

GAGOSIAN

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Theaster Gates

Hilton Als

There's something stately, beautiful, and removed in this prodigious Chicago-based artist and theorist's exhibition "Black Vessel," at the Gagosian gallery. In four rooms, Gates has created environments that expound on his interest in both the ideas of the thing and the thing itself. In the first space, wall-mounted ceramics were shaped without the benefit of the artist's hand: their forms are the result of the extreme heat in the kiln. It's that gesture—the artifact making itself—that seems to inform so much of Gates's ethos, which opens up such European-American modernisms as Abstract Expressionism, Arte Povera, and Minimalism to an African-American perspective. His large, handsome constructions, including the elegant, slightly inert, but ultimately winning six-foot-square "Flag Sketch," use materials commonly associated with labor (industrial enamel, copper nails, bitumen) to present new ideas about color-field painting, and about how categories of art and utility intersect and transform each other in the process. Throughout the show, Gates gives the very word "color" new meaning, just as his work alerts the viewer to the eye as a vessel leading to thought.