"Covet," a plate painting by Molly Hatch.

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SPECIAL SECTION

ceramic arts

Kilnfolk

The popularity of ceramics is on the rise. Both established artists and novices "discovering" the medium are popping up all over the place, which doesn't surprise me in the least. For one, clay is the original open-source media: it is a viscous lump of mud with which anyone can record action, express creativity, and tell their story. For two, ceramics is old, really old: the first known fired clay object—the Venus of Dolní Věstonice, a 4½-inch-tall female figure discovered in Moravia (Czech Republic)—is about 32,000 years old.

In North America, people have been firing clay pots for over 20,000 years, but what we picture when we think about American ceramics, particularly in New England, is probably something European-influenced and less than 300 years old. Maybe you've seen a beige stoneware jug donning a swiftly painted cobalt-blue flower, or a statuesque vase covered in a thick, matte, "Gruby-green" glaze, or that collection of commemorative plates hanging on the wall in your grandmother's house? Each of these examples is part of a historical lineage of skill, knowledge, and cultural signifiers that has been passed along from generation to generation and traded across cultures since Ms. Věstonice was formed.

Today, ceramicists use the medium's rich history and versatility to design both functional wares—everything from piggy banks to pendant lamps—and sculptural works of art, the most intriguing of which challenge our understanding of what "ceramics" is. Thus, they continue to build on a common, ancient language of materials and techniques, writing new chapters in the story of us. By "us" I don't just mean the contemporary artists you'll meet in the next few pages and their kin, I mean ALL of us—humankind.

—Elenor Wilson, editor of the *Studio Potter* journal

PHOTO BY JOHN POLAK

CRUSHING OUT ON ROBERTO LUGO

by JILL MCDONOUGH

→ *Detail of "All about the Benjamins Century Vase," 2016.*

Here's what I love in art: made things, and mash-ups of high and low culture, and things that make me think. Sacred/profane, everyday/elevated. I'm a poetry professor, best job in the world. When I'm teaching poetic meter I like to point out that "kaPOW" is an iamb, as in iambic pentameter. And "MOtherFUCKer" is two trochees, like in trochaic trimeter. Big words students don't know yet and little words they didn't know they were allowed to use in art. My job is awesome because I get to be the one to give them permission. KaPOW!

So I was 80 percent in love with Roberto Lugo just from looking at his website. There are images of Lugo himself, beautiful self-portraits, his body big and legible in its baseball caps and musing open mouths. There are pandas that loom like his spirit animal, pandas that look like him. One patchwork panda is aiming two guns, an Eats Shoots and Leaves joke. His paintings are beautiful, detailed, accomplished, and look like graffiti—the drip marks, the defiant fonts. My favorite says "TO THAT ONE GUY WHO SAID I SUCK YOU LOSE." (Five iambs, by the way; iambic pentameter. This line is part of a sonnet I want to read. Can I write it? Can I write it and give it to Roberto Lugo as an artist-crush mash note?) When he talks about the difference between teaching little kids at summer camp and teaching college students, he says, "Kids at camp feel limitless and have to be taught very little, as their imaginations are boundless. College students often have to be taught to be as fearless as their childhood selves." He's giving them permission!

Roberto Lugo's email address is thismachinekillshate@gmail.com. There's a kind of earnest tenderness there, and it translates to his work—affectionate portraits of real faces with sideways glances, on jars and teapots loaded up with color, pattern, ornament, crowns, touches of gold. They glorify, deify everything they feature: Bernie Sanders, Trayvon Martin, chubby sparrows breathing puffs of visible vapor, Abe Lincoln, Ghostface Killah, Frida Kahlo, Bert of Bert and Ernie, Biggie Smalls.

PHOTO BY KENEK PHOTOGRAPHY, COURTESY OF THE WEXLER GALLERY

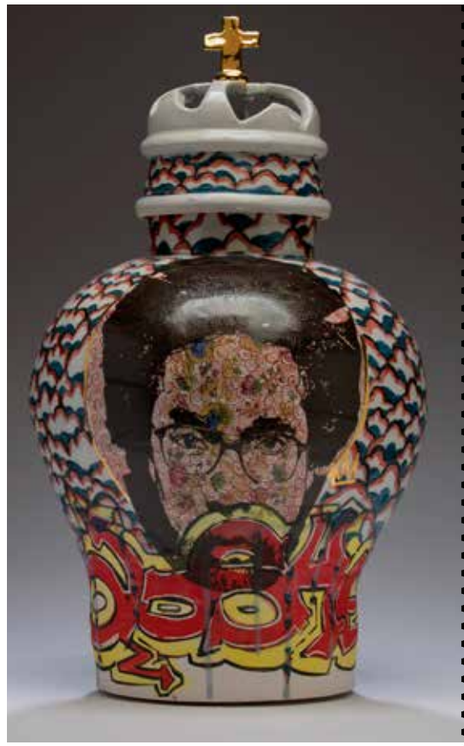
Lugo refers to himself as "a ghetto potter," adding, "The word 'ghetto' can be seen as a negative, but I equate 'ghetto' with the word 'resourceful.'" His dad used to take old washing machine engines, MacGyver them into massive food processors with tin can lids, make a shit-ton of masa, and sell it for cash money. One recent show included a video, "Ghetto is Re-Source-Ful," that shows Roberto Lugo walking around garbage-strewn streets in Philadelphia, finding a shovel in a trash heap. We see him use it to dig up some soil to sieve to make clay, see him tagging a wall with a chunk of broken brick as a marker, drawing one of his signature crowns. The video shows him making a potter's wheel out of a trashed tire hub, a Goya can, a tree trunk someone has tagged "SPIC," and a lot of duct tape and rope. Then he uses it, makes a new pot on the spot.

His 2015 show at Ferrin Gallery, *Ghetto Garniture: Wu Tang Worcester*, isn't talking about Worcester, Massachusetts, but Royal Worcester, maybe the oldest English porcelain brand that's still making stuff. By creating a Royal Worcester style of decorative vessel with street graffiti looks, pairing traditional Turkish patterns with the colors and symbols of Puerto Rico, he highlights "beauty in integration and tolerance." He also makes some crazy pots. Like "Food Stamp Ware:" a blue and white vase with images from a food stamp. Lincoln's on the five dollar food stamp, so there he is; the reverse side is a landscape from the same bill.

"When I grow up, I want to be a ceramics professor" doesn't occur to most of us—not Lugo, either. When he was a kid in Philadelphia, playing in the abandoned cars and tagging the neighborhood with his brother, he got work at a Christmas wreath factory. He worked there every year from the time he was 13 until he was 19. He also worked as a doorman, a security guard, a death claims specialist, a call center receptionist, a shop clerk, and a bus boy. The first thing he ever made in clay was a fire hydrant soap dispenser, "to commemorate my father and I showering in the fire hydrant."

← *Pottery saved my life: Roberto Lugo with "Big Pun and I," 2015.*

↓ *"Ol' Dirty Bastard (ODB) and Dr. Cornel West," 2015.*



THE WORD 'GHETTO' CAN BE SEEN AS A NEGATIVE, BUT I EQUATE 'GHETTO' WITH THE WORD 'RESOURCEFUL.'

PHOTO BY JEWELLEA PHOTOGRAPHY, COURTESY OF THE WEXLER GALLERY

PHOTO BY KENEK PHOTOGRAPHY, COURTESY OF THE WEXLER GALLERY

Now he's got a sweet job teaching ceramics at Marlboro College in Vermont, a wife and baby, and a solo show up at Wexler Gallery in Philadelphia through June 11. The video diary entries he posts on Facebook are short raps about whatever's going on. The one about getting to go back to Philadelphia, his hometown, includes: "They used to hate me, but now they pay me ... I tell them what I do and people be like, 'Really, dog?'"

This kind of generosity and transparency comes through in Lugo's teaching, too. He still remembers the first person who told him he was a good artist: Professor Jay Spalding at Seminole State College. Lugo is finding fresh ways to honor that memory. One of his videos is a sort-of how-to for his students, after Biggie Smalls' "Ten Crack Commandments"—"Ten Pot Commandments." Number Nine: "No, that glaze is not fine. You need to sieve that shit twice so it come out nice." He shakes a finger at the screen. Who doesn't want to take a ceramics course with this guy? "Follow these rules you'll have mad fun making stuff, less time breaking stuff."

His life, his voice, his body, is at the center of these beautiful, surprising pieces. I kept thinking about his body, why it is important to me—how he dresses, his face, big human-loving eyes. So often they're featured on the pots themselves—these fancy urns with a portrait not of a duke or the queen of England, but some guy who looks like he lives in my neighborhood, and we smile when we run into each other at the bodega.

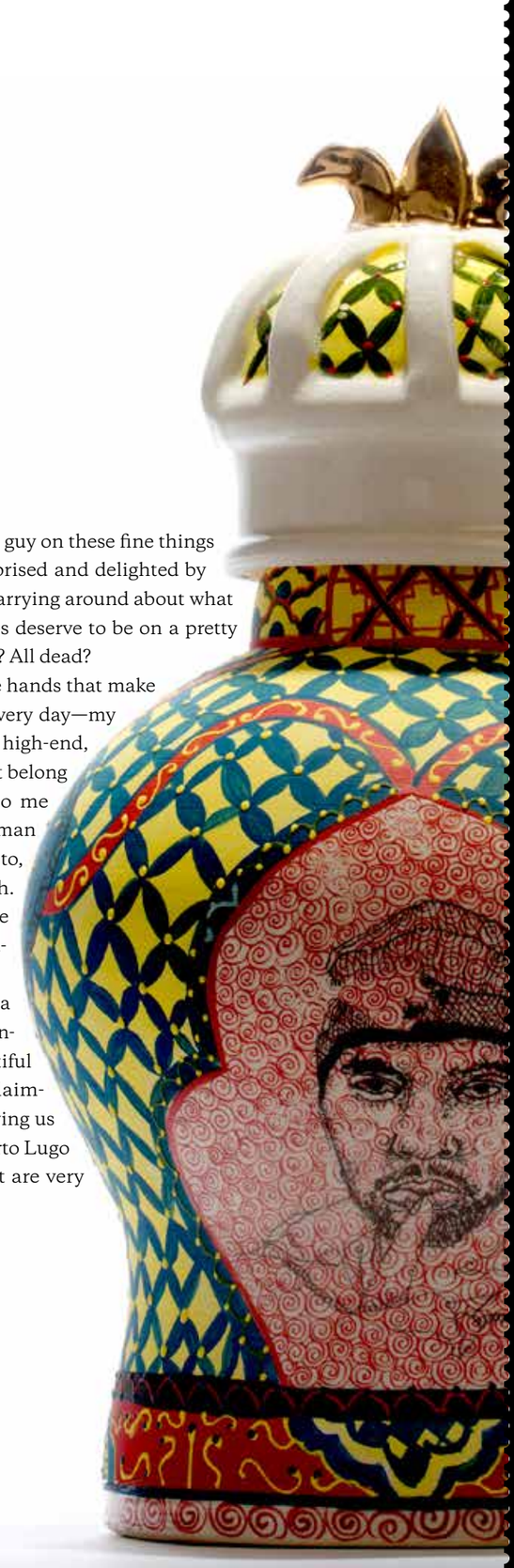
↖ *Detail of "Method Man and Ol' Dirty Bastard," 2015.*
→ *"Wu Tang Clan, Raekwon and Masta Killa," 2015.*

THEY USED TO HATE ME, BUT NOW THEY PAY ME ... I TELL THEM WHAT I DO AND PEOPLE BE LIKE, 'REALLY, DOG?'

That fixation I had with seeing this real guy on these fine things made me ask myself why I was so surprised and delighted by it, what that meant. What ideas was I carrying around about what ceramic artists look like, or whose faces deserve to be on a pretty teapot? Do I just figure they're all white? All dead?

I realized I had some ideas about the hands that make simpler pottery, the coffee cups I use every day—my dad is a potter, after all. But this kind of high-end, decorative, gilded porcelain, things that belong in vitrines in museums, they seem to me unworldly, *sui generis*, untouched by human hands. Not something I deserve access to, something anyone is allowed to touch. They come out of a fancy factory in The Europe, and rich people get them for getting married.

But there he is, a guy from Philly with a backward baseball cap and a Puerto Rican-flag bandanna, humanizing these beautiful objects. They are delicate and real, claiming status and fame for their maker, giving us access to their kind of perfection. Roberto Lugo makes dirt into delicate machines that are very busy exalting us all. ■



PHOTOS BY KENEK PHOTOGRAPHY, COURTESY OF THE WEXLER GALLERY

SPECIAL SECTION

ceramic arts

Form and Substance

Michael Boroniec has 30 skulls in his studio that you probably haven't seen—yet. When the eyes of the art world are increasingly turned to Instagram as the avenue to find the next big thing, Boroniec has very purposely avoided playing into the relentless documentation and exposure of "the process" of creating work that social media demands.

Keeping his process off the Net hasn't slowed the career of this Lanesborough, Massachusetts-based ceramic artist who teaches the ceramic program at the high school he graduated from. His past year has been full of positive press and attention from appreciative collectors and galleries. "I like to have 15 to 20 pieces finished before I show them," he says. Keeping all the complex steps it takes to create one of his eye-catching spiral artworks under wraps allows for the presentation of the finished piece to become more of an "unveiling." Each of the works starts as a familiar and functional form—a teapot, a vase—which he slices and deconstructs into a shape that presents as weightless, airy, and sculptural.

Even with the attention this particular series has attracted, Boroniec hasn't stopped creating and experimenting with new works and frequently switches back and forth between projects in his studio. "Being a little scatterbrained in the studio helps me get work done. But it confuses gallerists when they come to visit." This is where the skulls come in—one of his unseen projects not yet ready for an unveiling. Made from the waste clay that comes from the production of the spirals, they offer him a new challenge to tackle an intimately familiar form and transform it into something entirely new. Certainly they are worth keeping a patient eye monitoring *instagram.com/mboroniec* to see when they finally get their public moment.

↑ *Michael Boroniec in the studio*

↑ *"Gas Pump Teapot"*

↗ *"Spatial Spiral; Crawl I"*

Off the Walls

Ceramicist, designer, and artist Molly Hatch breaks molds and boundaries

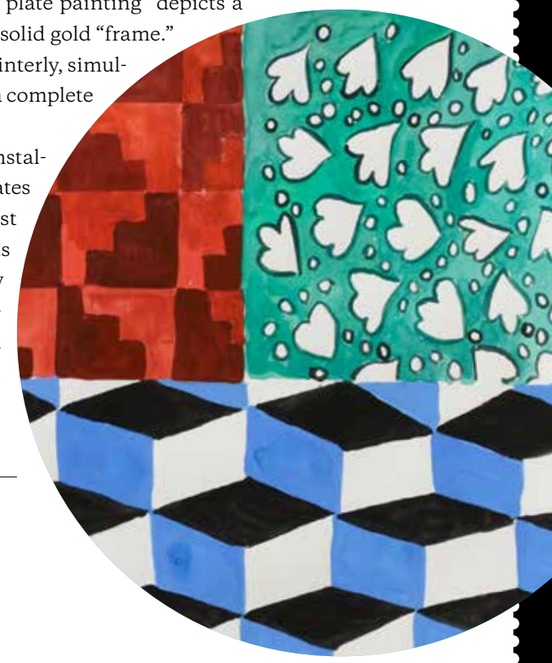
by **SARAH WERTHAN BUTTENWIESER**

PHOTO BY EMILY BILLINGS

Approaching Molly Hatch's ceramic studio on the third floor of Florence, Massachusetts' Arts and Industry building, every single footstep resounds through the hallways. That's the way of former mill buildings. This one, solid and comfortable with its little bit of dustiness and roughness, leaves plenty of space for artists to remake its purpose.

For Hatch, the spot's pitch-perfect, a leisurely walk from her house and design studio with her black dog, Hank. "When you're a young person dreaming of the studio you'd one day work in, this is what you envision," she explains. In Sunday mode, which is not unlike artist-at-work mode—jeans, a striped blue and white tee, and sneaks, auburn hair pulled into a high ponytail—Hatch is ready to lift plates from one of her kilns. The plates belong to an installation titled "Illume" for Todd Merrill Studio Contemporary in Manhattan. This "plate painting" depicts a blue and white vase, surrounded by a shiny, solid gold "frame." Each plate that helps comprise the vase is painterly, simultaneously a swath of the overall pattern and a complete work of art in itself.

Hatch is known for her plate paintings, installations that rely upon individual painted plates organized to create a larger image. The first series, "Covet," showed at Sculpture Objects Functional Art and Design (SOFA) in New York in 2012. For that, she drew upon the collections of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston and New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art.



← *"Illume"*

↗ *Detail from* Passage.

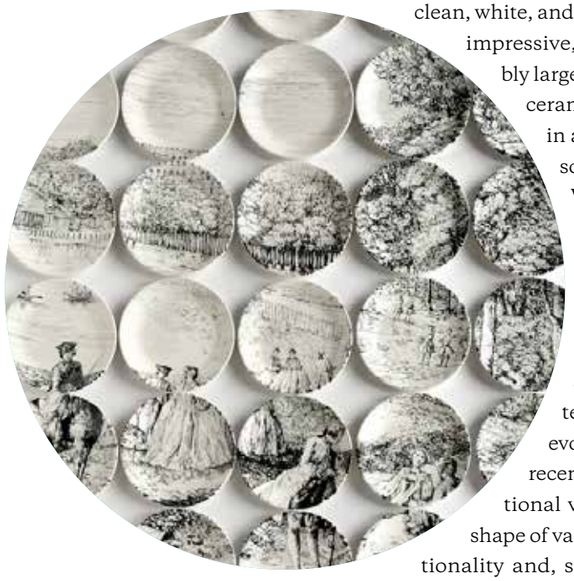
PHOTOS BY JOHN POLAK

Probably the best known—and the largest to date—of the plate paintings is "Physic Garden," a permanent installation at Atlanta's High Museum that measures 22 feet high and 17 feet wide, and required 456 plates to complete. Two 1750s Chelsea Factory plates that depict realistic flora and fauna in the "Hans Sloane" style served as source material for the project. Hatch finds the setting of "Physic Garden" in the museum's Margaretta Taylor Lobby inspired. "There's a window, and beyond the window, a reflecting pool," she explains. "At night the wall, window, and reflecting pool move you, your eyes, in and out of the space. The architect put in an exhibition wall at exactly the right spot so that the work and the space are phenomenal fits for one another."

Her latest big project, *Passage*, a solo show at the Dianich Gallery in Brattleboro, Vermont, co-presented with Todd Merrill Studio Contemporary, is a departure from the plate paintings. "The plate paintings rely upon the boundaries of the wall," says Hatch. "I want to question the wall. I'm interested in making three-dimensional paintings that reveal different images from various angles."

One way to sum up Hatch's voraciousness as artist and designer is this—she's a consummate conversationalist. Rather than rely on words, her conversations take place between past and present, commercial design and fine art, boundaries and space.

While she was creating *Passage*, which runs through July, her studio space was relatively empty. The sole full wall—no doors or windows or shelving—was blank. The floor was mostly bare, save for kilns sitting like urns and a number of large ceramic blocks—clean, white, and ready—in neat piles. The blocks were impressive, not exactly massive, and yet notably larger than most ceramic objects. Imagine ceramic versions of wooden blocks found in a preschool classroom—but large and somewhat wondrous, like an Alice in Wonderland teacup.



Hatch painted the blocks in different patterns, from a Middle Eastern tile to a weaving. These patterns generally do not "go together." In the gallery, the blocks are set upon wooden and ceramic plinths, painted in patterns and faux wood grain. *Passage* evolves from a series of cube vases Hatch recently created, objects that aren't functional vases, but cubes with cutouts in the shape of vases to play upon both the idea of functionality and, simultaneously, negative space. For *Passage*, she posed a related question: "Do I need that cutout?"

As for the big blocks: "I wanted a chance to pull my work into space. I wanted it to come off the walls," Hatch explains. "The idea is the pieces could be played with and restacked. I want to explore pattern and form, but in a three-dimensional space."

↙ *Detail of "Covet."*
↗ *"Physic Garden."*
↘ *Detail from* Passage.

Patterns often seen on functional objects, from vases to wallpaper, cover these non-functional forms. As if that idea isn't sufficiently intriguing, Hatch plays with other juxtapositions. Some patterns are from history and others are more contemporary ones that tend to show up in a design context rather than art. She wants to lure them from functionality to see how they fare.

The Dianich Gallery is much more intimate than other places Hatch has exhibited. "I was drawn to that—and the chance to reach a different audience," Hatch says. "In this setting, I'm able to focus upon a small, pointed project—and to take some risks within the constraints of this venue—a small gallery in a small town close to home."

Hatch's childhood and family background have a great deal to do with her sense that perpetual conversations arise from juxtaposing things people don't often put together. Her parents eschewed a world of refined society and instead moved to southern Vermont, where they farmed. Décor at the farmhouse was unusual: Art and antiques in her family's home and extended family's residences were, like pieces she plays off of in her own art and design work, beautiful and significant and fine and enduring.

As an adult, Hatch contemplates the role of beauty and delicacy, but she does so in the milieu of simple, hard work. She is a powerhouse. She credits her work ethic to her upbringing on the farm and her aesthetics in large part to family influences and exposure. "To have grown up with old-money objects and the farm's demands, lessons I drew upon were complex—about taste and lifestyle," she says. "I love that I interact with these questions on a daily basis."

Interior design is another of Hatch's influences. "I read interior design magazines to see what interests designers," she says. "For example, I love the idea of putting an old object on a mantel and a contemporary cutout vase and pretty much encouraging the objects to talk to one another."

That sets the stage for a paradigm that makes sense to Hatch. "When I first began to do design work for Anthropologie, some ceramic artists thought I was selling out. I disagreed and I still disagree," she says. "I need to focus on creation of both the consumable and the unique object, and, rather than see those as oppositional choices, I find them complementary."

She constantly extends ideas developed in one realm into another—she might create a one-of-a-kind vase and then make a series of commercial vases that are decorated with her *paintings* of vases. "I love to operate in consort, and to see where designs land best." She maintains enthusiasm for the large plate paintings or the new work in *Passage*, and she also enjoys her ongoing work with Anthropologie. The way Hatch works—process and breadth—represents her unique heritage.■

PHOTO BY JOHN POLAK

TOP PHOTO COURTESY OF THE HIGH MUSEUM OF ART IN ATLANTA, GEORGIA. BOTTOM PHOTO BY JOHN POLAK

Glazed Expressions

Well over 1,000 years ago, a Chinese potter made a tea bowl and glazed it using a process that gave it the appearance of holding an inky black sky with an entire universe of stars. Fast-forward to the day when Hideaki Miyamura, an aspiring potter apprenticing in Japan, first saw these bowls, of which only five remain. The bowls provoked a profound shift in Miyamura's artistic path, inspiring him to find a way to reproduce this iridescent glaze, the formula of which had been lost to time. Miyamura, who studied art history in college in Michigan, wasn't always interested in becoming a potter, but he knew he wanted to be an artist. It wasn't until he returned home to Japan to work for his father's business and visited a master potter who lived nearby that he found his passion.

Early in his career, Miyamura, now based in New Hampshire, apprenticed with two master Japanese potters, the first of whom taught him the essentials of throwing and firing. The second was a master of glazes with whom Miyamura worked very closely for five years—so closely he virtually lived with the potter's family, tutoring their children while working 16 hours a day in the studio. During those long hours, Miyamura would make new formulas for glazes every day, ultimately throwing and firing over 10,000 pieces as he perfected his reproduction of the glaze on the ancient tea bowls. Miyamura returned to the United States after marrying an American and continued his work as a potter while working part-time jobs. Bedeviled at first by chemical differences in the clay available in the United States, he happened upon some oak ashes in the fireplace of a neighboring furniture maker that resolved the problem and enabled him to recreate the glazes he had developed in Japan.

← *"Building #3, hare's fur glaze with clock gear lid"*
← *Hideaki Miyamura in the studio*
↘ *"Vase, sea foam purple glaze"*

The shapes of Miyamura's work—vases with elongated necks and lidded jars with tiny openings—are both a conscious break from the functional pieces he made as an apprentice (think endless numbers of sake cups and plates for years on end) and inspired by the work of Venetian glass blowers and glass artists like Dale Chihuly. While made of clay, this combination of unexpected form and one-of-a-kind glazing technique transport Miyamura's pottery from the everyday to the level of fine art.

PHOTOS COURTESY PUCKER GALLERY