

How the ceramist Roberto Lugo stays true to his past

# Taking it to the streets

## Glenn Adamson

Roberto Lugo grew up in Kensington. No, not the place in London with the museums, the expanse of Hyde Park and the expensive shops. This is another Kensington, in north Philadelphia, which Lugo unapologetically calls a ghetto. His formative years there were tough. He credits his discovery of art for saving him from the fate of many of his friends – jail time or worse. Today he is among the most prominent potters in the USA, and a faculty member in the ceramics programme at Tyler School of Art. His new installation at the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore is one of the most important craft events of the year.

Here's the thing, though: Lugo hasn't left Kensington behind. Ask him to deliver a lecture and he'll open with a freestyle rap. Graffiti has a prominent role in his repertoire, as does the cut-and-paste method of hip-hop improvisation. 'The word "ghetto" can be seen as a negative,' he says, 'but I equate it with the word "resourceful".' He often describes his work as bilingual, fluent both in the living language of the streets and the more formal vocabulary of historical decorative arts.

For the installation at the Walters, the first of a series of contemporary interventions staged in its newly renovated galleries, Lugo has created a series of mash-ups inspired by the museum's collection. The breadth of idiom is impressive, comprising ancient Greek black figure pottery, Chinese blue and white, Della Robbia figural sculpture, and moulded porcelain. The real power of the work, though, comes from its iconography. Some pieces bear images of unidentified black residents of Baltimore, which Lugo uses to conjure the servants who once tended the Walters' building when it was a luxurious residence – men and women whose likenesses are lost to history.

Other luminaries of African American history, such as Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman and Thurgood Marshall, also make appearances. In one particularly arresting work, Lugo reimagines a Sèvres potpourri as a slave ship, thinking of period descriptions that emphasise the stench of the sinister vessels as they sailed into port.

The crowning glory of the Walters installation is a self-portrait within a wreathed roundel, based on a Della Robbia relief sculpture. This sculpted and painted Lugo looms over the finely appointed gallery, formerly a dining room, like a presiding angel. His skin is tricked out in patterns drawn from Chinese export ware, evoking a gang member's tattoos. His garment is in orange and black, the colours of ancient pottery, but also contemporary prison uniforms. The effect is supremely ambivalent, which is appropriate, because it's tricky for Lugo when he is invited into such rarefied surroundings. On the one hand, he welcomes the platform and the chance to engage directly with historic objects. On the other, he is acutely aware of the perceived elitist history of places like the Walters. What he really wants, he says, is to 'eliminate the separation between that and where I come from'.

So that's exactly what he's been doing. As he was preparing for the show, Lugo took time out for a series of events back in Philadelphia. He isn't the only one who wants to reach new audiences there: the Clay Studio, an important centre for ceramic education that has been located in Philadelphia's upscale Old City neighbourhood since 1974, is currently preparing for a move to Kensington. Together with the organisation's curator, Jennifer Zwilling, Lugo conceived a disarmingly simple idea: he takes his wheel out into the streets where he grew up and starts throwing. No special invitations, no advertising, just making in



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public. It's an unusual sight, and he reliably gets a crowd of interested local people, some of whom have never seen a potter at work. These performances are a great piece of outreach for the Clay Studio, which is determined to build up a network for its new facility. Zwilling says that for her and her colleagues, 'the pop-up wheel-throwing events provide a great opportunity to engage our new neighbours and invite them to be partners in our planning process'. It's meaningful for Lugo, too, a chance to give something back to his old neighbourhood.

The artist is also committing his considerable energies elsewhere: in New Haven, where he is leading a mural workshop with local high school students; at Tyler, where he has built up a diverse group of MFA students; and at museums and conferences nationwide, where he is in high demand as a speaker. Watching him spread the word, it's hard to miss the burden that is placed on him, and on his work.

There are too few artists who are able to bridge the cultural gaps that he does, especially in the craft media, which remain overwhelmingly dominated by white middle-class people. Institutions have rushed to embrace him – and that's a good thing. Even better is that Lugo has engaged with them on his terms. Many people, from all walks of life, have good reason to be inspired by his example. The most important is that he's been able to stay true to himself.

[thewalters.org](http://thewalters.org)

**Above:** *Kick in the Doorway* (detail), 2018, installed at the Walters Art Museum at 1 West Mount Vernon Place. **Left:** Lugo at a throwing performance on a street in Kensington