

ART@BAINBRIDGE

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY ART MUSEUM

Roberto Lugo / Orange and Black

February 15–July 6, 2025



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Roberto Lugo is a Philadelphia-based artist who takes inspiration from historical ceramic vessels, recontextualizing their visual imagery in his own work. In his recent series *Orange and Black*, Lugo draws on the shapes, techniques, and decorative motifs of ancient Greek vases to tell personal and communal stories, highlighting issues of oppression, inequality, race, socioeconomic hardship, and incarceration. Adapting the pictorial narrative structures of ancient Greek objects, Lugo replaces the depiction of Greek life and myth with the underrepresented stories of various contemporary communities. He creatively plays with Athenian ornamental vase decoration to relate it to imagery that pervades the present-day urban landscape, creating a new visual vocabulary and mythology of life in America.

The following text is adapted from an interview with Lugo conducted by exhibition curator Carolyn M. Laferrière.

RL: From the very beginning, my perception of what art is was pulled from my lived experiences. When I threw my first pot in community college at the age of twenty-five, it was transformative. I felt like there was a place for me to make the work that I would eventually wind up creating. The vessels that I'm developing for this exhibition are all done in the hope that I can follow the ancient Greeks' capacity for storytelling as I archive the people and the community who made it possible for me to be an artist.

CL: In many ways your work is so personal, tied to your own experience of life. What is your creative process for making a vessel, both in its form and for the story you want it to tell?

RL: One of the things that's distinct about my studio practice is that I don't have all the answers from the beginning. Clay doesn't always cooperate with me in the ways that I would like it to, and I think some of that is archived in my work in the visible mistakes and—for me—the things that I wish I could do. I look at the ancient pots and think about those artists who were absolute masters of their craft. It's very overwhelming, but there's a sense of humility in knowing you're not going to make something identical. Part of the fun, though, is that through my work, some of my own story is archived—what I am and am not capable of doing.

I look a lot at the shapes of the vessels and their original functions. I don't want to make an exact replica, but I think about what a contemporary version of that thing would look like. I also think about the orange and black colors and the curves of ancient Greek ceramics—or even European decorative arts or Chinese pottery. A piece encompasses a full spectrum of ideas, and I figure out how to put all of these things together so that the historical references are recognizable but there's something distinct about the work that I'm making. Both things have to exist in my work for me to be happy with it.

I also need to understand my audience, since I'm trying to represent a certain culture, and my work needs to be understood by that culture. A lot of my process is improvisational; I don't know the full story that a work is going to tell. I work with a team in a workshop, where everyone has a different skill set, and together we decide which elements will decorate a vase. For example, some Greek ceramics show someone pouring liquid onto the ground. That reminded me of when people pour a forty of beer over a memorial, to symbolically share the liquid with someone who passed away. Telling such a story that represents where I'm from, and then linking that experience with an ancient practice, connects my culture to different times and places. It's important for people to place themselves within this long history and see—feel—that they have importance, that they are worthy of acknowledgement.

CL: For this exhibition, where your work is displayed next to ancient Greek ceramics, what has been your approach?

RL: I'm trying to create images that talk about daily life so that people can see our connection to the past. The more that I can make those connections, the more that viewers will grow to understand things that they may not have otherwise. In *What Had Happened Was*, a new subseries of *Orange and Black*, I'm also trying to tell stories of independent individuals, such as Selena, whose story reminds me of my own, or Jackie Robinson, who went through so much strife just to do the thing that he was meant to do. I also wanted to think more about how the African diaspora has played a role in American culture.

One of the things I want is for visitors to remember the person or the image shown on the work, and not necessarily me as the artist. If someone leaves this exhibition and remembers that I showed Harriet Tubman on a vase, and that seeing her has changed their mind about what's possible in contemporary art, that's important because I've been able to commemorate and archive that story.

When I look at ancient Greek objects, I try to imagine what it would have been like to look at each object for the first time, because the people I'm trying to converse with are often looking at my work for the first time. When I see horses pulling a chariot, I think to myself, where do I see horses in the city? Sometimes cops are on horses, so I'll include that. Other times I might see a sparrow on a vase, and I think of the birds that I grew up around—a pigeon and a chicken—so I bring that into the fold. I try to figure out how to make connections between my experiences or the lens through which I view the world and the work. You'll also notice images from the objects that I've seen in Princeton's collections crop up, inviting you to find those places and make those connections for yourself.

I've never had my work displayed in such close proximity to objects that are more than a couple hundred years old. To display my work with things that are over two thousand years old reminds me of a moment that I had when I got to see these pieces in storage—I saw the way that the objects were made, I saw throwing lines. I just thought to myself how profound it is that I'm making work in a tradition that's so many generations old, and that so many things have happened since then. Regardless of whether people know or not who I am after I pass, the things that I've made and the stories that I've told will exist—just like the ancient Greek vessels. That's really significant, and it makes me feel like what I did with my time was important.

GALLERY 1



Same Boy, Different Breakfast,
2024



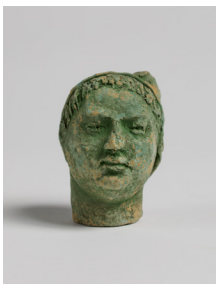
Attributed to the Hephaistos Painter
Classical Period (ca. 480–323 BCE)
Athens, Greece
Column krater (mixing bowl)
depicting a symposium (A),
three male youths (B), ca. 460 BCE
Red-figure ceramic
Princeton University Art Museum.
Trumbull-Prime Collection (y1929-203)

GALLERY 2

What Had Happened Was:
Ruby Bridges, 2024



What Had Happened Was:
In Memory, 2024



Garniture, 2024
Stoneware



Garniture, 2024
Stoneware, glaze, and luster



Garniture, 2024



Garniture, 2024



Classical Period (ca. 480–323 BCE)
Athens, Greece
Female head vase,
early 5th century BCE
Red-figure ceramic
Princeton University Art Museum.
Gift of Paul Didisheim, Class of
1950, and Ricarda J. Didisheim,
in memory of Helena Simkhovitch
Didisheim and Vladimir G.
Simkhovitch (2004-451)



Attributed to the Chevron Group
Classical Period (ca. 480–323 BCE)
Apulia, Italy
Oinochoe (jug) depicting a
male head, second half of the
4th century BCE
Red-figure ceramic
Princeton University Art Museum.
Gift of Annie Drown Ferree (y449)



Attributed to the Pithos Painter
Archaic Period (ca. 600–480 BCE)
Athens, Greece
Kylix (cup) depicting a kneeling
archer, ca. 490 BCE
Red-figure ceramic
Princeton University Art Museum.
Gift of Robin F. Beningson and
Joseph A. Coplin (2015-11)

GALLERY 3

**What Had Happened Was:
Selena, 2024**



**The Life and Times of
Dragon Clemente, 2024**



Garniture, 2024
Stoneware



Garniture, 2024
Stoneware



**Garniture (Dancing Man, Chain,
Microphone, Kangol Hat, Boom
Box, Dancing Man Fragments),
2024**



Attributed to the Princeton Painter
 Archaic Period (ca. 600–480 BCE)
 Athens, Greece
Amphora (storage vessel)
depicting a man and a woman in
a chariot (A), martial scene (B),
 ca. 540 BCE
 Black-figure ceramic
 Princeton University Art Museum.
 Trumbull-Prime Collection (y169)



Hellenistic Period (ca. 323–30 BCE)
 Greece
Rhyton (drinking horn),
 ca. late 2nd–1st century BCE
 Ceramic
 Princeton University Art Museum.
 Gift of Brian T. Aitken (y1994-89)

GALLERY 4



**What Had Happened Was:
The Path, 2024**



**What Had Happened Was:
Jackie Robinson, 2024**



**What Had Happened Was:
The Central Park Five, 2024**
Collection of Karen and
Henry Glanternik



Attributed to the Ariana Painter
Classical Period (ca. 480–323 BCE)
Athens, Greece
Column krater (mixing bowl)
depicting youths moving in a
procession (A) and standing (B),
ca. 460 BCE
Red-figure ceramic
Princeton University Art Museum.
Trumbull-Prime Collection (y1929-204)

Unless otherwise noted, all works are by Roberto Lugo (born 1981, Philadelphia, PA; active Philadelphia); are courtesy of Roberto Lugo and R & Company, New York; and are © Roberto Lugo. Unless otherwise noted, all are glazed stoneware.

Roberto Lugo / Orange and Black is curated by Carolyn M. Laferrière, associate curator of ancient Mediterranean art.

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Art@Bainbridge is a gallery project of the Princeton University Art Museum, located in historic Bainbridge House in downtown Princeton. Our main building is under construction as we build a bold new Museum, anticipated to open in Fall 2025. Visit our website for online exhibitions, videos, live programs, and more.

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