

AGENT *of* CHANGE

Drawing on his own experiences, Roberto Lugo speaks for many.

STORY BY
Joyce Lovelace

PORTRAITS BY
Irvin Serrano



Teapot photo: KeneK Photography, courtesy of Wexler Gallery



THERE'S A QUOTE THAT ROBERTO Lugo loves and repeats often. "It's about how perhaps what we want to say we figure out from our childhood," the artist explains. "And we spend the rest of our lives trying to say it."

At 35, Lugo is saying it with extraordinary power, making vibrant ceramic art that tells his story, one that began with growing up Puerto Rican American in a tough neighborhood of

Philadelphia. In doing so, he illuminates the larger hot-button issues of today – poverty, inequality, race – as well as timeless, universal human themes.

Dubbed "Ghetto Garniture" in a recent one-man show, Lugo's vessels are multicultural mash-ups, traditional European and Asian porcelain forms reimagined with a 21st-century street sensibility. Their handpainted

surfaces feature classic decorative patterns and motifs combined with elements of modern urban graffiti, plus striking portraits of individuals you might not expect to find on a type of ornate luxury item historically made for the rich – people like Sojourner Truth, Cornel West, and Erykah Badu, as well as Lugo's family members and, very often, the artist himself. He's done Toby mugs depicting

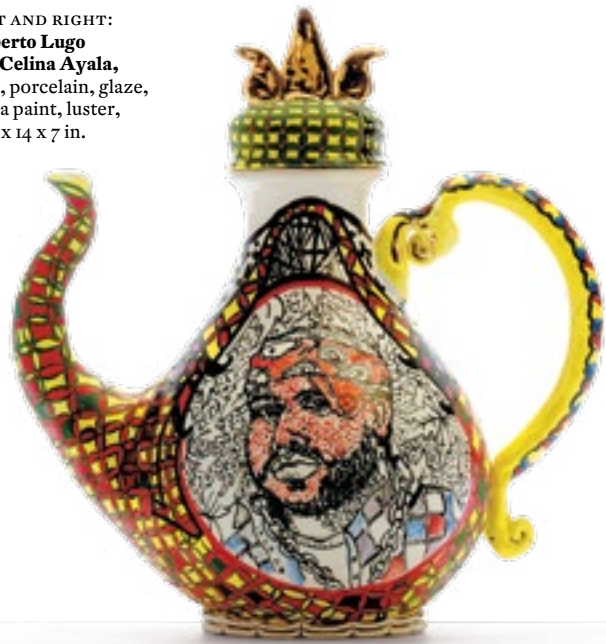
police officers and people of color engaged in conversations both contentious and conciliatory; a genteel teapot graced with the face of rapper Ol' Dirty Bastard; an urn titled *We Are All Kings* (2015), painted with commemorative likenesses of Rodney King, Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, and Michael Brown. With their beauty, humanity, pop culture appeal, and touches of humor, Lugo's pieces invite

us to look deep within ourselves. "I feel like the things we do in the visual arts matter most because they challenge the world in a way that people don't see coming – as opposed to being violent or retaliating with our words," he says. "We often get to the heart of the matter."

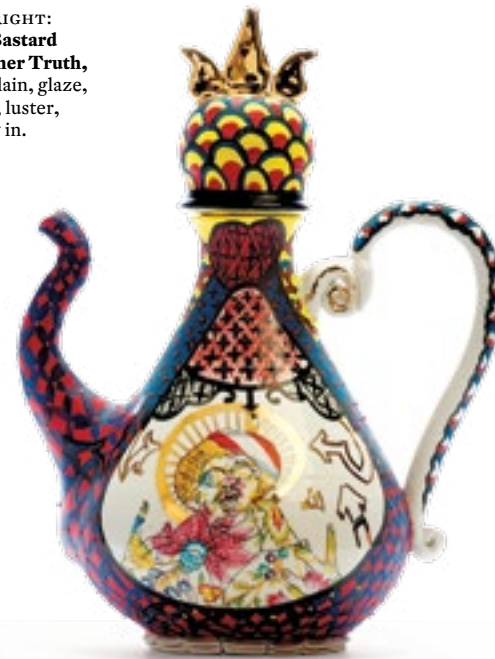
"Roberto is a potter, a painter, a sculptor, a provocateur, a survivor, and perhaps most importantly, an activist," says

Roberto Lugo's vessels may look like wild mash-ups, but they "make complete sense in terms of my own experience," says the artist. This 2015 teapot features Frederick Douglass; turn it around, and you'll find the rapper Method Man.

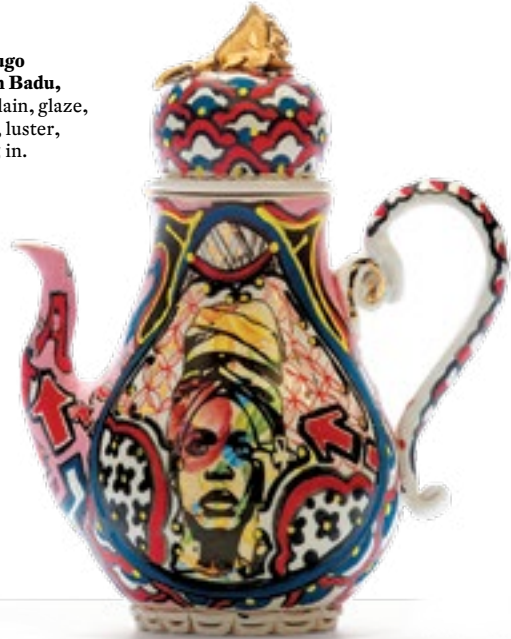
LEFT AND RIGHT:
**Roberto Lugo
and Celina Ayala,**
2015, porcelain, glaze,
china paint, luster,
16.5 x 14 x 7 in.



LEFT AND RIGHT:
**Ol' Dirty Bastard
and Sojourner Truth,**
2015, porcelain, glaze,
china paint, luster,
14 x 10.5 x 7 in.



**Roberto Lugo
and Erykah Badu,**
2015, porcelain, glaze,
china paint, luster,
8.5 x 7 x 4.5 in.



Oppression, 2013, stoneware, china paint, luster, 15 x 36 x 9 in.

LEFT AND RIGHT:
**Confederate
Graffiti Teapot 2,**
2015, porcelain, glaze,
china paint, luster,
9 x 7.25 x 5 in.



Shannon Goff, his friend and one of his professors at Penn State University's School of Visual Arts, where he earned his MFA. "His work challenges notions of class, race, and art-world hierarchies, and operates as an empowering agent of change. It's raw and honest and undeniably authentic."

"His ceramic art is a seamless blend of grit and circumstance, deft defiance, and deep

encounters with ideas that give form to his lived experience," says Graeme Sullivan, director of the art school. "The unlikely fusion of material, form, and content creates narratives that are at once jarring and captivating, where the devil is in the details, but it's passion that pushes the story."

Lugo blends diverse influences into an aesthetic all his own. "One thing I strive for in

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my work is being honest enough to be eclectic," he says. "To have things that will sort of clash, or not make sense to other people, but that make complete sense in terms of my own experience."

Early on, he learned that appearances can be deceiving, that society can stereotype us in ways that don't reflect who we really are. He watched his father – a Pentecostal preacher, factory worker, and sometime

street vendor – work terribly hard, yet still struggle on the margins of mainstream American culture. Lugo was a quiet and devoutly religious boy, had a thick Spanish accent as a child, and wasn't a good reader. Teachers failed to see, much less cultivate, his innate intelligence and artistic talent. As a teen, he liked grunge rock and ice hockey in addition to the salsa, rap, and baseball favored

by neighborhood kids, who would insinuate he was weird, or "trying to be white," as he puts it. "In hindsight, I realize my eccentricity was a sign of my creativity. However, at the time it was seen as more of a defect than an affect. I would get made fun of a lot." When he started doing graffiti, it was a way to fit in, to "be as cool as my cousins." He never thought of it as an art form then, not

least because the city would always paint over his creations.

After working various factory jobs, Lugo by age 25 had moved to Florida and was seeking a fresh start when he enrolled in a ceramics class at a community college. Told that "real, honest" art came from personal experience, he made pieces like a fire hydrant that evoked happy memories of showering in the street with his father on

nights when the family's water had been turned off. "It was the first time in my life I was ever told I was good at anything," he says of those early efforts, adding that artmaking immediately became his calling: "Right off the bat, it felt important."

In 2009, he enrolled in the prestigious ceramics program at the Kansas City Art Institute. He began devouring ceramics history as well as anthropology,

Teapot photos: Kenek Photography, courtesy of Wexler Gallery

Oppression photo: Roberto Lugo

intrigued by how pots tell stories about past cultures. In historical ceramics, he found connections to his own work, such as how the lines of a leaf or flower on a Chinese pot looked like graffiti arrows, and had the same quick, gestural quality as tagging. By drawing graffiti on his surfaces with china paint, he could put his own stamp on ceramics history and discourse. He also realized that minorities

and people of color were underrepresented in the field, and that, through his work, “I had the opportunity to speak on behalf of people where I come from.” That sense of mission intensified when he entered graduate school in 2012, around the same time that his brother was, Lugo says, unjustly convicted of a drug-related charge and sent to prison. Feeling sorrow and anger, and even guilt for his

own situation, he created *Oppression*, a work he considers one of his best. The heads of two men of color – Lugo and his brother – sit in subjugation on a Victorian tea cart, essentially serving as saucers for dripping cups. (His brother was eventually granted early release, has rebuilt his life, and is “doing really well,” Lugo says.) In 2013 he explored the theme of incarceration more directly, when

photographer Richard Ross invited him to collaborate on “Juvenile In Justice,” a show in Philadelphia about imprisoned youth. Coming on the heels of an artist residency he did in Hungary, the show marked a turning point in Lugo’s career. “I felt that I was empowered to do anything, and that my voice was an important and needed component to the ceramics community.”

Lugo has deep respect for the transformative power of making: “I feel blessed that someone taught me how to make a pot and gave me the tools to be able to express myself.”



We Are All Kings, 2015, porcelain, glaze, china paint, luster, 27 x 10 in. dia.



Though Lugo's art is provocative – and often informed by his own encounters with prejudice – his curious nature and openness to other perspectives lead him, in the end, to make work meant to start conversations, not push people away.

He wants to break down stereotypes, including his own. He admits, for example, that he once assumed white people in the South were all basically

racist – that is, until he met his wife, Ashley, a fellow artist, and her family in rural Alabama, who embraced him warmly. (The two were married in 2009 and have a toddler son.) His new outlook was tested on a drive through Georgia, Lugo says, when an officer pulled him over, questioned him, then called a canine unit to sniff the pots he had loaded in back. That confrontation inspired

Portrait Plate: **Maya Angelou,** 2015, porcelain, glaze, ceramic decal, 10.25 in. dia.



Portrait Plate: **Method Man,** 2015, porcelain, glaze, ceramic decal, 10.25 in. dia.



Confederate Graffiti Teapot 2 (2015), a vessel bearing images of Frederick Douglass, the Notorious B.I.G., and the Confederate flag tied into a gangster-style bandanna. Lugo imagined himself sitting down with the officer over cups of tea, talking things over, coming to an understanding. “The piece is conceptual, in a way. But I would love to literally have tea with him.”

Since his graduation from Penn State in 2014, Lugo's profile continues to rise and his message to resonate. He's now finishing up his first year as a ceramics professor at Marlboro College in Vermont. As an Emerging Artist lecturer at the 2015 conference of the National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts, he electrified the crowd with a deeply personal speech that was part rap poem

Photos: KeneK Photography, courtesy of Wexler Gallery

Portrait Plate: **O.D.B.,** 2015, porcelain, glaze, ceramic decal, 10.25 in. dia.



Portrait Plate: **Ghostface Killah,** 2015, porcelain, glaze, ceramic decal, 10.25 in. dia.



and part sermon. He has since received more than 100 emails from people who were there or watched online, thanking him and sharing similar experiences. It's especially important to Lugo that his work serves to encourage young artists of color, who may feel alone, to push on with their work because, as he says, “the things we do matter.”

And ceramics, he believes, has a profound educational role

“When I started taking art classes, I couldn't think about anything else ... I'd count down the hours until I got to go back to class.”

Century Vase III: American, 2015, porcelain, glaze, china paint, luster, 27 x 12 in. dia.



Wu Tang Clan, Raekwon and Masta Killa, 2015, porcelain, glaze, china paint, luster, 21 x 12 in. dia.



to play. Recently he was back in his old neighborhood, teaching a workshop to middle schoolers, when he noticed a boy who reminded him of himself.

“He was sort of a chubby kid, in the corner by himself, sculpting a little chef. I asked him, ‘Are you a chef, do you cook?’ He was like, ‘Yeah, I cook.’ ‘So what's your favorite thing to make?’ And he nonchalantly says, ‘Oh, I haven't made a

signature dish yet.’” Lugo recalls with a laugh. “It was the sweetest thing! But the potential to work with kids like him – to give exposure to pottery, the plasticity of clay, the ability to be able to craft anything you could think of. What ideas would he come up with? What would his signature pot look like? I think about things like that.”

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