

## Conversation with Ceramic Sculptor

Nasser Abdelwasie



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*Today's guest is Nasser Abdelwasie, a ceramic sculptor, pottery instructor, painter and grassroots football coach who, with his distinctively understated style, has now joined the ranks of up-and-coming Eritrean artists. Almost all of his ceramic sculptures, from the largest vases to the smallest candle holders, represent some form of a vessel. Their intricate designs, however, show that they are finished using a range of techniques. Energetic and cheerful, Nasser discusses his art and shares with us the highlights and challenges of his adventurous artistic journey,*

***Were you interested in pottery from a young age?***

No, though I'd always had an artistic disposition – I sketched and painted through all my years in school. But I don't recall having any interest in pottery or ceramics at that age. I was mostly a dabbler and a tinkerer. You could say I liked keeping my hands busy and active. Once, when I was a kid, I watched a technician fix our TV, and the next time it was broken, I fixed it myself.

As far as I can remember, I was crazy about football. I still am. But due to an injury, I couldn't go on to play professionally. However, I didn't sever ties with the sport because soon afterwards, I got involved with a grassroots program of coaching children with special needs, and continue to do so to this day.



**Nasser Abdelwasi**

***Is that challenging?***

Only until the kids get comfortable with you. I had taken a brief course in coaching children with disabilities or special needs so I was able to manage fine. Most of the time, in my experience at least, the key is to keep their needs in mind but to otherwise treat them like regular kids. I found that this fostered a sense of responsibility and confidence in them. A few years ago, I volunteered to show them the basics of pottery. Playing with clay helps to calm the children as well as to engage and strengthen the muscles of their hands. Pottery is a very haptic art and, when practiced regularly, it can be extremely therapeutic.

***You're also a pottery teacher. How do you feel about teaching? Does it take time from your art?***

No, not at all. I enjoy it immensely. It's so strange that this is how my life has turned out because I was an absolute football fanatic. I wanted to be a football player. I was sure I wasn't going to be anything else. But besides allowing me to

impart my love and knowledge of this craft to young artists, teaching is also a great way for me to refine my technique.



***How many exhibitions have you put on so far?***

Aside from the joint exhibition I had with Asmait Tekie last summer, I have never held an exhibition of my work, either collaborative or solo. I regularly participated in festivals, bazaars, carnivals and Independence Day parades but haven't yet done a proper exhibition.

***Why not?***

I'm not sure. I'm usually encouraging my students to collaborate and work towards exhibiting their art. I think my problem is that if someone really liked my piece, I'm sure I would be tempted to give it to them as a gift. [Laughs]

But exhibiting your work is undoubtedly important. It brings you into contact with like-minded people, creates a situation in which you are exposed to the tastes, trends, and styles of audiences and other artists alike, and that is where creativity sparks fly. For an artist, this is invaluable.

***Then you have plans to showcase your work in the future?***

Yes! I have an exhibition scheduled for the summer of 2024.

***What's the most challenging aspect of making ceramic sculptures?***

Drying the pieces at the right temperature and for exactly the right amount of time because if either quantity exceeds the precise limit, the vase or the sculpture will become too brittle and start to crack. For some time now, I've been challenging myself to make larger and larger pieces, but the added weight requires longer to dry and the sculpture would start to slowly collapse. That's been a persistent problem with my projects.



***You said you weren't initially interested in making pottery. What drove you to it?***

There was a curious incident in Sawa that pointed me in that direction. It was during tactical training. We were learning something at camp and I just happened to look down and see a short, thick piece of wood lying there. I don't remember why I did it, but I picked it up and started to carve it with a sharp-edged rock. Using my own hand as a model, I carved it into a hand. I discovered then that I really enjoyed carving pieces out. Even now, I don't press most of the impressions on my sculptures. I carve them out. It's not easy, and you're always on the lookout for more refined tools to achieve an accurate shape or silhouette. But it's invigorating. From early on, the creative and innovative sides of art have always

interested me. I want to learn more and deepen my knowledge of this craft, but I also try to limit outside influences so I can maintain my originality.



***Of all the arts, why are you into pottery?***

Well, people often forget that pottery is an ancient art. I'm especially fascinated by its historic and cultural place in our society. Earthenware continues to feature in our daily life. Pottery is one of the oldest, and, therefore, the most traditional crafts in Eritrea.

But I also love the art form. Using your bare hands to mold a lump of clay into a delicate, beautiful shape is just magical.

***And finally, what is the reason behind your particular style?***

I'm often asked why I leave my sculptures unpainted. You know the aged look of pots and potsherds excavated from archaeological sites? I like that look. The earthy, faded terra-cotta color is enchanting. It's how our ancient artisans made pottery. In understanding this, I become aware of the traditions of this craft that is passed down to me and I am careful to preserve them. That's why I design my ceramics in such a way as to retain their natural color.

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