

Design/ Miami



Artist Roberto Lugo. Photo © Neal Santos; courtesy of Wexler Gallery

IN THE MIX

Changing Narratives

Aric Chen

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Artist Roberto Lugo talks with Design Miami's Aric Chen about what craft, design, and the worlds they circulate in can tell us about their own history of racism

Last December, the Philadelphia-based ceramic artist Roberto Lugo presented Street Shrine at Design Miami. Recalling the impromptu memorials that often appear at the scenes of street killings in American cities, the installation confronted the intertwined issues of systemic racism, representation, and history that are often the subject of Lugo's work.

Born to Puerto Rican parents in the inner city neighborhood of Kensington, Philadelphia, Lugo is also a poet, activist and educator. In the wake of George Floyd's death at the hands of police in Minneapolis, Design Miami's Curatorial Director Aric Chen spoke with the self-described "ghetto potter" about his work and what craft, design, and the worlds they circulate in can tell us about their own history of racism and what we can do about it—beginning with the acknowledgment that it exists.



Street Shrine 1: A Notorious Story. Photo © KeneK; courtesy of Wexler Gallery

Aric Chen: Roberto, we're speaking just a few weeks after the killing of George Floyd, and I'm wondering how it's affected you—which I realize is maybe too big a question.

Roberto Lugo: No, I understand what you're asking. It's complicated, because I'm simultaneously trying to take care of myself as a person and not watch too many videos or listen to things that will bring me some sort of trauma. Inevitably, it makes me think of my own circumstances and how many times I've been really close to death with the police. Some of these things might seem abstract to people who maybe don't face the same issues. But when something like a George Floyd comes up or a Mike Brown or a Trayvon

Martin, I relive experiences in my own life where that could have easily been me.

It inspires me to do something about it, but it also makes me wary. I think partly it's because I secretly know that nothing I'm going to do is actually going to make change; because the only people who can convince white people not to be racist are other white people. It's a lot of work that is out of my hands. We can scream from the mountains, we can tear down statues, but until white Americans—day in and day out—are changing the attitudes of other white Americans, nothing is ever really going to be done. It's sad. But maybe some of what I'm doing is inspiring some of those white people who can empathize with my experience to take action and do things in their own communities. And maybe, progressively, that's how actual change is made.



Ghetto Krater 2018. Photo © KeneK Photography; courtesy of Wexler Gallery

AC: As disturbing as that is to hear, it makes sense. It describes exactly how systemic racism is, after all, systemic. You touched on this with Street Shrine. What prompted you to make that work?

RL: In Philly and New York and elsewhere, when people are killed in the street, a lot of times people will bring teddy bears and flowers and create like a street shrine for them. Those things are ephemeral, but I thought about how ceramics are this tool that's been used by anthropologists to tell stories about cultures in the past—what life was like way back when. So I thought about the permanence of ceramics and how I could use that to give permanence to some of these other narratives while also representing my culture.



Street Shrine 1: A Notorious Story. Photo © Silvia Ros

AC: Could you expand on why ceramics are such a compelling medium for doing this?

RL: Ceramics are a good platform for this, first of all, because they're subtly representational of a lot of the ways we think about how we prioritize cultures, especially European and white cultures over South American, African, and Asian cultures. One of the things that's been so interesting to me is you're more likely to see African art or Mexican art inside an anthropology museum, whereas you're more likely to see European decorative arts in an art museum.

One of the reasons I work specifically in porcelain is that there's this history of porcelain being more expensive than gold, and the wealth that it represented around the 18th and even part of the 19th century said that you were in the top one percent. To be able to commission these things and have your family crest on them—or portraits of people that were important to you—it made it a good platform for me to have conversations on issues of race and equality in America.

And so one of the ways I'm thinking about that is how a lot of these important figures I grew up knowing—like a Frederick Douglass or Harriet Tubman, who are really iconic abolitionist figures of American history—are not really taught in a lot of white suburban schools in America. Not like how figures like George Washington or Benjamin Franklin are taught. I'm using ceramics as a way to make those names and the names of other people of color sort of like household names and get them into places where they might not normally be part of the conversation. My hope is to make that transition organically, where I'm not forcing anyone to

take part in this conversation, but I'm showing them the value of it and why it's important.

AC: In *Street Shrine*, you also portrayed figures like Notorious B.I.G. and Tupac Shakur.

RL: I'm making art that's in the decorative arts, and there's a world and audience out there that's well versed in decorative arts. That crowd tends to be different than the crowd I grew up with. So Notorious B.I.G. and Tupac are really iconic figures, like what John Lennon and Paul McCartney might be in a white suburban community. And having those images of people that come from where I came from, in a place like Design Miami, I saw it firsthand... There were people walking up and immediately recognizing Biggie and Tupac, and then there were also people who didn't recognize the faces and were more familiar with the vase shape and decoration. And so it creates this conversation, and I get excited about that.

AC: The *Street Shrine* was addressing issues of street violence, which is often violence perpetrated on people of color by other people of color—which is, in fact, an outcome of systemic racism. So to bring that into a context like Design Miami, I wonder how intentional that was for you. I think for most Design Miami attendees, gun violence is something you only read about.

RL: I don't have answers in terms of how to resolve a lot of the systemic racial issues we have in our country—and

around the world. But what happens when these issues are not ignored or covered up? What happens when we just acknowledge that they exist and they become part of our daily discussion and part of the discourse of being American?

We're here at this design fair and acknowledging and looking at these wonderful artisans and craftsmen, but we're also of the world that we live in and we're trying to figure out ways to work forward. And for me, one of the things I like about some of the institutions I've worked with, like the High Museum, is that they're acknowledging the histories of racism in their cities and in their institutions and they're making people aware of it. It's about expanding a dialogue about what design can be.



Ghetto Krater 2018. Photo © KeneK Photography; courtesy of Wexler Gallery

AC: Right, because when we talk about systemic racism, we're also talking about institutional power structures. You're collected by a lot of museums, including the High,

Brooklyn Museum, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and others. Back in December, we were also fortunate to have you on a panel discussion with the curator [Wolf Burchard] and designers [Robin Standefer and Stephen Alesch of Roman & Williams] of the newly reinstalled British Galleries at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. I'd love to hear your thoughts on that talk and, maybe more broadly, the notion of decolonizing museums.

RL: I loved talking with them. My whole life isn't just about race, you know what I mean? When I meet people who have similar interests, like British porcelain? Believe it or not, I'm a pottery dork. [laughs] I love that stuff. My particular interests are maybe different, but folks like them really celebrate that. You realize that they're very conscious of the fact that their museums are not representational. But a lot of these curators and people who work in museums have a lot of red tape; they have donors who donate work who expect to see it on display. There are all these reasons why things happen the way they do.

For the next couple of years, I'm working with museums on a lot of different collaborations. And a lot of them have to do with me giving my representation of what I think are the contributions of that city or town to Black culture. I've never questioned whether or not a museum has good intentions when they're hiring me to make my work. But you know, there have been moments when I have spoken up about something, and I almost felt like I was put in my place when I've argued about it with a museum.

AC: Like how?

RL: An example of that is me wanting to do a portrait of a person who I think is influential, and the museum wanting somebody who's more politically correct or more accepted by their white audience. But I've never really lost that fight. When I go to a museum, a lot of the security guards are Black. They treat me with so much respect and admiration, and what I often hear from them are things like, "Finally, we have some art in here that we like to look at; we have some art in here that I get." And those are the things I get really excited about—when a person who comes from where I come from goes to the decorative arts wing of a museum and finds something that actually interests them. Something that's representational of them, and not just a representation of historic racism.

Like I once worked with the Walters Art Museum, and they had this Sèvres potpourri vase that had a picture of a ship on it. It made me think about how the home that this existed in had servants, and these servants are looking at this ship that smells good and it's really expensive. But their history, their vision of a ship coming to America is very different. Their idea of a smell as it relates to a ship is very different.

So this is a very loaded piece of historic porcelain, and most people are going to look at this and never get that. They're just going to see a potpourri vase. In my role as an artist, I make another potpourri ship that has an image of the interior of a slave ship. It's more in your face—making you have to confront the reality of this very loaded object.



Installation at the Walters Art Museum. Photo courtesy of the Walters Art Museum

AC: So institutions like museums need to rethink, and rework, how they see and tell history. But what can Design Miami and the rest of the design community do?

RL: I think what needs to happen is we need to foster and promote more young folks and expose them to the world of craft and making. Not everyone is going to be a ceramicist. But if you teach enough people, those that are meant to be that will see that as an option and pursue that.

For [the profession], it's a double-edged sword. I think whenever I've been in a situation where people will invite more artists of color, then it becomes, like, "Are we tokenizing this person?" So my thing is, we're involved in a field where we have a system set up that prioritizes things that are more likely to exist in the artwork of a white person than the artwork of a person of color. And so for me, we have to figure out our system of evaluation and how there could be racist undertones in the way we value and accept work.



A Century of Black Music 2018. Photo © KeneK Photography; courtesy of Wexler Gallery

AC: You mentioned earlier that you're not all about race, but I wonder if sometimes you feel pigeonholed or compelled to be about race.

RL: You know, Aric, you're a person of color from America, too, [laughs] and we all have similar struggles.

AC: Yes, that's true.

RL: But yeah, it's sad. I do sometimes feel pigeonholed, but I don't really feel like I have an option. I almost feel like I have an obligation to people of color when I'm given opportunities because they've lifted me up and they've supported me. I mean, it's unfortunate; I don't think a lot of pottery organizations are going to hire me to come in and teach people how to paint on pottery or how to make a perfect vase. Usually when I'm coming in, it's because they have issues in their community, and they want somebody who works with clay to come in and talk about these things. So I'm always kind of pigeonholed in that place, but I've become comfortable there, honestly. And because I'm comfortable there, I don't mind it. I don't want to force other people of color to have to be in that position. My hope is, if I continue to do what I do, and other people in my position continue to do what they do, then people after us will be free to just make pots about pots.