 years of experience working in clay, Scroggins' arrival made that feeling all the more palpable. "This was a historic event," Scroggins said. "It might be the first time in this century that a group of Black American ceramic artists and crafters coalesced to do a wood firing."

Aside from the 2–3 Hambidge staff members who are essential to day-to-day operations, everyone on campus during The Cookout was Black. In and of itself, that was one of the most pivotal aspects of this residency program, which ensured a safe affinity space for the artists to connect and create. Attracting Black artists is often a challenge for predominantly white institutions (PWI) that fail to recognize that Black artists are never 100% at ease in spaces where their identity is marginalized or not represented at all.

Thus, in co-signing the program's full campus take-over design, the Hambidge Center helped to remove a primary source of racial inequity, which afforded ceramic artists at The Cookout the rare opportunity to relax fully, create freely, and be wholly themselves in this PWI's residency space.



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4 Johnnie Bess processing local wild clay. Photo: Kemi Schleicher. 5 Diana Adams' wood-fired pots. 6 Stefani Threet handbuilding in the communal ceramics studio. Photo: Hambidge Center staff.

For many participants, The Cookout was their first experience as an artist-in-residence. Several socioeconomic factors can impede an artist's ability to attend a residency program, but the reality is that Black and Indigenous artists are disproportionately affected by these challenges in comparison to their white counterparts and other artists of color.

However, thanks to generous support from the Hambidge Center, sponsorship by Amaco-Brent, and more than \$7000 in crowdfunded donations, we were able to partially alleviate the financial burden for the invited artists, which helped facilitate their participation. In this inaugural year of The Cookout, all residency fees (meals, housing, firing costs) were covered and in the future, we hope to attract even more support in order to help artists cover their travel, materials, and shipping expenses.

Location

The Cookout residency program was presented in partnership with the Hambidge Center and took place on their secluded 600-acre campus in the mountains of Georgia. Supporting artists from across a variety of disciplines since 1934, Hambidge is one of the oldest artist communities in the US. Their traditional residency is a 2- to 8-week experience that includes dinner four days per week and private accommodations in one of nine rustic live/work studios, ranging from 500 to 1500 square feet in size.

Cell phone service disappears a few miles before you reach the Hambidge campus. There is no wi-fi in the artist studios, so residents can only be directly contacted by calling the landline telephone with which each of these private live/workspaces is equipped. Consequently, a unique aspect of the Hambidge experience is being forced to unplug from the real world, affording resident artists distraction-free time for rest, rejuvenation, and creative exploration.

Yinka Orafidiya, socially engaged ceramic artist and founder of the OYA Studio, experienced this firsthand as a Hambidge resident artist in 2022. During this time, she learned that Ife Williams, ceramic artist and deputy director of the Hambidge Center, was desiring to host Black artists on campus in commemoration of the Juneteenth holiday. It was then and there that Orafidiya pitched the concept for The Cookout, and the rest, as they say, is history.

The Artists' Experience

After accepting their invitation to The Cookout, each artist produced a body of cone-10 work (about 40–50 pieces) in their respective studios in preparation for the wood firing and were responsible for getting themselves and their bisque-fired ceramics to Hambidge. In addition to identifying as Black, the artists who came from various regions across the US, also reflected an array of gender identities, ages, and experiences working in clay.

Artists spent the first few days of The Cookout settling into their living accommodations and the communal ceramics studio. Outside of their designated time tending to the wood kiln, artists could continue to make new work as they had 24/7 access to the ceramics studio.

Day four of the residency was spent loading the wood kiln. Artists unpacked their bisqueware and glazed work under tents set up adjacent to the wood kiln. One artist, Dom Venzant, a recipient of the NCECA Emerging Artist award in 2021, demonstrated how



to place wadding effectively and decorate strategically to encourage dynamic interactions between the flame, ash, and ceramic surfaces during the firing. Possessing 15–20 years of experience building and firing atmospheric kilns, Venzant attended The Cookout in the dual role of resident artist and chief fire master responsible for leading the rest of the group through the firing process.

For some, The Cookout was their first encounter with wood firing, but regardless of their experience level with the process, for all of us, it was the first time participating in a wood firing with all Black artists. Reflecting on her time at The Cookout, Philadelphia-based artist and ceramic gallery owner Stefani Threet expressed, “This was my first time working in a ceramics environment where I wasn’t the only one of two people of color in a white-dominated space. No guards or boundaries were necessary . . . There was an eagerness, excitement, and enthusiasm to work around so many African-American potters whose work I admired and to learn that they, too, were admirers of my work. The cross-generational aspect created a mentor/mentee environment where I felt I had a lot to offer and also so much to learn.”

Logistically, of course, it was just like any other wood firing. Over the course of 12 hours, we loaded the kiln together, taking turns to squat-walk into the anagama to place the posts and stack the shelves. Like always, there were the artists who glazed meticulously and clamored to get their work in the kiln’s sweet spots, juxtaposed with the artists who didn’t care where their work was placed as long as it got into the kiln eventually. The person kneeling inside the kiln would call out “More five-inch narrow things!” or whatever configuration was needed to complete the stack, and the rest of us would search for the most suitable pieces, gingerly passing them to be loaded onto the shelf.



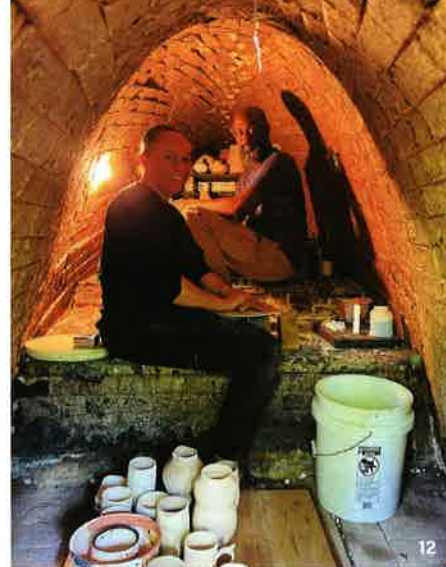
7 Wayne Perry throwing pots in the communal ceramics studio. 8 Dom Venzant displaying a newly unloaded wood-fired piece by Bobby Scroggins. 9 Addis Alemu decorating pots outside the communal ceramics studio. 7-9 Photos: Hambidge Center staff.



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10 April Adewole monitoring the chimney flame after adjustments were made to the kiln. 11 Kemi Schleicher displaying a newly unloaded wood-fired piece by Sharon Norwood. Photo: Addis Alemu. 12 Ife Williams and Rich Brown loading the anagama kiln. 13 Other residents watching as Johnnie Bess (standing) and Dom Venzant (squatting) brick up the kiln door. 14 Works from the wood firing by Yinka Orafidiya, Rich Brown, Ife Williams, and Wayne Perry. 10, 12-14 Photos: Hambidge Center staff.

Wood Firing

Indeed, in some respects, we essentially performed the same routine you would see at any communal wood firing, but this was not any ordinary firing. This was our firing.

As fire master, Venzant spread his time across all work shifts to reinforce safety rules and answer technical questions about the process. His generous spirit and patient exchange of knowledge empowered every participant to feel ownership in firing the kiln. It cannot be overstated how powerful it was to witness an all-Black cohort of Hambidge residents take turns nurturing the flame and assuming command of the wood kiln. The laborious nature of the work was offset by easy vibes, excitement, and comradery. We played our music and shared our stories. We split into four 6-hour work shifts to cover the firing schedule, and some light-hearted smack-talking ensued as each group (*ahem* . . . albeit some more than others) boasted about temperature gains and key milestones achieved during their shift.

The official Juneteenth celebration began shortly before midnight on June 19th, when the wood kiln reached its target temperature. Sleep was elusive that night as we down fired for a few hours, then sat by the last few glowing embers of the bricked-up kiln, buzzing with joy, pride, and anticipation. We talked about what everyone was planning to make for the Juneteenth potluck dinner and cracked jokes about whose food would be under-seasoned or

who would dare mess up the potato salad. We waxed poetic about the banality of what we were doing in the woods of rural Georgia in the middle of the night in stark contrast to what our ancestors would have been doing there a mere few centuries ago. This was freedom to us . . . we all felt free.

After three long days of cooling, it was finally time to open the kiln and revel in the collective achievement of a successful firing. The results spoke for themselves. No, The Cookout was not just another firing. It was our firing, and together, we did that!

An exhibition of wood-fired ceramics from The Cookout will be on view March 20–22 during the 2024 NCECA conference in Richmond, Virginia. For sponsorship inquiries and to support OYA Studio's radical equity initiatives, including The Cookout II, scheduled for June 2024, please contact admin@oyastudio.org or see [@theoyastudio](https://www.instagram.com/theoyastudio) on Instagram and www.oyastudio.org.

the author Yinka Orafidiya (*shelthey*) is a primarily self-taught socially engaged ceramic artist based in Philadelphia. She has received a number of recognitions for her work and has completed artists residencies across the US and internationally. She is the founder and current CEO of the OYA Studio, a ceramics residency & archival space for Black artists.