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# His First Art Was Graffiti. Now His Pottery Is in the Met.

With his ceramics, Roberto Lugo tries to reach out to people who often feel ignored by museums.

**By Ted Loos and Video by Mohamed Sadek for The New York Times**


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*This article is part of our latest Fine Arts & Exhibits special report, about how art institutions are helping audiences discover new options for the future.*

Many times while he was studying art, and later as a working ceramist, Roberto Lugo was told he was out of place or that his work was somehow not worthy of attention.

“People don’t normally look at me walking down the street and go, ‘Oh, that’s definitely a potter,’” Mr. Lugo said with a laugh during a video call. He was in his car because it was a quiet place to talk, and he was wearing a tank top that revealed many elaborate tattoos of his own design.

But there was frustration and sadness in his statement.

“I’m thinking about how hard it was for me as a Puerto Rican going to college for ceramics,” said Mr. Lugo, who attended the Kansas City Art Institute in his 20s. “Every single day people would stop me and ask if they could see my ID. They didn’t believe that I was a student.”

Mr. Lugo, 40, of Philadelphia is indeed a prolific maker of ceramics.
His website identifies him as a “ghetto potter and activist”; he is also a spoken-word poet.

Roberto Lugo at his studio in Wyncote, Pa., near Philadelphia. Credit...Mohamed Sadek for The New York Times

On his active Instagram account, he tries to attract new audiences to his work and to ceramics generally. He sells work directly there, sometimes for charity. Mr. Lugo also teaches ceramics at the Tyler School of Art and Architecture, part of Temple University.

His tenacity and devotion to clay are on view in many exhibitions this fall, most prominently in "Before Yesterday We Could Fly: An Afrofuturist Period Room," opening Nov. 5 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

"It's a different kind of period room that needs a different kind of artist," said Ian Alteveer, one of the Met curators who organized the show.

The exhibition takes inspiration from Seneca Village, the Black community that thrived in the early 19th century not far from where the Met is now. It was destroyed by New York City in the 1850s to make way for Central Park.

"We thought, 'What would it be like if that community were still there?'" said Mr. Alteveer, a fan of Mr. Lugo's artistry.

He added, "What's so fantastic about Roberto's work is that he feels free to appropriate design elements and aesthetics from the past, but to turn them into his own wonderful kaleidoscopic vision."

The exhibition "Back and Forth: Red and Meth" at the Wexler Gallery in Philadelphia, featuring Mr. Lugo with the collaborators Salvatore Annunziato, Charlie Cunningham, Kyle Mello Dixon, Griff Jurchak, Molly Hutter and Ashley Porrini.Credit...Julia Lehman, via Wexler Gallery

The exhibition includes 26 works by Mr. Lugo, making him the most represented artist in the show. His marquee object is “Digable Underground” (2021), a large glazed stoneware urn painted with enamel, depicting the abolitionist Harriet Tubman on one side and the singer-songwriter Erykah Badu on the other. The museum has acquired it for its collection.

“I see myself as an Afro-Latino, and I’ve always found inspiration from my Black ancestors,” Mr. Lugo said.

The Met show is only one of many. In Philadelphia, there is a selling show at Wexler Gallery that runs until Dec. 30. The Arthur Ross Gallery at the University of Pennsylvania asked Mr. Lugo to curate a show from its collection, and the result, “God Complex: Different Philadelphia,” is on view through Dec. 19 (it also includes his own work).

Samantha Cataldo, who organized a recent exhibition of his work at the Currier Museum of Art in Manchester, N.H., said her conversations with Mr. Lugo centered on how inventiveness can be achieved with limited means.

“He talks a lot about resourcefulness and ingenuity,” Ms. Cataldo said.

In addition to the work of local ceramists, included to emphasize community, the show featured a food processor made by Mr. Lugo's father from a motor that had been thrown away. "It was one of people's favorite objects," Ms. Cataldo said. (Mr. Lugo's father and sister make all the packaging for the pottery he sells.)

Mr. Lugo grew up in Kensington, which he called "definitely the worst neighborhood in Philadelphia," adding, "As a child, it's just nailed to you that you are in the ghetto."

"My first real relationship with art was doing graffiti" from ages 14 to 19, Mr. Lugo said, adding, "The city spent a lot of time covering it up." Now he sees that phase as an important step in his artistic development.

Originally, Mr. Lugo studied ceramics intending to be a "production potter," making basic items, not artworks, and after graduating from the Kansas City Art Institute he got a master's degree from Penn State.

In school, his feedback from professors were "really bad," he said, but during a trip to the library he saw in a book a picture of a Worcester pot, made by England's royal porcelain manufacturer.


Mr. Lugo's"Brooklyn Century Vase," 2019, which depicts Jay-Z, Jackie Robinson and the Notorious B.I.G. The piece was commissioned by the Brooklyn Museum and is currently on view there.Credit...Neal Santos, Wexler Gallery, Brooklyn Museum Collection

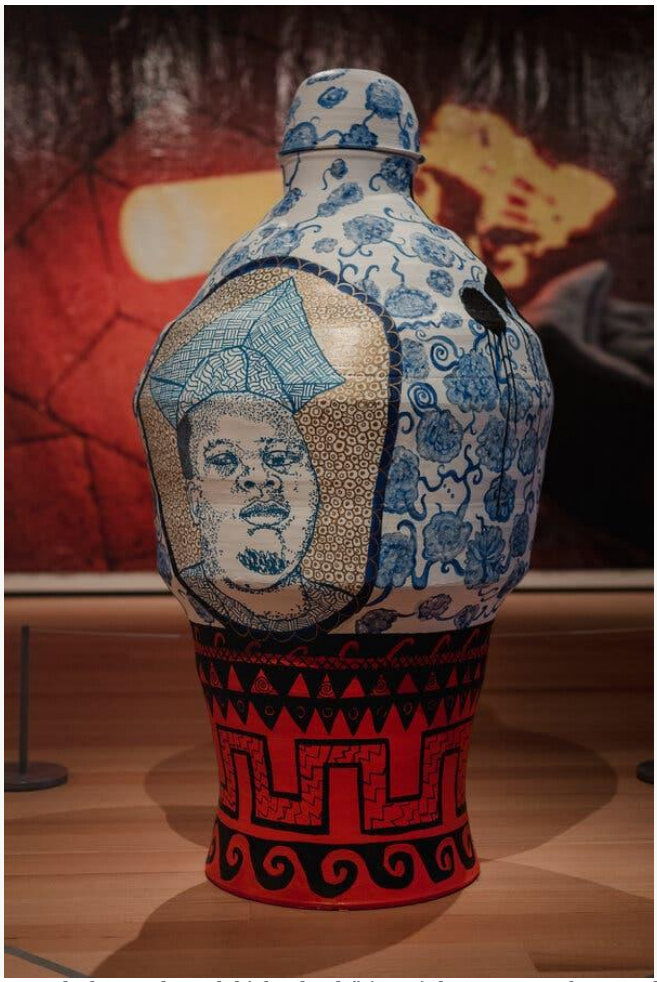
“It was gold and royal blue, and it had a portrait on the very front,” Mr. Lugo recalled. “I thought, ‘This object looks expensive. Right now I don’t feel too great about myself, so what if I tried to remake this pot and draw a portrait of myself on it?’”

He did, and it planted a seed for his future art in pieces like “Brooklyn Century Vase,” commissioned by the Brooklyn Museum and currently on view there. It riffs on an 1876 work in the collection and depicts Jay-Z, Jackie Robinson and the Notorious B.I.G.

In one of the many odd jobs he has had over the years, he once worked as a doorman in a building across from the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

“I would eat my lunch on the steps of the museum, but it was $12 to get in, so I couldn’t afford it,” Mr. Lugo said. “And now I have a piece in the collection.”

Another work of his that was shown there, “Do you know how hard it is to get a Black man through high school?” (2019), features the face of Michael Brown Jr., the Black man killed in 2014 by the police in Ferguson, Mo.



“Do you know how hard it is to get a Black man through high school?” (2019), by Mr. Lugo, features the face of Michael Brown Jr.,who was killed by the police in Ferguson, Mo., in 2014.Credit...Hannah Yoon for The New York Times

“I can’t tell you how many Black moms took a picture of this piece and posted it and shared their own stories,” Mr. Lugo said.

He added, “It’s important that it makes people feel like that institution is there for them, not just others.”

The images on his pots, urns and cups may be thoroughly contemporary — “I use that to bring people into this medium,” he said — but Mr. Lugo’s techniques are squarely in the ceramic tradition.

“Nowadays I use a wide variety of clays, for different reasons,” he said. “Sometimes I like to start with a dark clay because then the background has some color. So I use that for some of my functional pottery.”

For his more elaborate artworks like the “Brooklyn Century Vase,” porcelain is “a whole different, messy thing,” he said, because its heavy iron content increases its plasticity. “It’s like throwing cream cheese.”

That piece and others like it were hand painted by Mr. Lugo. “It’s a very traditional process called overglaze painting, sometimes called China painting,” he said. “It’s hand done with a quill pen.”

Mr. Lugo has eight assistants helping him in his busy studio. “We call it Lugo Land,” he said. “I’ll start off my day throwing 20 to 30 cups as kind of my warm-up exercise.”

He gives away part of his output “to young artists of color, or people who need support for their organizations,” he said.

In the last few years, Mr. Lugo has turned the spotlight on himself so much, on social media and elsewhere, that it has taken a toll.

“I feel like I’m a sacrificial lamb,” he said of the sometimes harsh feedback he has received. “I’ve had two serious bouts of depression.”

He added, “Being an artist is about vulnerability, but when you’re vulnerable, it gives everybody else the power.”

But that isn’t stopping Mr. Lugo from making art or promoting it, partly because he thinks that his trajectory may inspire others.

“When I first started making ceramics, if anybody ever gave me a compliment, my joke was always, ‘Oh, you can go check out my work at the Met,’” Mr. Lugo said.

Now that it has really happened, he added, “It reminds me how far I’ve come, but it’s not just about me. People have to look for artists like me, and support us.”

***Correction:*** *Oct. 21, 2021*

*An earlier version of a picture caption with this article misspelled the surname of an artist collaborating in the "Back and Forth: Red and Meth" exhibition at the Wexler Gallery in Philadelphia. The artist is Ashley Porrini, not Porini. An earlier version of the article misstated the ending date of an exhibition at the Arthur Ross Gallery at the University of Pennsylvania. It is Dec. 19, not Dec. 1. Also, because of outdated information from a publicist, it misstated when “Before Yesterday We Could Fly: An Afrofuturist Period Room" will open at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. It is Nov. 5, not Nov. 1.*

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