

ARTSY

This Artist Is Making Ceramics to Honor People of Color, from Obama to Biggie

ARTSY EDITORIAL
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When ceramic artist, poet, and social activist Roberto Lugo traveled to Utuado, Puerto Rico, to see about starting an art residency there, he asked locals if they knew his grandfather, who was from the area. “They remembered him as the man who carried the refrigerator up the mountain,” Lugo tells me.

This was the result, Lugo posits, of systematic discrimination against his people, the indigenous Taíno, by the United States. “They didn’t build roads to their land, so they couldn’t compete agriculturally with the rest of the people,” he continues. “My grandfather would have to climb a mountain in order to get to his home.”

While the terrain was flat where the younger Lugo grew up in Philadelphia, the Puerto Rican artist had a figurative mountain to climb from an early age.

“My neighborhood in Kensington was really synonymous with prostitution and drugs,” the artist says. He recalls the racial tensions he faced growing up there; and being surrounded by graffiti—an early font of artistic inspiration.

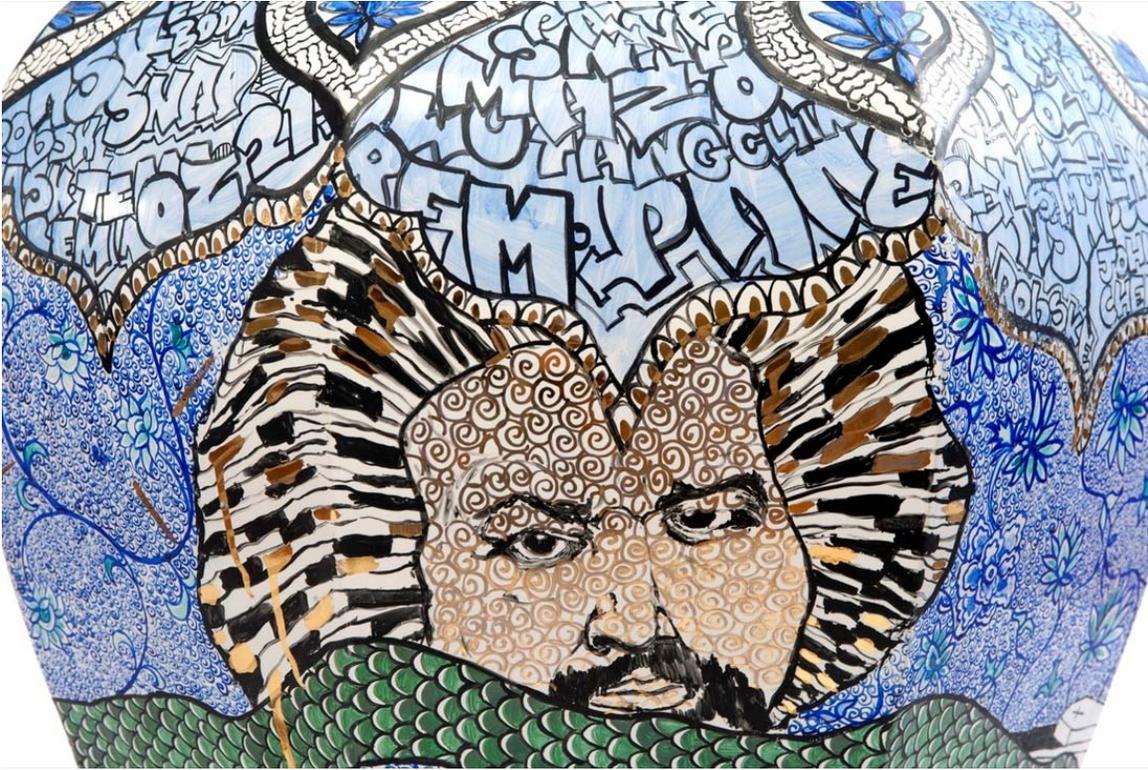


Today, Lugo describes himself as a “ghetto potter.” He creates fine vessels that take on the shapes of Victorian-era fine china, and paints on their surfaces the likenesses of Mike Brown, Trayvon Martin, Biggie, and Prince, as well as members of his family and self-portraits, with exacting detail. These works are memorials to people of color, many of whom were slain by police, and celebrations of figures who have persisted. Lugo meditates on histories of power and art, but roots his work in his own heritage and experiences.

“I know there are Africans and slaves in my family,” he says, and recalls the prejudice he felt growing up. He remembers his mom being harangued by a teacher for not sending him to the zoo with money for lunch; and a school trip to a local prison, where the warden had asked who the troublemakers were. His teacher singled him out alongside two others.

“I was a Christian, a little goody-two-shoes,” he explains. “I didn’t curse, I made sure to never talk out of turn, I always did my homework. I remember looking around and having this warden tell me I was gonna live in this cell.”

This led to an epiphany for the young Lugo. “On my way home, I was trying to figure out why would they put me through this,” he explains. “I was in shock, I was crying, and I didn’t understand. I realized that it was because of the way that I looked.”



Growing up, Lugo's father was a Pentecostal preacher and his mother worked numerous jobs, from school cafeterias to bodegas. At around the age of 13, he first became interested in graffiti, while spending time with his family ("I have about 57 first cousins"). "I would watch my cousins, who would do a lot of bubble letters and graffiti drawing in notebooks," he says.

At 16, he started drawing on walls. He never had a problem with police, he says, because "in those areas, nobody gave a shit [where] you painted...This was a defunct part of the world that cops didn't really care about." Death and tribute were recurring motifs, and Lugo remembers being inspired in particular by messages he saw on trains. "I'd see things like R.I.P. and somebody's name who'd passed away. I just loved the fact that there was this moving memory of this person," he offers.

Later in life, Lugo's parents moved to Deltona, Florida, and he enrolled in a community college there. "I was 25 years old and there wasn't really a history in my family of people going to college," Lugo notes. He signed up for an art class, excited by the prospect and thinking that it would be a good way to meet people. He didn't anticipate that he would fall in love with it.



Lugo developed a portfolio of work that earned him a scholarship to School of the Art Institute in Chicago, but he couldn't afford to stay. He moved back to his parents' house, found a kiln on Craigslist, and installed it in the garage. Since there wasn't a proper outlet there, he would move the kitchen stove at night and plug the kiln in at night. It was at that point that he started combining graffiti aesthetics with the historical pottery he studied.

He would go on to earn a BFA from the Kansas City Art Institute, and after undergrad, he began giving lectures on pottery and activism. In 2014, he finished the MFA program at Pennsylvania State University, and has since gone on to have his work shown in exhibitions in galleries and museums, while also serving as a professor. A new show of his signature vessels (including a human-sized urn), titled "Jarring," opens at The Delaware Contemporary on May 26th.

In March 2017, Lugo was among 45 artists to receive a United States Artists grant, a \$50,000 unrestricted stipend. He gave a stirring acceptance speech (with a spoken-word cadence that he attributes to listening to his father's rhythmic sermons), and later explained that he's using that money to help buy a house, where he'll have a studio. "It's allowed me a lot of flexibility in terms of the way I work," Lugo says.

He acknowledges that there's a gray area when it comes to making and selling his work, which at times raises the complex issue of portraying other people's experiences and political struggle for profit. "If I'm just working off of what I know could sell, then my work could flow into this sort of exploitative part," he explains, "because often I'm paying homage to people."



However, he says, “I need to figure out how to support myself, and I think my work is important.” One recent work, titled *Law and Order: The Reincarnation of Frederick Douglass* (2017), is a porcelain pot with an image of Donald Trump on the front and Frederick Douglass on the back, a reference to the recent gaffe the president made when he referred to the legendary abolitionist in the present tense. Another recent work portrays Freddie Gray, the 25-year-old who was killed by Baltimore police. For Lugo, making art has enabled him to feed himself and his family—and to communicate ideas that people need to hear. “What it’s trying to do,” the artist says, “is pay homage to those lives that have been lost, and keep the conversation going after it’s not on the news and not right in your face.”

He later adds, “Art has the capacity to make people listen.”

—Rob Goyanes