

GAGOSIAN

Wallpaper*

Theaster Gates explores the troubling history of a coastal community forced out of home

For his first solo museum show in France, the Chicago-based artist dives into the dark past of the now-uninhabited Malaga Island off the coast of Maine

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Installation view of Theaster Gates' exhibition 'Amalgam' at Palais de Tokyo, Paris. Courtesy of Regen Projects Gallery, Los Angeles; Richard Gray Gallery, Chicago; White Cube, London and Hong Kong; and Gagosian

For his first exhibition in France, artist Theaster Gates has dredged up a dark and largely unknown fragment of American history. It concerns Malaga, a small island off the coast of Maine where, until 1912, a self-sufficient maritime community lived in relative isolation. Because the 40 residents represented a mix of African or partial-African descent at time when racism remained largely unchecked, they were evicted by the state so that Malaga Island might be transformed into a desirable tourist destination. This never happened; and the island remains uninhabited to this day. Yet within the Palais de Tokyo are a series of new monumental works, including a short film, through which Gates interprets and commemorates the larger history of colonial practices.

'I'm trying to suggest what happens when you take real history and fake history and force it into a form like modernism,' he explained during a preview of the exhibition. The show's title, 'Amalgam', is a near-perfect anagram of Malaga; but more importantly, its meaning as a mix of

elements (from materials to religious denominations) becomes the leitmotif under which Gates creates these evocative hybrid works.



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Highly respected for his approach as a 'social practice installation artist', which essentially encompasses his pot-making and activism alike, Gates recently accepted Prada's invitation to co-chair a Diversity and Inclusion Advisory Council, a new initiative that aims to elevate voices of colour within the company and throughout the fashion world. Incidentally, the exhibition falls during Black History Month in the United States. In France, meanwhile, President Emmanuel Macron's favourable stance on the restitution of 'tribal art' has become an ongoing issue with far-reaching ramifications. Gates and curator Katell Jaffrès may not have directly addressed either subject in his show, yet they give his complex cultural representations irrefutable relevance.

And so, the visit begins with a structure resembling a giant rooftop covered in slate shingles. This sloping form positioned on the floor gives the impression of a house that has been buried – whether under earth or water. The dimensions are roughly that of a Malaga Island cabin and Gates has christened it Altar, as though imbuing its humble construction with sublime significance.

Further on, the *Island Modernity Institute and Department of Tourism* is a multi-part installation consisting of traditional African artefacts, made-up archival documents and obsolete mementos (such as old records) that depict the Malaga people as a pseudo-archaeological study and subject of fascination. Within a vitrine on the central podium, neon green signage reads: 'In the end, nothing is pure', which Gates said applied as much to his 'ways of making' as something racially charged.



Island Modernity Institute and Department of Tourism, 2019, by Theaster Gates. Courtesy of Regen Projects Gallery, Los Angeles; Richard Gray Gallery, Chicago; White Cube, London and Hong Kong; and Gagosian.

In his 20-minute film, *Dance of Malaga*, Gates has spliced imagery of interracial cultural moments with the slow-moving, torqued choreography of American dancer, Kyle Abraham, who was filmed on the island. The Black Monks, a music collective to which Gates belongs, composed a score that sounds alternately ominous and meditative.

The final work exists as an immersive space where ash tree pillars – some topped with bronze casts of wooden African masks – are meant to both honour the forgotten people of Malaga and suggest how the island’s ecosystem has proven resilient. Through this forest of organic steles, visitors can wander and wonder whether the effect is calming or haunting. The title, *So Bitter This Curse of Darkness*, seems to declare a tragic end. Yet to hear Gates describe his first visit to Malaga in mostly positive terms might suggest otherwise. Despite arriving on a cold, damp day, what he remembers most is ‘feeling comfortable, alive and good.’

‘Amalgam’ is part of the Palais de Tokyo’s spring programming, titled ‘Sensible’, which runs until 12 May and also features creations by Angelica Mesiti, Julien Creuzet, Julius von Bismarck, Louis-Cyprien Rials and Franck Scurti. Elsewhere in Paris, Gagosian has devoted two floors to Gates, exhibiting works such as *Yellow Hose*, a large canvas paneled in a fire hose and his striking Black Madonna effigy in bronze.



Works in progress at the studio. Photography: Chris Strong. Courtesy of Theaster Gates.



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