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Roberto Lugo at Wexler Gallery empowers us all with the art that saved him

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Posted by Chip Schwartz

Above: Roberto Lugo, "Defacing Adversity." Photos by Chip Schwartz.

What comes to mind when you think about ceramics? Throwing wheels, glazes and vases? Bowls, plates and other beautiful yet fragile objects, perhaps? How about hip-hop and graffiti? Needless to say, the pairing of urban culture and traditional porcelain forms doesn't really seem to fit. Philadelphia artist **Roberto Lugo**, however, has a body of work on display at **Wexler Gallery** that might very well change your mind.

Lugo grew up in North Philadelphia as a child of Puerto Rican immigrants, and with that experience came all of the challenges that go along with inner city life. Growing up in a setting that seemed to place injustices and obstacles at all turns, Lugo could have easily succumbed to the pressure. Instead, his rich cultural heritage and nurturing family helped inspire him to become part of his own solution instead of the problem. His answer to life's hardships is art, and his medium of choice is porcelain.



Roberto Lugo, "Frederick Douglass and Method Man."

In his Wexler Gallery solo show, "Defacing Adversity: The Life and Times of Roberto Lugo," the artist provides a sampling of his creations. Although there is an obvious emphasis on the ceramic, he also includes graffiti tag-styled painting and a smattering of photographs as well. The photos included in the show provide a visual documentation of Lugo's youth and family, alongside pictures of him from the present, and shots of the corner stores, friends and row homes that have served to frame his life.

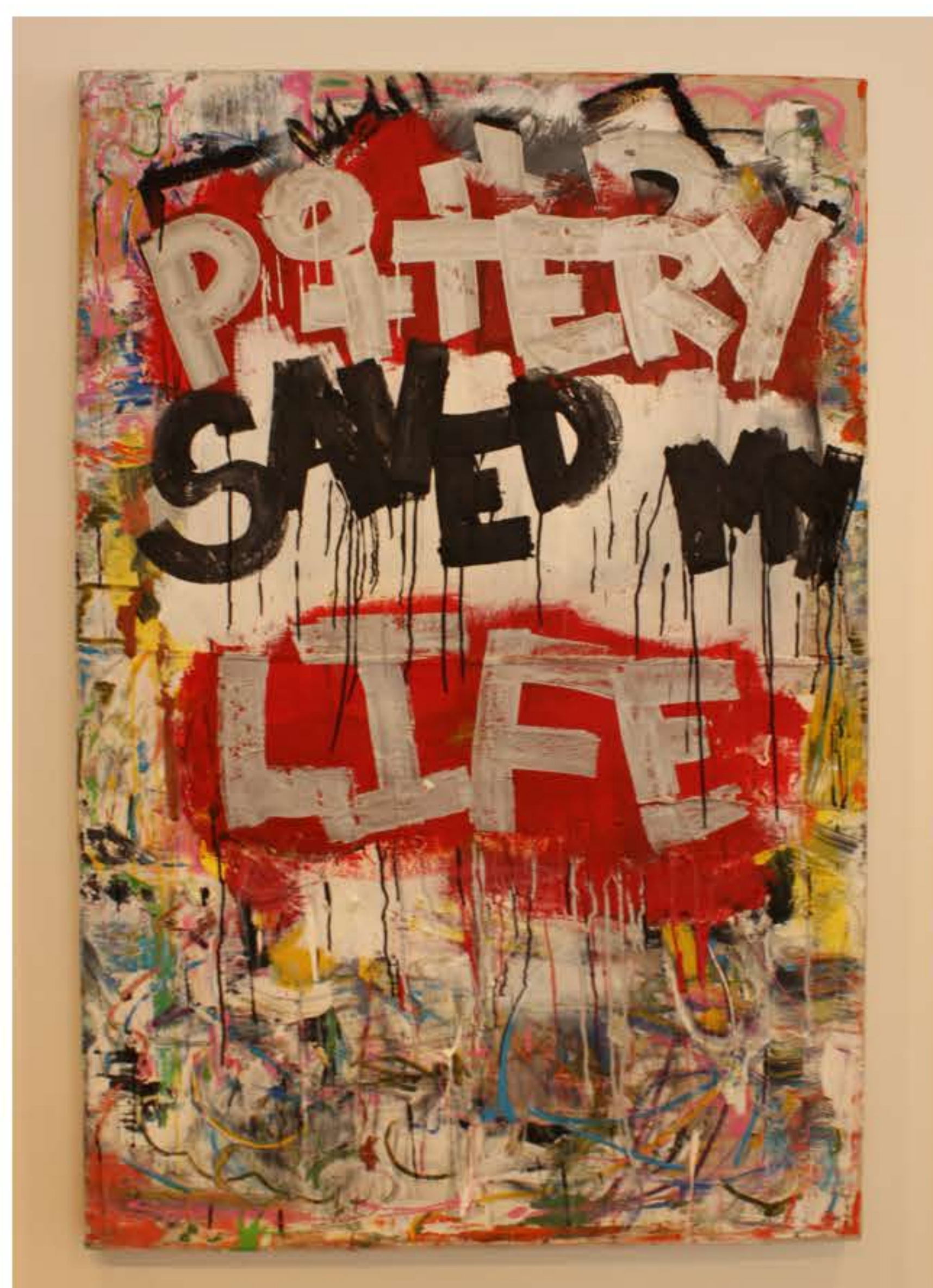
Much of the exhibit features not only those themes that have helped to shape Lugo's life, but also the structures that have been built on account of it. The curves of teapots and the flat discs of plates represent an ancient lexicon, but their content speaks to a contemporary American city. We find objects decorated with glaze applied in thick, illustrative styles that resemble notebook sketches more than highbrow antiques. These vessels are sometimes topped with gilded crowns and crosses indicative of common gang and religious symbols, respectively. In a way, it's as if Lugo has actively defaced precious heirlooms with the images and tags of his neighborhood, but since these creations are all his own, he instead forces us to consider both cultures from an objective point of view; to take them as they are instead of exalting or condemning them.



Roberto Lugo, "We Are All Kings."

As a sort of visual pun, the artworks that appear almost 'defaced' in Lugo's stand against adversity, generally contain actual representations of famous individuals' faces. These likenesses run the gamut from Civil Rights leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr., abolitionists like Frederick Douglass, celebrities like Whoopi Goldberg, politicians like Bernie Sanders, and a seemingly never ending cast of rappers like Method Man, ODB, Biggie and many others.

One of the most powerful pieces in the show is entitled "We Are All Kings." Conceived not as an homage to famous likenesses per se, but as a tribute to black men whose lives were taken or forever changed at the hands of law enforcement: Mike Brown, Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner and Rodney King. The crown at the precipice of this artwork references not only the surname King, but seeks to represent the dignity that all of these individuals deserve. Lugo makes no concessions here. Each of us should be afforded the same rights and privileges as the next person, and as our society stands presently, there is a wide disparity in this treatment.



Roberto Lugo, "Pottery Saved My Life."

Mixed in amongst the various tags like "Food Stamp" and "Hustle Hard" in Lugo's paintings, we find the unambiguous message "Pottery Saved My Life." Lugo, it seems, has found an outlet for his frustration and a vehicle with which to raise his voice. He likewise encourages us to do the same and offers us the hope that there is always another way. Roberto Lugo knows that each of us is noble in our own way. He also knows that it is up to us to discover how.

"Defacing Adversity: The Life and Times of Roberto Lugo" runs through June 11.

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