



# Meet Roberto Lugo, the ceramicist changing the politics of clay

*By Kelsey McKinney  
August 23, 2016*

The first time I saw a piece of Roberto Lugo's work, it stopped me in my tracks. I was in the Phillips Collection Contemporary Museum in Washington, D.C. to see an exhibit on the top floor, but I ended up stuck in the first gallery with this Roberto Lugo. In front of me was a ceramic vessel that was round at the bottom and narrow and straight at the top. It was painted black, and on the front-facing side there was crackle red glaze. Over that, a portrait of a young black man wearing a backwards hat gazed out at the viewer.

Pottery straddles the line between craft and art. Among ceramicists, there is just as much emphasis on how thinly you can throw the side of a bowl as what you put on the outside of it. Because of the emphasis on technical skill in ceramic communities, it's rare to see a piece of pottery in a museum and think "radical." It's rare to see ceramic art in contemporary museums at all.

Roberto Lugo's work is the exception. It's beautiful, emotional, and incredibly powerful. Lugo grew up in Philadelphia, in a part of town where no one he knew became an artist. He is a talented man of Puerto Rican descent working in pottery, which very few people of color do.

I spoke with Lugo on the phone last week about how he became an artist, why he makes art, and what his hopes are for the future.



YouTube

## **Let's start with some background on you. Where did you grow up?**

I grew up in different parts of Philadelphia but mostly a neighborhood called Kensington. My father was a pastor. He'd often fix up houses, and we'd often live in those houses. They didn't have electricity or plumbing. Most often they were poor neighborhoods, and the houses we moved into [had been] houses used for crack or something like that—a reason someone would abandon a whole house.

Poor in Philadelphia is different. The place specifically where I'm from was more of a place where people might come to buy drugs and get prostitutes, but you weren't very likely to get robbed there. It was a hub for other kinds of criminal activity.

## Were you close with your neighbors?

It wasn't a neighborhood where you got together with your neighbor for a potluck. But there were really cool parts. When it was a hot day, my dad would open up the fire hydrant and all the neighborhood kids would come play in it. Sometimes I look back at memories and I have this strange relationship to them, because they are sort of sad, but they are also really sweet. My sister would take me to buy penny candies but then we would buy them with food stamps.



Wexler Gallery

## How did you start doing art?

I wound up finding it later, at 25. I never really had a relationship with the arts. I did do some graffiti when I was in my teens. But that was sort of a more rebellious thing. I would say I'm an odd person, which suits being an artist but doesn't really suit being anything else.

I was into different things than all the kids in school. Graffiti was that perfect bridge. It fit that culture of where I was from and it was also creative. It was also a place where people built community—I think in the same way that gangs get kids because they have nothing else to do.

People think of, like, Banksy, beautiful graffiti that someone got permission to do. Graffiti for us was tagging abandoned buildings. The biggest thing I was afraid of was stepping on syringes. Sometimes we'd have to wait for a john and a prostitute to finish their thing so we could go tag a building. But I was no longer a hermit.

### **When did you decide to leave Philadelphia?**

I found myself where all the friends I had gone to high school with, and my male cousins... a lot of them had found themselves in prison. This is where the odd part of me would surface. I just thought that there's gotta be more to life than this. My idea at the time was if I can get really big rims, maybe I can get a girlfriend. Then I was like, maybe I don't have to do any of this. Maybe I can get away.

I called my cousins in Florida, and they said I could come stay with them. So, I moved down here. I got a job. Fell in love with a community college here that was \$200 a class. When I showed up to the college and looked at the class listing, art was the only thing I could think of that seemed somewhat exciting. I knew I would have fun doing it. The drawing teacher was also a potter and he encouraged me to try pottery out.



Wexler Gallery

**"Refugee Century Vase"**

## **So when did you realize that pottery was more than just a hobby for you?**

It was the first time that people thought I was good at something. I think it was because maybe I gave off some sort of aura that I was good at it. I tried to keep up with the fact that all this pressure was put onto me in this beginning ceramics class. After a while, I began to develop a technical skill, which I think is something I had been thirsty for for a long time.

Pottery really felt like the first time that a door was open for me and that what I was doing was above the average. I also found that my relationship with art was completely different right off the bat. The first time I thought about the potter's wheel, I didn't think about the fact that it made bowls. I thought this is a thing that makes things round. And since I thought that, I started making fire hydrants that were soap dispensers because when there wouldn't be any water, my dad and I would take a shower in the fire hydrant.

Because of my background, I had different connections than my peers did. It wasn't that my work was more important than theirs. My work made the conversation more complicated. Because I was interested in their backgrounds and where they came from whereas if it was an all white class they would have had very different critiques and conversations.

## **Do you feel like you're included in the ceramics community, which is historically a pretty rich, white, artistic practice?**

You can also get and feel exploited by fulfilling some kind of niche by being the person of color in a show. Their need for that. One of the things that's really difficult with my background and being a person of color, I have to get people to a basic understanding where my work comes from.

## **So when you submit your work, you feel like people often have trouble understanding where it comes from?**

If you're making work about being from rural America, people sort of instinctually understand where you're coming from on a landscape. When I'm talking about urban discourse, a lot of people that come from the urban area, they usually don't come from a poor urban area. If they come from the poor area, they probably aren't people of color. I had very few people who just understood my content. So, I had to spend a lot of time having to explain where I come from. I was able to bring my work and use my work as a bridge between cultures. There isn't a lot of representation of people of color who come from poor neighborhoods in the visual arts. You're talking about content that doesn't have to do with a lot of show opportunities that are out there.



Wexler Gallery

"We Are All Kings"

## **Why do you think it's difficult to break through that divide?**

People automatically assume that you're going to make art about certain things. And then I make art about those things, so I fit the cliché. Yes, I make pottery; that isn't a cliché. But then I make pottery about hip-hop and racism and poverty, which is a cliché. A lot of my work encompasses what people expect of me. The way that I execute it is through craft in a medium that I think is underexploited in contemporary art. Although there are historically some people of color who make pottery, I don't think a lot of people look to those crafts as contemporary art exhibitions. I think I'm getting more support from the visual arts community than I am the craft community. For them in the craft, I think I am somehow ruining the culture that they had by adding these things they don't think belong, like content and racial implications.

## **Ceramics often asks artists to choose to be craftsmen or visual artists. Have you picked a side?**

I definitely feel myself more as a visual artist. I've just grown not to care about a lot of things that people who make pottery do. Like, I would really like for a teapot to pour incredibly well, but I don't let that stifle me from showing the work. If I make a teapot that gives me what I want. I'm not gonna not show it because the spout is clogged and it doesn't pour very well.





**There are so many black faces on the sides of the pots that you make. Can you talk about how your art is political, and why you choose to make it so?**

There are people who are really great at speaking and writing and there are people who are good organizers. Somehow, I've been given the opportunity to be a maker. We need all of these people to move things forward. The things we make with clay last thousands of years. Making something and giving it permanence is important, even if no one tells you it is.

I put Mike Brown and Trayvon Martin on a pot. Their faces will be on a pot for thousands of years, even when people have forgotten. My role in the new civil rights movement is keeping the conversation going long after it's left the news.

**A lot of your work is deeply personal, sometimes including self-portraits. How often does your political view overlap with what you're going through personally?**

I think sometimes they're separated. But most often the political and the personal are very connected. When I was painting Mike Brown it was an overnight thing. One night I realized that I was kind of sleep drawing. When I woke up, I realized that I drew my face on this pot. Then I realized, I drew Mike Brown's face, but his features are really similar to mine. Because I wasn't thinking too hard, I was able to visualize how similar we are. I realize how easily I could have been taken from this world.

Any time I'm on the road and I drive with my wife she always drives because I am genuinely afraid of being pulled over. Am I going to get shot if I go for my license? I have a little boy. That kind of thing does become really personal. I am very afraid of the world that we live in. That sensitivity really informs my work.



Wexler Gallery

## **Do you feel any kind of backlash to your use of pottery as a medium for political progress?**

Oh yeah, people will call me a sentimental bitch. I get quite a bit of hate mail. Mostly from the craft community. Some people say I'm "the de-evolution of clay." They don't think that this conversation belongs in clay. But it definitely does. That's why anthropology uses so many ceramic objects because we can know so much because of the pottery: what they were drinking and eating, how they lived.

I'm representing a culture that maybe people don't think is worthy of representing. It's not a place that people often think about. People where I come from make really pragmatic decisions.

I took a big risk becoming an artist. Now I'm gonna go and take a career in the arts where I'm not going to make any money. It was a huge risk and I'm so glad I've taken it not just because of the exposure but because of the conversations that have been had.

*Lugo's work is on display at the Wexler Gallery in Philadelphia. He is also currently starting a scholarship to fund artists of color to work at the Haysack School of Craft.*