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'Pottery Saved My Life': A Kensington graffiti artist finds fine art success



DAVID MAIALETTI / Staff Photographer

Award-winning ceramic artist Roberto Lugo points to an area where he used to graffiti as he does a pottery demonstration at E. Tusculum and Somerset streets in Philadelphia, PA on June 19, 2018.



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Roberto Lugo was sitting at a pottery wheel he'd planted on a barren triangle of concrete at Tusculum and Somerset in Kensington. One after another, cars passing through the intersection pulled up, real slow.

Lugo, who grew up in the neighborhood, is an award-winning ceramist who teaches at Temple University. His taller pieces may surpass two feet in height and command between \$14,000 and \$18,000. One recent weekday morning — the fifth time he was partnering with the Clay Studio, an Old City-based gallery and educational center, to make pottery in public — his goal was to show people of color what they can make with their hands, and make of themselves.

Drivers looked on with puzzlement or smiles at the man whose sleeveless T-shirt said: Pottery Saved My Life.

Mark Kent, 40, took in the scene from his bike.

“You ever made pottery before?” Lugo, 36, asked him.

“No,” Kent replied. “How do you that?”

Lugo swiftly invited him to the wheel. Spinning clay can yield moments of magic when a mound stops being a mound and becomes something more — a cup, a jar or a vase, rising into shape. Lugo showed Kent that bowls are made from clasped palms and soft pinches.

Kent seemed amazed at the result.

“You made that seem real easy, man,” he said.

“Nah,” Lugo replied, “you got this.”

This patch of an open-air studio was a block away from one of the Kensington houses Lugo had grown up in, and it overlooked the train tracks where Lugo used to spray graffiti. His tag: Robske.

“I just didn't see my life going anywhere,” Lugo said of the period after high school.

Drug dealing, he knew, could bring in more money, cash to buy Jordans, new rims, and other trimmings that he thought could make him feel “important.” And so he started saying to himself, “Well, I want to do that.”

“And the moment that I had that feeling, I said, ‘Well, you know what? I really just need to get the hell out of here.’”



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Award-winning ceramic artist Roberto Lugo helps Justin Pryor during a pottery demonstration at E. Tusculum and Somerset streets in Philadelphia, PA on June 19, 2018.

Lugo moved to Florida and took art classes at a community college, where a couple new chapters in his life took shape. One of his instructors was a potter, who clued him into the craft. He fell in love with making pottery. And he fell in love with the woman he'd marry, then Ashley Ainsworth, a fellow art student.

After Florida, the couple moved together to pursue studies at Kansas City Art Institute, where Ashley took a photograph of her husband for a class project, and later, amid critique, a peer remarked to much laughter that he looked like a Mexican gangster. (Both of Lugo's parents hail from Puerto Rico.) The comment made Lugo reflect on whose faces get venerated on vases. A seed was planted. He started with a self-portrait.

Lugo is known for taking the traditional forms of fine china and drenching them in urban aesthetics, creating patterns that resemble paint sprayed on stucco, tribal textiles, or even tied bandannas. Instead of deities, he often selects visages from Black history. He works primarily with porcelain and makes reference to the finery of blue-and-white pottery designs and gold. He calls this process "code layering": Rather than code switching, or changing from one language or dialect to another, he presents myriad art traditions together in the same piece.



Images by KeneK Photography courtesy of Wexler Gallery

Ceramicist Roberto Lugo created this jar, 'Pulitzer: Kendrick and Gwendolyn,' as an ode to the achievements of both hip hop artist Kendrick Lamar and trailblazing poet Gwendolyn Brooks. This piece is among his newer works this year.

Judith S. Schwartz, a ceramics curator based at New York University, said the craftsmanship of Lugo's pieces deserves consideration first: "They're elegant and have a sensitivity to the volume of a vase, the swell, the curvature."

Schwartz considers the scale of, say, a 25-inch-high Lugo pot seductive, and noted that multiple portraits invite 360-degree walks to take in everything and better absorb his message, "reflecting our time, our social and political changes."

Three years ago, Lugo was still on the grind: He could be seen at art fairs charging \$20 for cups and \$200 for large jars.

But after winning an emerging artist award from the National Council on Education for Ceramic Arts in 2015, he got a call from Lewis Wexler, owner of an eponymous Old City gallery. Lugo lugged his pots in Walmart bags. Gallery staffers set them on soft blankets. Then they asked about his pricing.

“I was trying to impress them, so I gave them a figure,” said Lugo. “And they’re just like, ‘Well, we don’t really sell things for that low.’”

Wexler added another zero to Lugo’s going rate. Life for the artist hasn’t been the same since.

Now that the Elkins Park resident has won a prestigious Barr Arts Fellowship and landed an assistant professorship at the Tyler School of Art, he navigates the field as an artist and advocate, constantly pushing for diversity in pottery. With the Clay Studio, which is planning to move its headquarters to Kensington, he also gives pottery classes to youth around the city. He runs an Instagram account that highlights potters of color and curates group shows that feature them. Last year, the Haystack Mountain School of Crafts opened a scholarship for minority students in his name.

According to National Center for Education Statistics data for the 2016-17 academic year, one quarter of students who earned degrees in ceramics were of color. Natalia Arbelaez, a 2018 NCECA Emerging Artist, said Lugo is always pushing for funding for marginalized artists.



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Award-winning ceramic artist Roberto Lugo, left, helps Justin Pryor, 45, of Kensington, during a pottery demonstration at E. Tusculum and Somerset streets in Philadelphia, PA on June 19, 2018.

Back on the triangle

As Lugo worked at the wheel this week, Mimi Lovell approached on foot. She lives in a tent in a homeless encampment below Emerald Bridge, which [stretches above the Conrail tracks nearby](#).

“That’s so awesome,” she gushed. “It reminds me of, what’s that movie? Yes, *Ghost*! So beautiful.”

Moments later, a car pulled over. The driver was Lugo’s cousin, and she stopped for a hug. Lugo still has family in the neighborhood. His father, Gilberto Lugo, was a Pentecostal minister and store owner, but didn’t find much success in either.

“It reminds me a little bit of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*,” said Lugo, “in that he’s physically in a space, but he wasn’t able to participate in it.”

His mother, Maribel Ayala Lugo, who would take kitchen gigs here and there, estimates that the family moved 10 or 11 times during her son’s upbringing, switching schools frequently. Lugo remembers seeing his brother brutalized and left unconscious at the hands of a white supremacist youth gang that roamed Kensington in his adolescence in the 1990s.

Lugo’s mother recalls how he used to speak of his future. “He said, ‘*Mami*, one day, if I’m able to accomplish what I want to do, I’m going to come back and give back to my community.’”

After his cousin pulled away, Lugo returned to his conversation with Lovell.

“I know I’m not Patrick Swayze,” he joked. Then he offered a tutorial.

He talked her through shaping a mound on the wheel, how pressing her fingers would open up the clay. The sides of a small cup grew grander, rounder.

“There you go, you got a bowl,” he said.

“Yeah, baby!” she said. “I love it.”

The hustle for Lugo — teaching, advocating, creating — may never stop. His bachelor’s and master’s degrees left him \$170,000 in debt.

With all those missions on his plate, he can’t afford fatigue.

“It just feels like a dream that I’m living in right now,” he said. “I don’t know when it’s going to end. It’s like one of those hourglasses where I’m going to run out of time, and people aren’t going to care what I do anymore. So I’m taking advantage of it.”