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Theaster Gates: 'Art and protest are forms of political thought'
*The artist talks about the work behind his first ever New York show, **Black Vessel**, and why white supremacy still threatens vital cultural institutions*

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Theaster Gates: 'My daddy taught me art is the tool I have, and this tool is good enough.' Photograph: Joe Maher/Getty Images for Prada

For a year and a half, I was constantly heating them the fuck up,” jokes artist, professor and social innovator Theaster Gates of the laborious brick-making process behind **Black Vessel**, his first-ever New York show, which opened earlier this month at Gagosian.

The creator’s newest exhibition examines what it means to repurpose everyday materials like tar and clay into works that speak to the broader human experience –particularly of class and race, community and commodity – in modern America. It includes a collection of handcrafted ceramic sculptures as well as a series of innovative paintings made with found and upcycled building materials, in homage to his father, an artisan and professional roofer. It is here that he asks: “What separates art from craft? Who divides the highbrow from the commonplace, the seen from the unseen?” In this context, **Black Vessel** becomes a nuanced exploration into what it means to live and work within both a medium and a Black body, speaking – but not screaming – to our current moment of social and political reconsideration.

Raised on the West Side of Chicago, Theaster gained popularity for his innovative blend of materials, civic-minded initiatives and modern spirituality. In addition to his career as a professor at the University of Chicago, he is also the leader of the Black Monks, an experimental music ensemble performing works inspired by southern hymnals and the music of John Cage, and the

director of the Rebuild Foundation, established in 2010 to provide free arts programming while transforming vacant structures throughout the South Side into cultural institutions, often turning the raw materials from these renovated buildings into community works. All of this has made Gates a powerful voice for change in the art world, one which has traditionally overlooked BIPOC voices but is now, in the wake of last summer's Black Lives Matter uprisings, been forced to reckon with long-overdue, sweeping social change.



Theaster Gates – Walking Prayer, 2018–20. Photograph: Photo: Robert McKeever. Courtesy Gagolian

“The challenge historically has been that when people of color organize radically ambitious, highly functional cultural institutions – the Black Panther party, economically viable communities like Tulsa, Oklahoma, the genius organizing of the civil rights movement and the NAACP – that in each of those moments, there has been a white supremacist impulse to destroy those viable institutions. So, the question remains, how do we build cultural institutions that are allowed to thrive given the truth of institutional subjugation and individual subjugation?” Gates asks. “I’ve also found that museums’ investment in Black people and people of color has often been tied to their ability to finance other larger white artist initiatives, so there’s still the sharp pain of inequity.”

Does he believe that institutions can fully become racially equitable environments? “Yes, but in order to get there, we can’t only hold museums accountable – we have to look at the institutions that produce the kind of art history that shapes curators, the financial support that gives bias towards or against the creation of new works of art and exhibitions, and the governance of museums, which in the absence of racial and ethnic diversity can, unfortunately, sing the same song of the western canon.” Ultimately, Gates argues for a genuine engagement with questions of race, gender and sexual difference within institutions – of who gets to divide the seen from the unseen.



Theaster Gates – Black Vessel installation view. Photograph: Photo: Robert McKeever. Courtesy Gagosian

As a child, the artist would often watch his father’s manual process, the precision and skill that went into roofing profoundly shaping his world view. In the show, layered paintings sparkle like asphalt on a weathered rooftop, with splashes of enamel paint and the elements of disintegrated plastic bags reduced to painterly streaks by a fierce blowtorch. Many of these sections have been peeled off derelict buildings in thick scrolls and kept in the artist’s studio before their resurrection as imposing “tar paintings”. In eschewing the traditional materials and techniques associated with classical European painters, he is decolonizing the medium and making space for new voices.

“I started going down this road, wondering if there’s something else I can do with these abandoned structures, this banal material?” he said of his newest works, explaining that part of him feels, conceptually, like he’s always choosing “the lowest thing” – the objects and mediums least recognized for their potency or power. “I don’t know how oil paint is more important than tar, and who decided this,” he asks. “Tar’s viscosity, like oil paint, will run if you heat it.” But context is everything. “Tar is messy, it’s sticky, it don’t come off – it attaches itself to things, it has a bad rap. And I think about the relative use-value of materials,” he continues. “This room is about what happens when the working class has something to say about painting.” In this case, Gates hopes to create a new way of looking at what we tend to overlook – in essence, a more understated form of activism.

“Art and protest are forms of political thought,” explains Gates. “They are both potent and make apparent the deep inequities, injustices and truths of our time.” For *Black Vessel*, in this moment, where “the impulse is for representation at all costs,” as a Black artist, rather than highlight protests or individuals, or cave to the market’s desire for performative wokeness, he wanted his work to represent a broader Black experience. “My daddy taught me art is the tool I have, and this tool is good enough. So I feel it’s just as representative – it’s inherited, but it manifests itself in another truth of Blackness.”



Theaster Gates – Flag Sketch, 2020. Photograph: Photo: Jacob Hand. Courtesy Gagosian

For the exhibition, Gates, a formally trained potter, also created several vessels inspired by traditional African water-carrying jugs, Japanese ceramics and high-end sculptures. Upon entering, a single chord from a Hammond 83 organ is piped from a Leslie speaker on repeat, a sound installation scored by the Black Monks. The E flat minor chord, Gates explains, is played at the exact moment when a Black preacher has taken his text, and he's ready to whoop. "It's setting the tonal opportunity for the spirit to come," turning his sea of vessels into a silent congregation.

"Black art and experience have exponential value beyond putting our trauma on display for non-Black audiences to interact with," he elaborates. "Our art is not only our grief, but our joy, our celebration, our traditions and the beauty that exists in extravagance and the everyday of our communities. There has to be a belief that artistic power lives amongst all people, and there needs to be a willingness to invest in those that seek out that artistic prowess in every form, from every underrepresented community, and amplify it on the walls of cultural institutions throughout the world.

"The Black experience isn't monolithic," he continues, "and that is why there needs to be Black voices at every decision-making process to inform the type of art that is on display for the rest of the world to consume."

In the show's final room, a chamber with glossy black brick walls, the same bricks that caused Gates so much grief, a makeshift sanctuary contains 2,600 volumes of a poem called *Walking Prayer*. Leather-bound and housed on traditional shelving from the legendary Black-owned Johnson Publishing Company, these books are given titles like *When We March* and *Martyrs When Necessary*, a repository for the joy and pain of Blackness in America. "The poem is a long-form prayer. It's my way of re-cloaking Black history, making it a tangible form that people would want to consume, and then working backward to the knowledge and knowing – an archive made whole and retrievable through my poem work." Above, the speakers echo in a way, he notes, that can make us feel emotions the material sometimes cannot. "It can be invisible yet still invoke – moving, shaking the walls."

