

GAGOSIAN HYPERALLERGIC

Theaster Gates's Emotional Confrontation With Racism
*With **Black Chapel**, Gates references the racism embedded in modernism's failure to adequately acknowledge non-white sources of inspiration.*

Alexandra Sommer



Installation view of Theaster Gates: Black Chapel, Haus der Kunst, Munich, 2019 (photo by Jens Weber, München)

A large oval club couch from the 1970s invites visitors to meet and linger in the central hall of the Haus der Kunst. It is part of *Black Chapel*, an exhibition by Chicago-based artist Theaster Gates that fills the museum's hall and accompanying archive gallery with a new energy and sense of purpose.

A *gesamtkunstwerk* encompassing sculpture, photography, sound, and architecture, *Black Chapel* almost literally transforms the museum into a place of worship. Two mirrored, iceberg-shaped sculptures on rotating platforms — housebergs, as Gates calls them — create a disco-like atmosphere in the central hall while R&B records from the collection of the Black American Olympic sprinter Jesse Owens (1913–80) are softly audible from the adjacent room. Two monumental illuminated advertising boxes fill the room with the presence of gorgeous Black women. The compelling images from the 1960s and '70s are from the archives of *Ebony* and *Jet*, Johnson Publishing Company's landmark magazines — the first mainstream magazines in the US addressed to Black readers. Gates confronts viewers with Black history in America, as well as systemic racism, by interweaving his installation visually and conceptually with the monumental Haus der Kunst, a major German museum for contemporary art built under Hitler's orders in Munich in 1933-37.



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Black Chapel is part of Haus Der Kunst's exhibition series *Der Öffentlichkeit* (To the Public), which is free to the public and always in the museum's central hall. The hall — a gigantic rectangular room that serves as a central passageway to the other rooms — is emblematic of the oversized Nazi architecture that was designed to demonstrate power. Gates echoes architectural elements and the grid-like façade of the doors and ceilings, as well as the monumental size, in two large cubic steel constructions reminiscent of pedestals and display cases. A houseberg is enthroned in the middle of one, while on the other is a showcase filled with objects. The “chapel” reference is reiterated in the two-sided, columnar aisle of the museum, which recalls the side aisles in churches, here interwoven with signifiers of secular African American culture.

Gates is known for his large-scale urban interventions — for his Dorchester Projects, in Chicago's South Side, he renovated abandoned buildings to create new spaces for art, research, and affordable housing. By adopting the museum's formal language with *Black Chapel*, Gates draws attention to its painful architectural history: The hall, where Adolf Hitler once gave speeches, is now a site of encounter with Black history. In the middle, suspended from the high ceiling, are American business signs; a neon sign reads, “Rothschild Liquors” and “Mama's Milk” and a lightbox sign reads, “Harold's, the Fried Chicken King.”



Theaster Gates, Black Madonna series (© Theaster Gates in collaboration with JNL Design)

Below, the light boxes screen a succession of images, alternating between glamorous fashion photographs of Black models and celebrities and reportage-like representations of Black middle-class Americans since the 1960s. Stylized photographs of Black models, some with collage elements, seem to emphasize the missing context, while others foreground their historical context — for instance, a woman lying on a chaise lounge, smoking, and facing the viewer on the oval red couch. The couch, designed by American interior designer Arthur Elrod and manufactured in 1972, was originally in the lobby of the Johnson Publishing Company office in Chicago. By positioning it as a central meeting and resting area, Gates references its history as well.

John H. Johnson founded Johnson Publishing in 1942, to provide Black readers “relief from the day-to-day combat with racism” and, as Johnson’s daughter, Linda Johnson Rice, told the Chicago Tribune in 2019, to be the “curator of the African-American experience, past, present, and future.” At the same time, the company created an archive of Black culture and history. Gates enlarges individual images from the magazines, monumentalizing them and dispensing with any direct reference to their context or the magazine’s content. The orientation requires viewers to look up at the women. This conceptually connects the images to the “chapel” theme as it invokes the upward gaze that connects worshippers to the heavens in church architecture. (It is worth noting that Gates initially planned to place the signs on the balcony of the central hall, which would have underscored this aspect further, but the signs were too heavy for the architecture to support.)



Installation view of Theaster Gates: Black Chapel, Haus der Kunst, Munich, 2019 (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

The images of glamorous Black models are a necessary corrective to media images in Europe and America of feminine beauty, which are historically — and remain today — dominated by white women. If the presentation falters at all, it's in the perpetuation of the tall, thin, symmetrical ideal of womanhood that is unattainable to most women around the world. Nevertheless, Gates's images are powerful and his intervention in the space is compelling and crucial, as is his spotlight on the Johnson Publishing archives. The archive was auctioned in July 2019; a larger consortium of foundations made the purchase collectively to make it available to researchers and ensure the preservation of Black American history.

Signs made by the German company Stöer used in the exhibition will be familiar to Munich residents, subtly calling to mind previously seen advertisements. Interior and exterior space thus interpenetrate each other. Here, though, the context serves to question the viewing habits of the predominantly white European viewers, many of whom will likely remember the Stöer signs. With which images do we surround ourselves? Gates offers a counter-image to the white-dominated media industry.



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The question of the representation of Black culture re-emerges in a showcase at the back of the hall that looks like a small museum within a museum. The objects it contains — books, masks, and object stands — seem to be exhibited in an unsystematic, almost chaotic arrangement. The question “What are we looking at?” carries over to the act of exhibiting itself and raises the question: *How* do we see things? By framing the books and objects within the format of an ethnographic museum display, Gates exposes the racist roots of the display method, but also challenges those viewers with ingrained (white, privileged) perspectives to consider who created the display.

The masks are presented with small signs denoting those from tourist markets and those made by Gates. They are juxtaposed with American history books that focus on the American Civil War period, such as *Abraham Lincoln: The War Years* by Carl Sandburg (1939) and *Lincoln’s Negro Policy* by Earnest Sevier Cox (1938). Gates references the racism embedded in modernism’s failure to adequately acknowledge non-white sources of inspiration as well as current discussions in museums about the repatriation of cultural objects. In doing so, he beckons questions of where these objects come from and what, exactly, they are. To what extent are viewers really familiar with American history? The entire installation seems designed not only as a matter of cultural emancipation but also an urge to reflect and to seek out knowledge.



Archives in Residence, Installation view of Theaster Gates: Black Chapel, Haus der Kunst, Munich, 2019 (photo by Jens Weber, München)

In the adjacent archive gallery are 1,800 LPs owned by Jesse Owens and acquired by Gates after Owens’s death, lined up in a meter-long wall niche, across from a wall text detailing the building’s Nazi history. A short video by Leni Riefenstahl projected onto the connecting wall shows excerpts from Owens’s triumph at the 1936 Olympics in Berlin, where he won four gold medals. The paths of Jesse Owens and Leni Riefenstahl crossed again in 1972, when both traveled to the Olympic Games in Munich. For Haus der Kunst, Gates montaged heroic scenes of Owens running past a white competitor, filmed by Riefenstahl and commissioned by the Nazis, with scenes from the everyday lives of Black people in the 1930s.

National Socialist history, symbolized by the Haus der Kunst building, reflects the racism and adversity Owens faced in his lifetime. Despite his Olympian triumphs, he could barely make a living, taking menial jobs. At one point he raced against horses for money. He opened a dry cleaning company and worked as a gas station attendant, but filed for bankruptcy in 1966. But he also worked as a DJ. According to Gates, Owens’s impressive collection of mostly R&B, jazz, and soul is not just a matter of musical taste: a collection, Gates explains, “says so much about

the intellectual life of a person.” It is one portrait of Owens. The music complements the *housebergs* in the adjacent room. Although the festivity of the sprinter’s Olympic success, as portrayed in the video, is enhanced by the joyful music, the discrimination he encountered — and its devastating effects on his life and livelihood — are an unshakeable presence in the show.



Installation view of Theaster Gates: Black Chapel, Haus der Kunst, Munich, 2019 (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

Repeatedly, Gates’s own background shimmers through in the exhibition. A black monochrome picture, reminiscent of a Modernist abstract, consists of tar layers. Though it refers broadly to the world of labor, it is also a connection to the artist’s father, who was a roofer. Gates himself began as a ceramicist in mid-1990s, and continued with urban planning in the early 2000s (currently he is a professor and Senior Advisor for Cultural Innovation and Advisor to the Dean at the University of Chicago).

The function of the archive is to preserve and to show. While Gates seeks to stimulate a discussion of race, politics, and inequality, he reactivates the archive in the here and now. *Black Chapel* succeeds because it invites both intellectual and emotional engagement, but it is not an easy show — the visitor’s own, often white, gaze is continually scrutinized. Now reopened to the public, viewers can experience its relevance once again, as a reflective but hopeful “place of encounter”: a convivial encounter on the red couch after months of social distancing, a cultural encounter with the past of Germany and America. And an encounter with existing power structures of gender, race, and class, which must be all the more strongly acknowledged in the event of a global pandemic.



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