



ALL FIRED UP

King Houndekpinkou's other-worldly ceramic art connects Japanese craft, African Voodoo and pop culture

PHOTOGRAPHY: ALEXANDRE GUIRKINGER WRITER: MINAKO NORIMATSU



Benin in West Africa and Japan in the Far East. Ancestral pottery and space-age video games. King Houndekpinkou, an emerging ceramic artist based in Paris, pulls together these seemingly disparate influences to create sculptures characterised by bursts of bold colour, playful spikes and cracked surfaces. They are not indebted to any style or school, but instead reflect his background and perspective: a life defined by happy accidents.

Of Beninese origin, Houndekpinkou, 34, was born and raised in the suburbs of Paris. As a video game-

Above, photographed in June 2021, some of the 40 ceramic works King Houndekpinkou is currently creating for his next solo show, 'Dans Mon Jardin...', at Paris' Galerie Vallois

Opposite, the ceramic artist in his studio in Antony, a southern suburb of Paris

obsessed kid, he developed a fascination for Japan's pop culture. 'My favourite was *Zelda* for its colours and motion graphics. I also loved the solution-seeking side of the games. For me, Nintendo also meant getting to spend time with my cousin, who was my playmate,' recalls the ceramist. Today, his creative universe still feeds off this childhood passion: he is fond of dynamic forms, eye-popping colours and human connection.

Houndekpinkou made his first trip to Japan when he was 22. There he stumbled upon traditional ceramics, which sparked his curiosity. Back in Paris, »

Right, one of the artist's latest creations, this untitled sculpture features multiple layers of glaze and is made of a mix of clays collected in Sè (Benin), Iowa (US), and Bizen and Tamba (Japan)

Below, Houndekpinkou kneads the clay for hours to remove any air bubbles, like a baker preparing a perfect dough



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he trained with a Japanese ceramics teacher, Kayoko Hayasaki. While accompanying Hayasaki to central France for a project with Japanese ceramicists, he met the ceramics master Toshiaki Shibuta, whom he now refers to as his spiritual father. 'I was drawn to the animist rituals they practised. They prayed to the "kiln god", drank sake, heaped up salt and scattered flowers to ward off evil, so that the firing of their ceramics would go well,' explains the artist. 'Our countries are 13,000km apart, but what a resemblance! Shintoism and African Voodoo share a strong connection to nature. Our rituals are about humility.'

Following this epiphany, Houndekpinkou made a second trip to Japan, this time to Bizen, home to one of the oldest kilns in the country. Since then, ceramics has become a medium for interrogating his identity and his roots; his 2016 *Terres Jumelles* (Twin Soils) project uses ceramics to foster cross-cultural dialogue between Benin and Japan. Each year, he travels to both countries, bringing back to Paris a bit of soil from each location that he blends into a hybrid clay. 'The

nature of clay – whether it is soft or sturdy, or what its mineral content is – depends on its geographical origin. I recognise each variety by its colour and texture.' The artist experiments with different 'cocktails' of clay until he arrives at a formula that suits his purpose. 'If I want something sturdy, I opt for sandy clay, which absorbs thermal shock. Touching the soil with my fingers, I feel so peaceful, spiritual and playful,' he says.

His sculptures have ranged from huge vessels to more complex compositions. For example, using an upturned bowl as a base, he uses clay to attach more bowls, cups and handles to it, creating an evolutionary form of pottery. 'I assemble functional pieces to become sculptures.' While the Mingei movement, an influential force within Japanese culture, is based on finding beauty in daily and utilitarian objects, Houndekpinkou instead elevates them to another dimension.

One of Houndekpinkou's signatures is an inventive use of glaze. 'I was inspired by dripping liquid on a Voodoo altar,' he explains, showing a few dozen pots of pigment and notebooks full of his own recipes. »

