

GAGOSIAN



Theaster Gates on ‘Clay Sermon’ and the stories objects tell *The artist talks to fellow potter Edmund de Waal ahead of a series of exhibitions in London*

Edmund de Waal



© Lyndon French. Theaster Gates at work in his studio

There are sermons where you look at your watch, and count heads in pews, and — if you are English — look at the stranger parts of *The Prayer Book*. I grew up in churches and I know sermons.

And then there is Theaster Gates’s *Clay Sermon*.

This sermon, this exhortation, is a series of exhibitions that link the Whitechapel Gallery, the Victoria and Albert Museum and White Cube in London, but it is also a revivalist meeting for ceramics. All good sermons take a text and examine it with fierce concentration, spin out its meanings and send the congregation back out into the world lifted up.

The Bible is full of images of the shaping of people like the shaping of vessels on a potter’s wheel. It is also threaded with images of the brokenness of vessels. “And he shall rule them with a rod of iron; as the vessels of a potter shall they be broken to shivers,” says the Book of Revelations, making the vulnerability of human lives and clay vessels explicit.

I have talked to Theaster several times in the past 18 months over Zoom. Screens have a way of flattening encounters but these have been spectacular conversations, a spinning of stories and fissile ideas, possible projects and collaborations flashing past.

Each time he has been in a different space in his Chicago studio, framed by “a cluster of African vessels” in the room where he hosts people as “a salute to great indigenous makers”, or in one of his cavernous making rooms with kilns as a backdrop, new vessels drying on the tables. Or he

has a wall of books in one of his archives. This is a man who does not stay still. Do you want to talk to the potter, the contemporary artist, the architect, the archivist, the activist? He looks at me and calls me “brother de Waal” and I realise that I am talking to the preacher.



Theaster Gates shot in his Chicago studio last month © Lyndon French

There is a particular zeal behind these exhibitions. Gates wants to redraw the map of what we might expect from a show of ceramics, reset the connection between makers and objects. After exhibiting in museums and galleries across the world, including Tate Liverpool, the Palais de Tokyo in Paris and Haus der Kunst in Munich as well as numerous American institutions, he draws breath and tells me, “There is a clay show in me. Straight, no chaser.”

He has said before that as a potter “you very quickly learn how to make great things out of nothing. I feel like as a potter you also start to learn how to shape the world.” With the art world at his feet, he tells me he can now “identify as a full-blown potter”.

Theaster was born on the west side of Chicago, one of nine children raised in a Baptist family by a school teacher mother and a father who worked as a roofer. He studied ceramics at Iowa State University and spent a year making pots in Tokoname, Japan, a place of pilgrimage for those who love traditional Japanese pottery.

That year was profoundly significant for him as it introduced him to the Mingei movement. Mingei — best translated as “art of the people” — was a term coined early in the 20th century by the Japanese philosopher Yanagi Soetsu to describe the pottery, textiles, basketry and other crafts made by people whose names were unrecorded.

Many potters go to Japan on pilgrimage. It is the “potter’s country”, a place where ceramics are given respect and traditions of making are deep. When I press Theaster on what Japan meant to him, he recalls that he “grew up in a very ambitious, proud, somewhat flamboyant environment where my personality of flamboyance was given space to thrive — and in this place I was

presented with decorum and ritual and solemnity and those things seemed so different from, let's say, my personality or my nature.

“But it was so great to have this interruption at 22, 23 years old, where at the moment that my intellectual core is being shaped, my spiritual core is being shaped, my physical core is being shaped, that I had something to bump up against that was so wholly different. And I think that collision of difference is what then allowed me to get to something eventually like Afro-Mingei.”



© Lyndon French

“Collision of difference” is key. Early in his career, Theaster began to explore this tension between objects of great beauty and the lives of those who made them. He has explored this with lyricism and with anger. Mingei becomes Afro-Mingei, a way of looking at what is marginalised by “Western White Sameness”, to use his own excoriating words.

Materials that were overlooked are re-appropriated: he uses tar in homage to his father who tarred roofs. He uses firemen's hoses in installations connecting himself to the demonstrations of the Civil Rights Movement. He reclaims bricks — the lowliest of ceramic forms — and timbers, abandoned construction debris. He is alive to the fissile world where objects, like people, are overlooked, disregarded, junked. “Objects are storytellers,” he emphasises to me, “and storytelling as it relates to this material that I love is what I need to do now.”

In the centre of Theaster's exhibition at White Cube is a stoneware jar inscribed with the date “December 17, 1857”. It was made by David Drake, known as “Dave the Potter”, who was an enslaved man in South Carolina in the 1800s. Little is known about him — his birth and death were not recorded with exactitude; “Drake” is the name of the family who enslaved him. Literacy was illegal for slaves. And so Drake's stoneware jars are both beautiful and heartbreaking as they are signed with his name and sometimes have short, snatched lines of poetry or scripture inscribed into them. One jar, not exhibited in London, bears the line: “I wonder where is all my relations / Friendship to all - and every nation”. Another references a subsequent enslaver: “Dave belongs to Mr. Miles / Wher the oven bakes & the pot biles.”

Theaster's interest in Drake is not new. In 2010 at the Milwaukee Art Museum, he took a single earthenware jar and spun from it an exhibition titled *To Speculate Darkly: Theaster Gates and*

Dave the Potter. Drake's jars witness his own making and his own pride. And Theaster's identification with Drake is powerful: "Dave for me represented, finally, a named linchpin in the key to my history with this material in America . . . Until then, until he was named, I felt utterly invisible within the history of this material. And it's not that I needed Dave to have the right to be a potter, but I needed Dave to substantiate the truth that I'm not the first one. And so by inhabiting Dave and then offering Dave my platform, my hope was to then help others know Dave. That if I could amplify his life through my body, through song, through the making of new objects, that then there would be a kind of lineage that, in fact, if I were to sign my name, Dave, 200 years, 180 years, it seems like someone should inherit Dave Drake's name."



David Drake's 'Storage Jar', 1862, far right, alongside ceramics from the Ed J Williams collection and Gates's artwork at Whitechapel Gallery © Theo Christelis/Whitechapel Gallery

This idea that you can take back and reclaim ignored or erased parts of a culture has led Theaster into huge projects of social renovation in the parts of Chicago where he grew up. Since 2009 he has worked at identifying derelict spaces that can be repurposed through his non-profit The Rebuild Foundation. A former bank, a handsome 1920s building, has become the Stony Island Arts Bank where the vast archives of *Ebony* and *Jet* magazines sit alongside the thousands of artefacts in the Edward J Williams Collection that feature racist representations of black people — a collection created specifically so that these objects are taken out of circulation and recontextualised, as well as the archival record collection of Frankie Knuckles, “the Godfather” of house music.

Music is central to Theaster, and his band The Black Monks is an important part of his life and practice, “expounding the word of art alongside the word of god”. His Instagram feed segues long tracking shots of piled tea bowls in his studio with funk or jazz or the bands playing at Stony Island Arts Bank. He promises me that when he creates the Serpentine Pavilion in London for 2022, there will be music.

The trio of exhibitions stretching from the V&A to the Whitechapel Gallery and White Cube also reveals a fearsome curator. At the V&A, Theaster has inserted new works into vitrines in the storeyed ceramics gallery on the fourth floor of the museum. At the Whitechapel Gallery, he has gathered his favourite pots from the collections of the V&A, an alternative and unruly canon of vessels from China and Japan and Iran. These vessels “materialise the ghosts of my ceramic training”, he tells me.

He has also brought African ceramics from his own collection. Objects from the Edward J Williams Collection — “Black Boy Eating Watermelon”, “All White Mammy Cookie Jar” — are juxtaposed with the Wedgwood “Am I Not a Man and a Brother?” medallion. He is showing studio pottery made by the 20th-century British potters Lucie Rie and Bernard Leach and Japanese potter Shoji Hamada along with magisterial vessels by Peter Voulkos, the postwar American potter who threw vast vessels and stacked them together to make craggy landscapes. The exhibition is an autobiography. It is an “intimate encounter” with the things he loves most.



At the V&A, for his 'Slight Intervention #5' exhibition, Gates has added works such as 'Voulkos #1', 2021, to the museum's ceramics gallery © The Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Theaster is showing his own new work too. When I talked to him during lockdown, he was eloquent about his return to clay. Making pottery vessels and sculpture was the first thing he did, the first thing he needed to do when faced by the strange reorientation of a world in pandemic. To make much of this work, he took himself off to The Archie Bray Foundation in Montana, a place as revered in the ceramics world as any Japanese pottery village. It was set up in the 1950s as a place for exploration in the ceramic arts. This allowed him space to create some of the huge closed vessels that we see at the Whitechapel Gallery, strangely anthropomorphic, glazed in dark fluxing metallic glazes.

We see chairs made from stoneware clay, thrones waiting for some hieratic presence. And we see bowls and flasks and masks, ceramic objects that seem to be part of such complex back history, part of one of Theaster's invented narratives where he adopts the persona of a collector or an artist, sometimes from another era. All of them show the movements of his hand, throwing marks and the energetic spirals of coiling, the repeated smearing of clay to bring texture on to the surface of a jar. This sermon is about touch revealing the maker's own irreducible identity. Each maker has their own "velocity of making, managing and flowing with clay" as he puts it. And laughs. It's a good line.

And all these works are on plinths; they have authority. The plinths are satisfactorily tactile — a stack of wood-fired bricks, hewn wooden columns. In the Whitechapel exhibition, a black vessel sits alone on a highly vibrant carpet from the archives of the African-American-owned Johnson Publishing Company held in the Stony Island Arts Bank. The work is titled "they believe, you breathe, they quake, you dance, they wet, you pray", and suddenly you see how close pots are to people, how this pot stands so powerfully in the place of an absent figure.

This is what makes Theaster so intriguing as an artist. He talks of "speculating darkly". He speculates on identity and ownership and justice and he speculates on clay. He looks deep into history, into the unacknowledged absences of makers. He thinks about how spaces — gardens, libraries, cafés, arts centres and workshops — can be given collective life. And then he goes back to his studio and makes more pots. He reflects, "I was singing about something that made me happy but my voice was mournful." This sounds like the psalms to me, songs where you both laugh and mourn. I am a preacher's son from the Church of England and we are normally rather quiet but let me just say, "Hallelujah." Thank God for Theaster Gates and his sermon.

