



EDITOR'S PICK

ROBERTO LUGO'S HIP-HOP TEAPOTS

by Robin Rice | May 2, 2016

Through his porcelain vessels, the Philadelphia artist and rapper pays tribute to black history, pop culture and his own story of overcoming adversity.



Across many cultures, a shared pot of tea has long been at the center of civilized discourse. The artist **Roberto Lugo** describes his provocative figurative teapots as symbols of "sitting down with topics that people will discuss." He is showing these and other porcelain vessels in his solo exhibition "Defacing Adversity: The Life and Times of Roberto Lugo," at Philadelphia's **Wexler Gallery** through June 11. The objects are displayed alongside paintings that the artist executed in the gallery.

Typically, Lugo pairs portraits on the sides of his ornate teapots. People who never met in life now share the surface of the cultivated container. In *Frederick Douglass and Method Man* (2015), the 19th-century abolitionist and the modern-day Wu-Tang Clan rapper grace either side of a diaper-patterned pot with a high dainty handle, possibly suitable for Douglass's day. What would these exceptional wordsmiths have to say to each other? They now have eternity to discover.

Lugo appropriates other familiar forms for *We Are All Kings* (2015), an artwork in the shape of a high-shouldered urn, which is surmounted by a delicate open-work golden crown, an encrypted reference to the urban myth that the popular car air fresheners in this shape are made by the Ku Klux Klan. The surface of the teapot is decorated with portraits of individuals who have become symbols of the destructive power of institutional racism: Michael Brown, Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner and Rodney King. Each face floats in a deathly pale cartouche against a black ground.



Artist **Roberto Lugo**, whose work is currently showcased in the exhibition "Defacing Adversity," at Philadelphia's **Wexler Gallery**, holds his porcelain vessel *All About the Benjamins*, 2016. Top, from left: Lugo's *Robbie Vase J*, 2016; *Tubman, Obama and a Dragon Century Vase*, 2016; and *Of Dirty Bastard and Sojourner Truth*, 2015. Portraits by Jewel Lee Photography; product photography by Kenek Photography, courtesy of Wexler Gallery

It took Lugo several years to find the voice that enabled him to transcend and manipulate functionality in this expressive way. For a long time, he says, "I couldn't figure out what I could add to the conversation and had to consider how it would work in the world." Ultimately, ceramics spoke to him, enabling him to integrate the traditions of decorated vessels with his commitment to more directly communicative fields. He is still an activist, educator, rapper and poet.



Ceramics: *Bong Teapot and Pillon*, 2015



Self-described as a polite Christian boy, Lugo grew up in a Puerto Rican family in Philadelphia's Kensington neighborhood. He learned early on that society expected him, like other young people of color with little money, to use drugs and deface property — in short, to become a criminal. He did get involved with graffiti and rap music, both of which remain central to his work, but when Lugo witnessed drug-related assaults on his brother and a friend, he says, "I realized I had to make a drastic change if I wanted to make anything of myself."

So he moved to Deltona, Florida, where a serendipitously selected course in drawing at a community college led to pottery, with which Lugo felt "an instant connection." (He went on to earn a BFA from the Kansas City Art Institute and an MFA from Penn State University.) His relentless focus on "skill building and how to throw a well-rendered pot" remains evident in his newest ceramics. Graceful bodies segue into well-fitted lids. Baroque handles balance swan-like spouts that really can pour tea.



"I realized I had to make a drastic change if I wanted to make anything of myself."

Lugo says, "I see the act of making pots as a metaphor for my life." To further reflect his vaulting aspirations, he has chosen porcelain, the most difficult and elite clay body, as his main medium. It is fired to cone 10 (about 2,381 degrees Fahrenheit), generally regarded as the highest temperature for pottery, at which clay vitrifies, or fuses into a glass-like material.

Shaping the vessel is the beginning of a process that involves three or more additional firings. Lugo's favorite part is painting the portraits and related decorations in colorful overglazes. By the time he gets to that part, the perfectionism of making the pot and the worry about whether it will crack in the kiln are over. "I'm not really sure of whom to put on the pot until that point. It's a little bit of a mystery."

From his sketches, Lugo makes decals similar to street-art stencils. A black outline, borrowed from graffiti techniques, becomes the master pattern. He also draws directly on the pots. These visible layers of overglaze "add history," he says. Finally, gold is applied, in a wink to traditional china painting, and the vessel is fired one last time. In *All About the Benjamins Century Vase*, 2016, a pail-like container with images and quotations reflecting the manipulation of money, handles in the shape of a billy goat, on one side, and a panda bear, on the other, are highlighted in gold.

"The teapot for me is really a conversation point," Lugo says. His occasional self-portraits suggest a conversation in which "I sit down with somebody and realize that we are similar," he continues. "In order for me to really make change, I have to have two ears and one mouth — and have the capacity to listen and change myself. I have to be humble enough to understand that I don't know everything."



Michael Jackson and Lauryn Hill Teapot, 2016

Visit Wexler Gallery on 1stdibs

FILED UNDER

1stdibs Dealer, 1stdibs Gallery, Art, Artist, Ceramics, Contemporary Art, Decor, Decorative Arts, Fine Art, Gallery Show, Philadelphia, porcelain, Pottery, Roberto Lugo, Robin Rice, Sculpture, Tea, Teapot, Arts, Wexler Gallery