

Roberto Lugo

Alfarero del Barrio (Village Potter), 2026
Artist Statement



Yo soy Boricua.
a proud domino-playing,
pasteles-making,
piragua-selling,
fire hydrant-spraying,
plantain-peeling,
salsa-dancing,
alcapurria-consuming,
limber-on the front porch-hustling Puerto Rican.

Puerto Ricans are bar none a resilient people.
The same bars that protect the windows of our row homes from thieves.
We got bars that imprisoned our brothers who grew up in a life where
they felt they had no other option but to steal the bread and not let their
child starve.
We have bars, like the ones we drink at to forget the pain.
The same bars in our hip-hop.
Bars like the one passed by Justice Sonia Sotomayor.

We are proud.
The same pride that inspired my grandfather to ask for his gravestone to
have the American and Puerto Rican flags etched on it. The love that
Puerto Ricans have for the Island, culture, and people reminds me of the
love of country that many Americans have for the United States. The
story of the Puerto Rican migration is often marked with the search for
opportunity, but the more time that search continues, the less connected
we can feel to our motherland and ancestors. It is in the crafts that I find
these connections to the African potters and Taíno weavers who came
before me.

In recognition of the semiquincentennial of the United States of America, I wanted to recognize the diverse contributions of Puerto Ricans. *Alfarero del Barrio* is a celebration of Puerto Rican culture and a visual representation of our resilience, creativity, and courage. Puerto Rican heritage has roots in African, Taíno, and Spanish culture—a sofrito that provides flavor to everything we do. The history of this intersection is filled with stories of strife, injustice, and horror, but through it all, Puerto Ricans have proven to be icons of resourcefulness and ingenuity that are celebrated through our food, music, and culture.

Part of my role as a potter is to explore how history represents culture, and how I can use my work to tell the story of my people. In many ways, I am a traditional artist, so it is important to me to reclaim traditions that I feel have been stolen from us through the diaspora and enslavement of my African ancestors, the genocide of my Indigenous bloodline, and the pillaging of resources from the Island. Like many artists, I look to how our ancestors made objects, and in that I find representations of community. In my work, I consider how historically the role of the village potter was to create objects that transform everyday life into moments of ritual. What we call in Spanish “disfrutando.”

During the semiquincentennial, celebrate us, all of us. Puerto Ricans are as diverse as the entirety of the United States: we are black, white, liberal, conservative, and we have a wide range of philosophies within our communities. Yet what brings us together is a pride in our culture. Through my exhibition, I wanted to confront this complicated history by acknowledging the past while celebrating our greatness. I want to create a monumental vase with vignettes inspired by royal porcelain manufacturers, who depicted influential figures on objects that were affordable to the most wealthy. But *Alfarero del Barrio* is for everyone, and visitors to Madison Square Park can walk inside this vase and become one of its vignettes—proving how everyone is individually important and can contribute greatly to the world. The figures represented on the work have achieved incredible feats, from becoming a Supreme Court justice to winning Grammys, Oscars, Pulitzers, and Tonys, but they also include my mother and father, whose daily work made it possible for me to have the life and career I am blessed with.

This installation, at both Madison Square Park and Highbridge Park, exemplifies that all contributions are significant and none are small. *Alfarero del Barrio* celebrates all of us and is a reminder that we get to choose who we want to be and how we show up in the world. Together we can create a more just, loving, and empathetic place.

And I hope all visitors will stop for a moment and take pictures of themselves in the vase

Play a game of dominoes

Play around the fire hydrant

See that to be Puerto Rican is to be American.