



## Art | Roberto Lugo Sculpts a Sobering Argument for Black Lives Matter

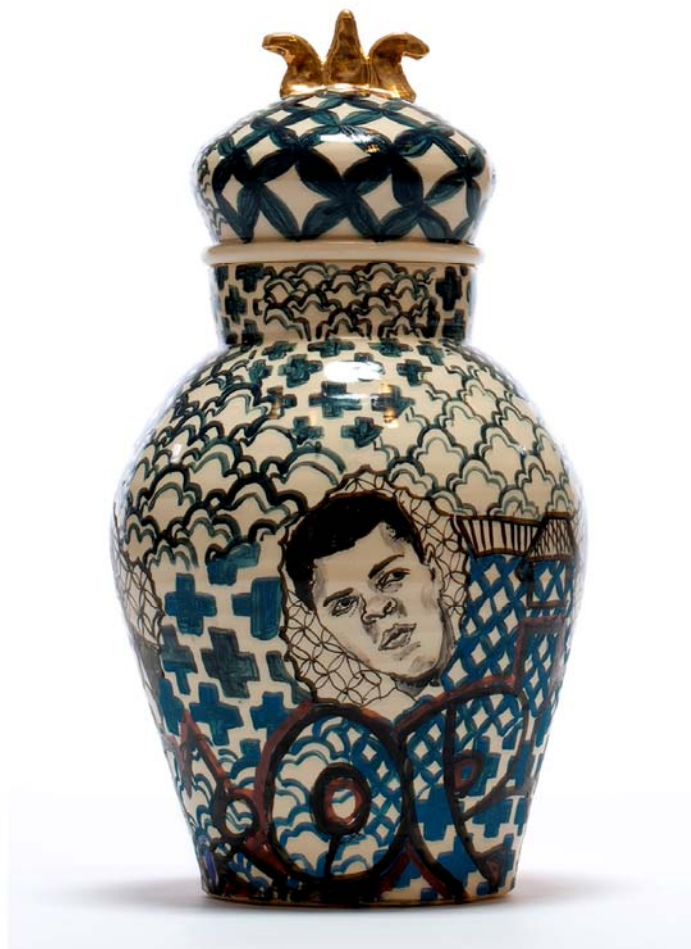
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**PHILADELPHIA** — Potter Roberto Lugo, armed with his wheel “This Machine Kills Hate,” makes socially conscious pottery that takes its visual vocabulary from graffiti art. If you’re not acquainted with this talent yet, please take a moment to read some of our other posts about Lugo. In particular, we’re big fans of his [emerging artist address](#) at NCECA from about a year ago. Not only is his work unique, it’s accompanied by a passionate voice that articulates the concepts that drive it.

*Above image: Roberto Lugo, 40 Cooler 4, 2016, porcelain and china paint, 9 1/2 x 9 1/2 x 6 1/2 inches*

*Today my graffiti is defacing social inequality I teach communities to make mosaic murals to honor victims of gun violence. I see my pottery as a process of transforming the ground we walk on into something we eat from; we search all day for the perfect spot to put it on display. In many ways this transformation of tragedy into triumph is a metaphor for my life's story.*

*My experiences as an indigent minority inform my version of Puerto Rican American history. With my education in critical theory, art education, art history, and studio art I have developed a studio practice that fluidly communicates with diverse audiences. I bring art to those that do not believe they need to see it and engage in deeper ways of knowing, learning and thinking.*



*Roberto Lugo, Homage to Them, 2016; porcelain, china paint and luster, 10 x 10 x 19 inches.*

We have some [new work](#) of Lugo's to show you today. Some of it is joyful, some of it is harder to swallow. *Homage to Them* (2016) is a work of gratitude, adorned with portraits of Muhammad Ali, President Obama and Dr. Cornel West (his head emerging from some decoration like he's peeking out at us from behind a cloud). There's a thread running through many of these pieces

that feels celebratory, even fanboy-ish. I'm thinking in particular of the amazing plates featuring rappers from the Wu Tang Clan. The portraits sit in the center of the plate and detailed decoration surrounds them as though GZA, Ugod and Ghostface Killah are radiating cosmic energy.



*(Left) Roberto Lugo, Portrait Plate: Maya Angelou, 2015; porcelain, glaze and ceramic decal, 11 x 1 inches. (Right) Roberto Lugo, Portrait Plate: Ghostface Killah, 2015; porcelain, glaze and ceramic decal, 11 x 1 inches*



*(Left) Roberto Lugo, Portrait Plate: Ugod, 2015; porcelain, glaze and ceramic decal, 11 x 1 inches. (Right) Roberto Lugo, Portrait Plate: Method Man, 2015; porcelain, glaze and ceramic decal, 11 x 1 inches*



*A Century of Black Lives Mattering* (2016), referencing the black community's ongoing fight against police brutality, is more grim. The portraits here are of those who were killed by law enforcement officers and racist vigilantes. [Eric Garner](#) (whose last words were "I can't breathe" as the police choked him to death on a crowded street in 2014) is the standout picture here.



*Roberto Lugo, A Century of Black Lives Mattering, 2016; porcelain, china paint and luster, 13 x 12 x 16 1/4 inches.*

On the reverse side of the jar is Trayvon Martin, who was shot to death by "neighborhood watch volunteer" George Zimmerman in 2013. The thing that hit hardest on this work is how young Trayvon Martin looks next to the rest of the victims. He's a skinny, even gawky, young teenager and it made me remember, as fresh as though it happened yesterday, the monstrous affront to justice and decency that was his killing and the subsequent actions of his killer. Zimmerman has practically been running victory laps around Trayvon's corpse since the killing; he even auctioned off the gun that killed Trayvon for \$250,000. We don't know anything about the buyer, "John

Smith,” but what we can infer by the buyer’s decision to remain anonymous and the final sale price of this grotesque modern relic is chilling.

I say this not to preach, but to draw attention to the most important feature of the vase: the small noose hanging just below the portraits of the victims. I am reminded of an old photograph of a lynching in the 1930s. The image (which is, of course, graphic) can be found [here](#). Perhaps just as terrifying as the bodies of black teenagers hanging from the trees are the faces of the crowd and how proud they look. Some of them are smiling for the camera! in front of bleeding corpses! One man grimaces, assuming what he must have thought was a very macho posture as he points at the murdered teens as if to say, “This is what we do here. This is who we are.”

That’s the connection. We’ve haven’t advanced since the day that photograph was taken. That foul human being in the picture, Hitler moustache and all, may as well be the “John Smith” who gave Zimmerman \$250,000 for a murder weapon. He may as well be standing in the frame of the Garner execution video, pointing at the gasping victim as if to say, “This is what we do here. This is who we are.”



*Roberto Lugo, A Century of Black Lives Mattering, 2016; porcelain, china paint and luster, 13 x 12 x 16 1/4 inches.*

Lugo is taking aim at the fairy tale that we live in a post-racist society. People who look like myself like to tell ourselves that America used to be racist, and then Martin Luther King showed up and fixed everything, absolving us of any responsibility for how we treat others today. No. The faces on this jar remind us that we can’t pretend we’re far removed from the people who smiled and

waved for the camera that night in the 1930s. Only the technology we use to record the violence has improved: we can't hear the teens from the photograph begging for their lives the way we can with Garner.

The vase goes even further into history. We have some decorations above the portraits that are difficult for me to discern, but I'll take a stab at it (with apologies to Lugo if I mess up). The heads, to me, appear to be references to the founders of the United States, slave owners. They're above the portraits, suggesting that every fist, gunshot wound and heart attack suffered by the victims flows from the same source: the racial violence that was built into the founding of this country. I think another one of the decorations is a native wearing a buffalo headdress, which in context is a reference to more violence built into the founding of the United States.

Taken together the three features show a unity of time. The temptation for people living in the present is to think that the past is sealed away in a vault somewhere. It's true that we cannot change the past, but it's dangerous to assume that the past can't touch us. Garner died an undignified death under a dogpile of cops because of the vile monsters who posed in a photograph of a lynching. Zimmerman profited handsomely from killing an unarmed child because the people who built this country also profited handsomely from racial violence. The challenge for the viewer is to accept this totality of history before it kills again.