

# Pottery Is Political

## Nick Stagliano

Michelle Erickson and Roberto Lugo are ceramicists whose work responds to contemporary politics and society while relying on the medium's historical traditions. In Erickson's case, she uses the same techniques employed by potters in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries but infuses her work with modern commentary. Lugo adopts unmistakably traditional forms, such as urns, vases, and teapots, but he covers them with the faces of African Americans—Barack Obama, Martin Luther King, Jr., Frederick Douglass, and Whitney Houston, among others. Two centuries ago, the only black faces to appear on pottery were slaves, servants, or performers in blackface. Erickson and Lugo both have deep knowledge and respect for the history of their profession, but they are not afraid to shatter the authority of precedent to create profoundly relevant work.



Fig. 1. Century Vase, ca. 1876; Designed by Karl L. H. Müller; Manufactured by Union Porcelain Works; porcelain; Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Franklin Chace; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 69.194.1

Roberto Lugo was born in Philadelphia in 1981, the third child of his 21-year-old mother.<sup>1</sup> On an elementary-school fieldtrip to a prison, a teacher identified Lugo—who never swore and went to church every day with his preacher father—as one of the two troublemakers in the class. A prison guard took Lugo into a cell and told him, “This is where you’re going to end up.” It was Lugo’s first experience being treated differently because of his race.<sup>2</sup> A self-described ghetto potter, Lugo’s earliest artistic medium was graffiti, which continues to feature in his work. Not until he was 25 years old did he enroll in art classes and begin to make pottery, which he pursued through a BFA at the Kansas City Art Institute and an MFA at Pennsylvania State University.<sup>3</sup>

Lugo is perhaps best known for his reinterpretations of the Century Vase,

created in 1876 at Union Porcelain Works in Brooklyn, New York, on the occasion of the American centennial. Designed by Karl Müller, the Century Vase’s various decorative elements share a commonality: their overt and undeniable celebration of American history. Relief panels of historical scenes surround the vase, which is adorned with bison heads and portraits of George Washington (Fig. 1). One of Lugo’s versions of the vase is titled *A Century of Black Lives Mattering*; it is covered with the faces not of Founding Fathers but of African American men who were murdered by white police officers: Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Philando Castile, and Alton Sterling (Fig. 2). At the bottom of the vase, in relief, are nooses, referencing the history of hangings of African Americans. Around the neck of the vase is painted “Black Lives Still Matter.” “I am very much interested in having these lives memorialized,” Lugo



Fig. 2. Roberto Lugo, *A Century of Black Lives Mattering*, 2016; porcelain, china paint, luster; image by KeneK Photography courtesy of Wexler Gallery



**Fig. 3.** Pot-pourri à vaisseau, 1757–58; Modeled by Jean-Claude Duplessis; Manufactured by Sèvres Porcelain Manufactory; soft-paste porcelain; Gift of Samuel H. Kress Foundation; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 58.75.89a,b

says.<sup>4</sup> Another of his remixed Century Vases includes the faces of Sojourner Truth, Cornel West, and Frederick Douglass alongside busts of George Washington and Theodore Roosevelt with silver chains—perhaps slave manacles—around their necks.<sup>5</sup>

Lugo has a vast knowledge of ceramic history. In one piece, he adopts the style of fifteenth-century Italian sculptors Andrea and Luca Della Robbia; in another, he

eighteenth century at the Sèvres Porcelain Manufactory. Lugo's version of the Sèvres *pot-pourri à vaisseau* (potpourri in the shape of a ship), originals of which were owned by Madame de Pompadour, features the hold of a slave ship packed with bodies (Figs. 3-4). For his play on Viktor Schreckengost's *Jazz Bowl*, Lugo employs the same blue and black scheme to depict an urban environment, but he includes a boom box and cassette tapes and calls his version *Hip Hop Bowl*.

<sup>31</sup> references a celebrated form made in the



**Fig. 4.** Roberto Lugo, *Slave Ship Poipourri Boat*, 2017; porcelain, china paint, luster; The Walters Art Museum; image by KeneK Photography courtesy of Wexler Gallery

Lugo also adopts traditional forms used by Chinese potters, particularly vases and urns. In one tall, lidded vase, Lugo surrounds portraits of Colin Kaepernick and the abolitionist John Brown with abundant swathes of different repeating geometric designs. The overall effect is not unlike that on Chinese porcelains decorated in the tobacco leaf style. On one vessel in the typical Chinese ginger jar shape, Lugo depicts Frederick Douglass and Arthur Ashe (the decorated African American

tennis player) with their hair and clothes painted with vibrant florals in a manner evocative of Kehinde Wiley's paintings.

Lugo's work sells for tens of thousands of dollars. He admits to some discomfort with the idea of profiting off of other people's experiences. He argues, however, that he is trying to "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."<sup>6</sup> Similarly,



Fig. 5. Pickle Stand, 1770–72; Made by Gousse Bonnin and George Anthony Morris, American China Manufactory; soft-paste porcelain; Friends of the American Wing Fund; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1990.19

Lugo’s explanation for his use of traditional forms, and working in porcelain, is, “I put Mike Brown and Trayvon Martin on a pot. Their faces will be on a pot for thousands of years, even when people have forgotten. My role in the new civil rights movement is keeping the conversation going long after it’s left the news.”<sup>7</sup>

Another contemporary ceramicist strongly influenced by and making use of historical antecedents is Michelle Erickson. Erickson is probably best known for her recreation of the Bonnin and Morris pickle stand, also known as a sweetmeat dish, used for the display of candied fruits and nuts and one of the most recognizable products of early American porcelain manufacture (Fig. 5). On Erickson’s version, the interiors of the three scallop shells are painted with the words “Made In China,” referring both

to the Chinese origins of porcelain and to the present-day ubiquity of manufactured products originating from China (Fig. 6). More than just artistic reinvention, Erickson’s pickle stand is rooted in her deep knowledge of ceramic history and an understanding of eighteenth-century porcelain manufacturing techniques, which she relies on for her adaptations.

“Made In China” also appears on the interior of a porcelain chamber pot Erickson made titled *Republican Potty*. On one side of the exterior, Donald Trump takes the place of William Hogarth’s *John Wilkes*, a “shameless self-promoter.”<sup>8</sup> Behind Trump is the Confederate flag. On the other side of the chamber pot is Paul Revere’s *The Able Doctor*—depicting the violation of America—with the subbed-in faces of members of the GOP (e.g.,

John Boehner, Mitch McConnell, Wayne LaPierre, chairman of the NRA holding an assault rifle, and Chief Justice John Roberts) underneath the words “The Party’s Over.” Erickson has used the same two images on a porcelain leech jar.

Erickson earned a BFA from the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia, in 1982. Williamsburg’s deep history and culture of archaeological excavation influenced Erickson, who began her college career as a painting major and switched to ceramics after encountering the College’s collections. She calls herself an experimental archaeologist, a term that means investigating remnants of the past, such as architectural structures, agriculture, or ceramics in Erickson’s case. She attempts to understand the historical processes that become the archaeological record and even to reproduce them using authentic, original

techniques.<sup>10</sup>

Erickson’s work as a ceramicist is grounded in a deep understanding of historical ceramics, particularly eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American techniques. Drawing on this knowledge, she has recreated marbled slipware bowls, ring bottles, and squirrel bottles (Fig. 7). Squirrel bottles were made in Salem, North Carolina, by Moravian (from outside of Dresden, Germany) potters as early as 1803. Two forms of the squirrel bottle were made: one taller (about 8.5 inches) with a straight back and the other slightly shorter (about 6.75 inches) with a curved figure. The straight-backed example is most common, and squirrel bottles survive in greater numbers than bottles featuring any other animals (turtles, owls, fish)—perhaps owing to the squirrel’s popularity as a pet in the early to mid-nineteenth century.<sup>11</sup>

Fig. 6. Michelle Erickson, *American Pickle*, 2008; slipcast, sprig-molded, and hand-built porcelain; The Reeves Collection, Washington & Lee University; photo by Gavin Ashworth courtesy of Michelle Erickson





Fig. 7. Bottle, ca. 1790–1805; made in Salem, North Carolina; earthenware; Purchase, Dr. and Mrs. Burton P. Fabricand Gift; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1991.205

Erickson meticulously studied a surviving mold for a squirrel bottle and produced her own plaster mold with traditional techniques.<sup>12</sup> She placed a squirrel-sized assault rifle in the rodent's tiny hands and named her piece *2nd Amendment Squirrel*. A pair of Erickson's squirrel bottles hold the male and female gender symbols and have the rainbow flag painted on their heads (Fig. 8). The work is titled *HB2 Squirrels*; HB2 was the name of the North Carolina law forbidding transgender people from using the bathroom corresponding to their gender identities.

Erickson's reinterpretation of the eighteenth-century Meissen Monkey Band provided an opportunity to demonstrate her skills as a modeler of clay. A form of *singerie*, artistic depictions of monkeys engaged in human activities, Erickson's Monkey Band features George W. Bush and members of his presidential administration

as the musicians.<sup>13</sup> The figures are clearly labeled Condé, Dick, Rummy, and G.W., and we see Bush literally tooting his own horn.

Roberto Lugo and Michelle Erickson are far from the only contemporary ceramicists using their work to send a message or make a point—politically, socially, or otherwise. They are unique in their extraordinary knowledge of historical ceramic traditions and techniques. Their use of these historically significant forms lends enormous symbolic weight to the politically charged and challenging messages contained within their work.



Fig. 8. Michelle Erickson, *HB2 Squirrels*, 2016; thrown and hand built wood fired stoneware with black and white porcelain slip; fired in collaboration with Ben Owen III; Mint Museum, Charlotte, NC; photo by Robert Hunter

## Notes

1. Roberto Lugo, "About," Roberto Lugo Studio, accessed 26 April 2018, <http://robertolugostudio.com/about>.

2. Rob Goyanes, "This Artist Is Making Ceramics to Honor People of Color, from Obama to Biggie," *Artsy*, 15 May 2017, <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-artist-making-ceramics-honor-people-color-obama-biggie>.

3. *Ibid.*

4. As quoted in Sarah Archer, "Ceramic Vases that Contain All the Beauty and Ugliness of US History," *Hyperallergic*, 8 June 2016, <https://hyperallergic.com/304153/ceramic-vases-that-contain-all-the-beauty-and-ugliness-of-us-history/>.

5. *Ibid.*

6. Rob Goyanes, "This Artist..."

7. Kelsey McKinney, "Meet Roberto Lugo, the ceramicist changing the politics of clay," *Splinter*, 8 August 2016, <https://splinternews.com/meet-roberto-lugo-the-ceramicist-changing-the-politics-1793861429>.

8. Michelle Erickson, "The Party's Over and Trump Esq.," *Michelle Erickson Ceramics*, accessed 26 April 2018, <http://www.michelleericksonceramics.com/?action=trumped-up-china>.

9. Lauren Oyler, "Feminist Ceramicist Michelle Erickson Makes Pottery Political," *Vice*, 14 August 2015, [https://broadly.vice.com/en\\_us/article/qkg9jp/feminist-ceramicist-michelle-erickson-makes-pottery-political](https://broadly.vice.com/en_us/article/qkg9jp/feminist-ceramicist-michelle-erickson-makes-pottery-political).

10. Brandon Keim, "Experimental Archaeologists Test Past By Making It Real," *Wired*, 19 July 2011, <https://www.wired.com/2011/07/experimental-archaeology/>.

11. Michelle Erickson, Robert Hunter, and Caroline M. Hannah, "Making a Moravian Squirrel Bottle," *Ceramics in America* (2009): 201; "Squirrel Bottle," MESDA Collection Website, accessed 26 April 2018, <http://mesda.org/item/collections/squirrel-bottle/10255/>.

12. Erickson, Hunter, and Hannah, "Making..."

13. "Monkey Band," RISD, accessed 26 April 2018, [https://risdmuseum.org/art\\_design/objects/636\\_the\\_monkey\\_band\\_affenkapelle](https://risdmuseum.org/art_design/objects/636_the_monkey_band_affenkapelle)