

GAGOSIAN

HYPERALLERGIC

Theaster Gates and the Shapes of Black History *Gates reminds us of the many hidden, unacknowledged, and under-recognized histories of Black culture in America.*

John Yau



Theaster Gates, "Vessel # 2" (2020), high fired stoneware with glaze, 34 x 21 x 21 inches (© Theaster Gates, photo by Chris Strong, courtesy Gagosian)

Theaster Gates has work in the collection of the Brooklyn Museum, the Studio Museum in Harlem, and the Whitney Museum of American Art, but he has not had a solo show in New York until now. His current exhibition, *Theaster Gates: Black Vessel*, at Gagosian (through December 19, 2020), which takes up four galleries of the immense, warehouse-like space on West 24th Street should help remedy that situation, as well as afford viewers a chance to directly experience different facets of Gates's work.

Be forewarned: you will need to book a ticket in advance, which guarantees that there are a limited number of people in the gallery.

I confess that I was very happy to be alone in the different gallery spaces, particularly as I walked around the spacious room where he had placed large tar paintings made of roofing

materials, such as rubber torch down and bitumen, or when I circled the perimeter of the long, narrow room, which was filled with large stoneware sculptures, many of them sitting on custom-made plinths, and finally wandered into the vast large gallery, whose walls Gates had lined with Roman bricks that have been blackened with manganese dioxide and dye.



Theaster Gates, “Walking Prayer” (2018–20), bound embossed books and vintage Carnegie cast iron shelving; 83 x 320 x 19 inches (© Theaster Gates, photo by Rob McKeever, image courtesy Gagolian)

The bricks developed by the Romans, which they brought to the lands they conquered, are longer and flatter than the ones employed in modern times. Among other things, Roman bricks signify a shift from mud bricks, which are dried by the sun and are not nearly as strong as those fired in a kiln. The blackened bricks in Gates’s installation, *Black Vessel* (2020), changed the vast gallery space into a solemn chamber, an ode to repositories of printed information.

Gates, who studied ceramics, religion, and urban planning in the Midwest, Japan, and South Africa, has stretched the fundamental concept of a vessel (a container holding something else) from an object you can hold in your hands (bottle, bowl, or book) to architectural forms that can envelop an entire space.

By underscoring that all of what he makes, assembles, and gathers together is informed by his expanded understanding of a vessel, Gates engages viewers across many avenues and registers.

This is what makes Gates such a great and interesting artist: his deep awareness of the history of materials, from fired clay to roofing tar and brick, to paperback books and runs of newsstand magazines, to the malleability of language. His research into Black history and the context in which materials and commonplace products have been used transcends the aesthetic divide between high and low.



Theaster Gates, Black Vessel (2020), installation view (artwork © Theaster Gates, photo by Rob McKeever, image courtesy Gagosian)

Gates is a maker, a gatherer, and an archivist interested in libraries and the vernacular. There is a civic underpinning devoid of didacticism to his art that distinguishes him from his contemporaries. For Gates, firing clay in a kiln, using roofing tar, placing books on a specially constructed shelf, and assembling a sacred space are all of a piece.

“New Egypt Sanctuary of the Holy Word and Image” (2017), standing inside the walls of *Black Vessel*, is a semi-enclosed space made of four inward-facing bookshelves with a narrow opening. More than 15 feet high, with a cramped, elevated interior whose base is a section of marble flooring, the shelves hold bound volumes containing the full run of *Ebony* magazine, which was published by the Black entrepreneur John H. Johnson and the Johnson Publishing company. A single bare bulb hangs down, illuminating the space.

The bound volumes themselves are red, black, or green — the colors of the Black Liberation flag, which was originally conceived by Marcus Garvey. Through gestures such as this, Gates invites the viewer to follow the threads he weaves together in a single work and look beyond the surface.



Theaster Gates, Black Vessel (2020), installation view (artwork © Theaster Gates, photo by Rob McKeever, image courtesy Gagosian)

Started in 1945, and based on the format of *Life* magazine, the editors of *Ebony* stated in the first issue:

We like to look at the zesty side of life. Sure, you can get all hot and bothered about the race question (and don't think we don't), but not enough is said about all the swell things we Negroes can do and will accomplish. Ebony will try to mirror the happier side of Negro life – the positive, everyday achievements from Harlem to Hollywood. But when we talk about race as the No. 1 problem of America, we'll talk turkey.

The semi-enclosed space invites the viewer to step inside and peruse the bound volumes, discovering a history of a self-contained society that they might know little about. At the same time, the narrow entranceway and elevated floor sets the library apart from the everyday world: the place is sacred, as is the history this archive contains.

Just the existence of “New Egypt Sanctuary of the Holy Word and Image” serves as a reminder that there are many hidden, unacknowledged, and under-recognized histories of Black culture in America. This alone makes Gates’ stewardship of the Johnson Publishing’s archive an important event. His presentation of this archive in various iterations across a number of venues, which has drawn attention to the publications’ topics and contributors, such as the photographers Isaac Sutton and Moneta Sleet Jr., constitutes an important, ongoing body of work within his vast, sprawling oeuvre.

Another work in the hushed, brick-lined space is “Walking Prayer” (2018-2020), which consists of books about the Black and African American experience. Gates has uniformly rebound the books in black with gilt embossed titles and arranged them on cast iron shelves in an order that encourages the viewer to read them sequentially in an attempt to discern the pattern underlying Gates’s choices.



Theaster Gates, “Walking Prayer” (2018–20) (detail) bound embossed books and vintage Carnegie cast iron shelving, 83 x 320 x 19 inches (© Theaster Gates, photo by Rob McKeever, courtesy Gagosian)

The vintage cast iron shelves, which were developed for libraries funded by Andrew Carnegie, allowed readers to peruse them without the aid of a librarian. As in a public library, the shelves are deep enough to contain two rows of books, each facing out. With full shelves running contiguously with empty ones, Gates suggests an incomplete, ongoing project.

One of the delights of reading the titles sequentially is the way they seem to become lines in a poem that alternately dissipates into nonsense and coalesces into meaning. In the following six titles, you can get a glimpse of Gates’ humor: A LONG DONG IN THE BED OF MY ENEMY; A CAPITALIST ON THE WRONG SIDE OF PROSPERITY; KING KONG IN JAPAN BLASTED BY HOSTILITY; SHOW ME; HOLD ME; INFORM ME.

In these six titles, Gates seems to be guided by sound rather than meaning. Are they the actual titles of the bound books, or are they sentences and phrases gleaned from them? I like not knowing the answer.

On another shelf, I read: WHAT IS BLACK POWER; WHO COMPOSED IT; WHO PRODUCED AND REPRODUCED IT; SHAPING; BLACKNESS; AND POWER; A VANGUARD. The shift from one sequence to another occurs throughout the collection, pulling and pushing the willing and open reader to consider not just what words say, but also how they work.



Theaster Gates, "Black Vessel" (2020), installation view (artwork © Theaster Gates, photo by Rob McKeever, image courtesy Gagosian)

The installation of two archive projects within a brick-lined chamber is radically different from the three galleries preceding it, each of which was devoted to a particular kind medium (brick reliquaries, tar paintings, and ceramic vessels).

As commandingly handsome as the tar paintings are, I found them to be less interesting than the other bodies of works in the show, particularly the narrow room filled with large ceramic vessels, which reminded me of the storage rooms of museums I have visited, or the contents of a newly discovered tomb. The single organ chord piped into the room adds a spiritual dimension, and another understanding of a vessel — as a body ready to receive the message carried by the music.

In contrast to the reliquaries and the vessels, the tar paintings, done in non-art materials, have a backstory, which is that Gates' father was a roofer. The other works in the exhibition did not come with either a backstory or an aesthetic justification, and, as far as I could tell, did not need them. But this is a mere cavil. "New Egypt Sanctuary of the Holy Word and Image" is a great, singular, generative work.