

Ceramics

Art and Perception

2014
ISSUE 98

INTERNATIONAL
US\$20 · UK £10 · CAN\$22 · €17



Roberto Lugo

Not Fearing the Message

Article by Blair Schulman

THE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF ROBERTO LUGO'S work manifests itself towards a close-up look at an American experience. As both an artist and an activist, his work imparts a fearlessness that relates to many struggles rampant in our culture; incarceration, gang violence, obesity, politics, poverty and racism (both overt and covert). Thus, Lugo successfully assigns certain qualities of his ceramics into a high culture that either fawns over certain historical facets or else turns its back on odiferous, but significant and cultural explicitness. Rather than stand on a rostrum shouting platitudes, this artist is in his studio quietly crafting statements that linger long after the dust settles. Throwing clay enables him to relive terrible experiences in his life. Things that, says Lugo, "as a student . . . seemed irrelevant to my peers, but increasingly became all I could think of." Being exposed to both the impoverished inner-city where Lugo grew up to the art-historic streets of Europe, his work is an ongoing intersection of these worlds.

What became best known as an adverse reaction to urban decay in the 20th century, graffiti (or tagging as its also known) is elevated to an art form discussed as seriously as the Italian Renaissance or Abstract Expressionism. Skillfully combining the documentary and political aspects of tagging with the permanence



of clay, Lugo is forging a dialogue that combines both disciplines into a personalised experience that has long been a touchstone of his crafting.

Lugo was first taught graffiti by Payne (aka Tony Cuco) and thus became his formal introduction to art in Lugo's hometown of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, US. Many years later he found himself in a college classroom where a professor suggested he try the potters wheel. Since then he has made art continuously with an emphasis on his cultural history.

As a student of the Kansas City Art Institute (KCAI), considered to have one of the finest ceramics departments in the US, Lugo was the subject of racial slurs and insensitive comments that later found their way into his pottery. "Although I grew up in the 1980s," says Lugo, "(the times) still showed signs of pre-equality, as I can recall being called 'spic' more than my own name. My work naturally took its course because I found myself surrounded by . . . great people, but people (who nonetheless) needed to be surrounded by more diversity. I felt a calling to represent the people who will never get to throw on a wheel.

. . . put their faces on pots and tell their stories." The emotions of his work make it necessary to add humour in order to deal with these issues. Lugo earned a BFA from KCAI in 2012 (Ceramics) and was awarded his MFA in 2014 from Pennsylvania State University, State College, PA.

Although it was hard to discern then, Lugo's early exposure to graffiti and mural art led to painting RIP murals on the clay bricks of a street side building as a way to pay homage to the fallen in his neighbourhood.

Above: *Abuela Jar*. 2014. Stoneware, china paint and lustre.
Facing page, top: *King Jar*. 2014. Stoneware and slip.
Facing page, below: *World Champion of the World*. 2014.
Terracotta, china paint, lustre and acrylic.

These murals serve as public places of mourning. The one forbidden act of tagging, however, was to paint over a 'piece' made in honour of someone's death. When the city came in and painted over these murals only then did it symbolically end the mourning period. Seeking permanence, Lugo has begun paying homage to those killed, thus providing a validation to their existence.

His studio research led him to creating urns depicting the images of the fallen. Furthering this idea, he is looking to create murals in Philadelphia that include brick niches to house the ceramic pieces of the lost and forgotten. "Creating these murals" says Lugo, "with clay rather than paint will give the homage a different relationship within the community." Impressed by ideas on a trip to Florence, Italy, he discovered shrines built in public spaces that enlist the strength of the community to maintain their permanence.

Another inspiration is the Watts Tower in Los Angeles, California, a collection of 17 interconnected sculptural structures. Considered an example of outsider art and vernacular architecture, the Watts Tower is one of nine folk art sites listed in the National Register of Historic Places. Furthering his idea of community involvement with historical importance, Lugo is requesting the Warren McKenzie Advancement Award to allow him travel to Philadelphia to seek a location.

Richard Ross, Professor of Art at University of California, Santa Barbara, is also an activist and the creator of *Juvenile in Justice*, a 2013 multimedia project exhibited at Philadelphia's Crane Arts in which Lugo participated, "to visualise the American juvenile justice system". Ross and I discussed Lugo's long-term work. Says Ross, "He does current work on a scaffold of traditional and historical structure. . . Viennese porcelain supporting hip-hop. An elegant surface but (an) intentionally uncomfortable form. We all have limitations, imposed by society, nature

or our bodies. The goal is to overcome the adversity and move on. My work has taken me across the country talking to many kids incarcerated in various dependency or probation environments. All seem as there is no path for them, no way out of the poverty or social structure that doesn't help them, but claws them down. And then there is Roberto, who discovers he can put the most basic, almost prehistoric act of putting clay on a slab or a wheel and tell a story, his story."

The difficulty with exploring content driven work in clay is crafting. Putting the ideas into physical manifestation one must rely on their skill set. Lugo cites this is as a challenge he has placed on himself and why he underwent The Hungary Program, an artist residency at the International Ceramics Studio he attended in Kecskemet, Hungary in the summers of 2012 and 2013. During the trip the selected students visited the Herend Factories and many other historical European ceramics establishments. This residency has some of the whitest, most translucent porcelain in the world. There, Lugo witnessed master china painters illustrating on large jars commissioned by sultans. The Hungary Program altogether will take three years to complete, with two years on campus and one year of dissertation work.

Professor and Chair of the Ceramics Department at KCAI, Cary Esser, remarks on Lugo's infectious positive energy, "Sometimes you get situations in a department where there is a phenomenal amount of talent and the students feed off this energy and challenge each other and grow as young artists. The thing that was special about Roberto and his classmates was how generous they were with their time and their talents, not just with each other but with the younger students, too. Roberto, especially, was good at networking and at building a community, not just within the





department and KCAI, but into Kansas City and beyond. Projects such as Bread KC (a micro-financing organisation dedicated to providing sustainable, democratic means of supporting the Kansas City creative community, founded in 2010) in which Lugo found himself both a participant and a recipient, and Empty Bowls (an international grassroots effort to fight hunger where potters, craftspeople and educators contribute skills and bowls at local events, raising money later donated to organisations working to end hunger and food insecurity) were natural matches for Roberto.

The incubator of Lugo's practice is borne of his upbringing and shining a light upon it. "I heard (American social practice installation artist) Theaster Gates speak freely about the need for blackness in clay and spoke about it without fear of people not liking his message. I have always been someone who has spoken about fearlessness, but in order to have a career I must 'play ball' in a way by not making my work accusatory (or) blame ceramics for not allowing people of colour within its community. In fact my work supports how well the ceramics community is willing to accept people of colour, I think we just need to find ways of getting other communities interested in the first place. I have said that clay is white because it is a privilege but I don't believe privileges should only be given to the privileged."

Lugo is preparing to pursue his PhD (in Philosophy and Art Education) from Penn State in order to answer these questions. Faculty in the program are working on creating a platform for artists to have the ability to use their studio practices as part

of their dissertations. Lugo was offered an opportunity to begin a new facet of the program that will be studio-based. Because of the nature of a PhD, all of the logistics are not completely solidified but it seems to be the perfect progression from Lugo's studies to figuring out how he can use his studio practice to facilitate concrete efforts that promote social equality. This will likely come in the form of teaching, community outreach, among Lugo's many ideas.

The long-term evolution of his work in clay will bring Lugo's ideas of putting social equality into praxis. He is not asking for sympathy as someone who has moved beyond his circumstances, but rather as a young man who has found a solution to adversity in clay. As a long time observer of his work, I believe this critical thinking may place Roberto Lugo as one his generations' finest artists. He wants people to rejoice with him as he makes work that pays homage to his background in graffiti, elevating it as both a tool of communication and a fine art.



Facing page: *Latin Kings Teapot*. 2014.

Porcelain, china paint and lustre.

Top to bottom: *Pride and Prejudice*. 2014.

Stoneware, slip, china paint and lustre.

Profile Picture. Photo by Evan Deutch.

Signature.

Signature on Readymade. Says Lugo of this image, "That is when I graffiti over a historic piece of porcelain. It also relates back to graffiti when you cross some one else's name out and put yours up."

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