ABOUT THE ARTIST

Roberto Lugo

Born 1981

Roberto Lugo is an American potter, poet, social activist and educator. Born in Kensington in North Philadelphia, Lugo’s young parents were first generation immigrants from Puerto Rico. Because of the job scarcity and declining conditions in his own neighborhood, his father rode a bike to work in New Jersey in order to provide for his family. As a child, Lugo was quiet, had a thick Spanish accent, and often felt on the margins of American culture. He began exploring creative expression in his teens through street graffiti, and eventually discovered a love for ceramics while enrolled in community college. Lugo felt called to make pieces that highlight his personal experiences, and that spark conversations about important issues like social justice, race and poverty. “When I sit at a potter’s wheel, I often think of my father’s bike tire spinning, and this metaphor has always had me reach for more.”

Lugo’s work draws together hip-hop, history and politics in a unique way. He combines the classical pottery forms from traditional European and Asian ceramics with graffiti-like patterns and hand-painted portraits of people who have been historically absent from these kinds of vessels. Individuals like Sojourner Truth, the Notorious BIG, and even his own family members have appeared on his pieces.

Lugo refers to himself as a “village potter”, striving to be someone that not only creates beautiful and functional objects, but celebrates and empowers the lives of others through art and design. His work has been featured in museums and galleries world-wide. He is currently a professor of ceramics at Tyler School of Art.

Photo Credit: Roberto Lugo, 2019 Pew Fellow. Photo by Ryan Collerd.
ABOUT THE ARTWORK

Bold colors and hand-painted geometric patterns decorate the outside of two seemingly unworn sneakers. Golden ceramic accents with etchings make the tongue, heel and aglets (the rigid ends of a shoelace) of each sneaker glimmer. The rubber soles are two-tone in dark gray and white with several textured patterns visible. The shoelaces, neatly tied in a bow, are made of black leather.

Perhaps best known as a sculptor, artist Roberto Lugo enjoys combining elements of modern urban life with shapes and patterns traditionally found in historical art traditions. In 2021, Lugo collaborated with Garrixon Studio, a customized footwear manufacturer in Philadelphia, to create a series of 15 limited-edition, hand-painted Nike Air sneakers. When designing this custom sneaker collection, Lugo was inspired by the graffiti art and hip-hop street style that he saw while growing up in North Philadelphia. Sneakers like Nike Air Jordans were popular but expensive, often out of reach for families living in Lugo’s neighborhood. They were seen as a kind of status symbol, or an item that might indicate a person’s wealth or high value within a social group. According to the artist, whose work and social activism has propelled him to near celebrity standing in the art world, “Stunting represents a clash of where I was and where I am.”

LET'S LOOK

• What different kinds of materials do you see in this work? Why do you think the artist used them in the places and ways he did?

• If you were designed a custom sneaker just for you, what other interesting or unexpected materials might you enjoy including?

• In popular culture, the word “stunting” can mean showing off, or seeking attention by displaying something expensive or in high demand. In what ways might the title of this piece be referring to the artist? How about the person who might buy the work?

• Do you think that functional items like furniture, clothing or shoes can be considered art? Why or why not?

• Describe your favorite pair of shoes. What makes them so special?

Above: Roberto Lugo, STUNTING I, Custom Nike Air Jordan 4, 2021, 9/15. Acrylic on canvas, leather, glazed ceramic, luster, rubber, and plastic
**Spoken Word Poetry**
Roberto Lugo sometimes uses spoken word poetry to deliver powerful and inspiring messages about social causes. This type of poetry is designed to be performed in public, and often makes use of vivid imagery, repetition, rhyme, improvisation and unique points of view to tell a story or make a statement. Write your own spoken word poem inspired by Lugo’s artwork and/or the old adage “Don’t judge someone until you’ve walked a mile in their shoes.”

Hold a class-wide Poetry Slam Day where students can share their work. View performances by spoken word poets to help you prepare. Check out: “I Wanna Hear a Poem” by Steve Colman; “Touchscreen” by Marshall Davis Jones; “The Hill We Climb” by Amanda Gorman. Notice how these poets use eye contact, posture, facial expressions, repetition and rhyme to help tell their story.

**Hometown Stories**
Roberto Lugo grew up in the Kensington neighborhood of North Philadelphia, where he witnessed the community struggling with high crime rates and little opportunity for gainful employment. Research to find out what happened to turn a once prosperous neighborhood into an impoverished one. Has anything similar happened in a neighborhood in your city or town? What can people do to help uplift struggling communities? How can art play a role in that?

**Shoe Imagineering**
Sneakers are well-engineered products that use a mixture of materials to build a highly functional and wearable shoes. Shoe designers must consider the properties of potential materials and how they will support the structure and movement of human feet. As a class, collect a variety of interesting materials that you might not necessarily expect to see in a sneaker design – pipe cleaners, bubble wrap, cardboard, a ball of yarn, etc. Evaluate them according to height, flexibility, support, cushioning and traction, or grip. Which materials rate the highest for arch support? Which would make the best sole? Sketch a design for a new athletic shoe that incorporates some or all of these materials. Annotate your sketch to label each material and explain your choices.

**Contour Drawing**
Shoes make great subjects for contour line drawings, an easy and effective way to improve your observational drawing skills. Start by placing your shoe on the desk in front of you so that you are looking at one side in profile. Using a pencil, begin to sketch the outside edge of the shoe on a piece of paper. As your eye follows the outline of the shoe, try to move your pencil accordingly. For instances, if there is a ridge along the shoe’s outline, let your pencil make the same movement. Only capture the outline and key shapes of the shoe without adding any shading or small details. This can be tricky at first, and your initial drawings might even look a little strange. With continued practice, the process will feel more natural.

Want an extra challenge? Hold a piece of paper just under your nose while you work. This is called a “blind contour drawing”, and is an even better way to train your hand to follow what your eyes see.