

**Design
Miami**



Same Ol' Crack by Roberto Lugo (2019). Photo © KeneK for Wexler Gallery

SPOTLIGHT: AMERICA(S)

America(s)

Aric Chen

27 TUE, 20

Curatorial Director Aric Chen shares his thoughts on the theme of this year's Design Miami/ Podium

In November, Design Miami/ returns to its roots in the Miami Design District and inaugurates a new thematic exhibition concept: Design Miami/Podium. Curatorial Director Aric Chen shares his thoughts on this year's debut theme, America(s).

In the collection of the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore, there is an 18th-century Sèvres porcelain potpourri vase that is decorated with an image of a ship at harbor. To its earliest known owner, this fragrance-filled object would have epitomized luxury and refinement, its seagoing vessel evoking the romance of travel and the riches of trade.

But for the servants of that owner—19th-century businessman William T. Walters, a staunch supporter of the Confederacy whose collection seeded the museum’s foundation—this image would have elicited quite disparate associations. As slaves abducted from Africa in horrid conditions, ceramic artist [Roberto Lugo](#) points out, “Their vision of a ship coming to America was very different.”



To Disarm/ Angela Davis Mugshot by Roberto Lugo (2019). Photo © KeneK for Wexler Gallery

Lugo, who is of Puerto Rican descent, was recently commissioned by the Walters to create new critical work in response to its collection. The project embodies a broader cultural reckoning that defines this historical moment, offering a full-throated acknowledgment that “America”—whether referring to the United States or the wider region that includes it—has always meant different things to different people. And as the long-dominant narratives of American exceptionalism—grounded as they are in colonialist conceptions of manifest destiny and a melting pot mythology that too easily erases differences of race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, and gender—continue to unravel under scrutiny, so must we also problematize and actively challenge the way we tell the stories of design connected to the US and its neighbors in the Western Hemisphere.

America(s), the inaugural Design Miami/ Podium exhibition, is an attempt to expand our thinking on this subject. The show is not about American design per se. Instead, it looks at design in, of, and about the Americas by drawing from the fair’s international community of galleries and creative studios—both American and non-American alike—in order to explore America as an idea, an ideal, and a work-in-progress that transcends singular identities and geographies.



Five Leaf Chair by George Nelson & Associates, manufactured by Union Carbide (1963), designed for the 1964 New York World's Fair. Beehive Hanging Lamp by Lucia DeRespinis for George Nelson Associates, manufactured by Nessen Studio (1960). Photo © Joe Kramm for R & Company

Objects by Lugo—a Philadelphia-based maker who reinterprets Euro-American decorative arts traditions using imagery from Black and hip-hop cultures, among others—and the African diaspora-inspired ceramics of New York artist Malene Barnett be placed in conversation with iconic works from the mid-20th century, like an Akari Floor Lamp by [Isamu Noguchi](#) and a chair designed by [George Nelson](#) for the 1964 New York World's Fair, set alongside designs by underrecognized and underrepresented talents, such as a light by Lucia DeRespinis, a woman designer from Nelson's office.

The exhibition also includes Native American craft and 19th-century folk art displayed beside [George Nakashima](#) tables and [Wendell Castle](#) chairs; the contemporary ceramics of Colombian-American Miami native Natalia Arbelaez; and the extraordinary woodwork of Po Shun Leong, the British-born son of Chinese immigrants who eventually settled in California via Mexico.



Ghost Guitar by Asif Khan (2020). Photos © Asif Khan Ltd.

While many works in the exhibition are explicitly politically in nature—you might find Colin Kaepernick or, yes, Donald Trump on Michelle Erickson's ceramics—others speak of America's lasting cultural hold on the world's imagination: the electric guitar of London designer Asif Khan, the basketball hoop of Spanish designer Guillermo Santoma, and Chinese designer [Li Naihan](#)'s Greyhound bus terminal-inspired cabinet.

If the range of work seems sprawling, that is the point. Inclusivity, in theory, excludes exclusion. As the United States continues to be torn apart by rifts of all kinds, one positive effect has been that more people, more loudly, are calling for the systems and structures that have perpetuated racism and other injustices to be dismantled. This is long overdue. But while design as a cultural vehicle can play a role in undoing what needs to be undone, it is still by definition a constructive endeavor. Which poses the question: What might come next?

In the extraordinarily charged atmosphere of this moment, [Adam Silverman](#) is proposing what might nowadays sound radical: reconciliation. America(s) will feature the in-progress debut of Silverman's Common Ground, a project for which he has assembled, with the aid of volunteers, clay, ash, and water from each of the 56 US states and territories. The materials are being combined into a single clay from which the Los Angeles-based artist is making ceramic vessels and dinnerware that will be distributed back to each state and territory. The former will be donated to public institutions, while the latter will help host a series of dinners at which people of different backgrounds and persuasions might productively engage each other.



Clay samples from Common Ground by Adam Silverman. Photo © Erik Benjamins; courtesy Friedman Benda & Adam Silverman

Perhaps it is a small gesture, as Silverman himself would likely admit. But it is one that gives reason to hope that “America(s)” might one day thrive—for everyone—in its plural form. ◆