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A Chicago Roofer's Legacy Finds a Home in the Serpentine Pavilion
The ceramic artist Theaster Gates says his "Black Chapel" in London's Kensington Gardens is about optimism and openness, even as it pays tribute to his late father.

Farah Nayeri



Theaster Gates inside his "Black Chapel." "I wanted to create a sacred space," Gates said. "What I didn't imagine three years ago was that I would also have to be dealing with the mourning, with the passing of my dad." Credit...Lauren Fleishman for The New York Times

LONDON — The wooden edifice looms quietly over the trees and lawns of Kensington Gardens. Shaped like a bulky cylinder and painted black, it has apertures on two sides and a circular opening in the ceiling that lets light into what is otherwise a dark and contemplative space.

This is "Black Chapel," a temporary summer pavilion designed for the Serpentine Galleries in London by the Chicago artist Theaster Gates. Gates — a potter whose practice also involves converting derelict buildings into cultural centers — joins a long line of architects and artists including Zaha Hadid, Frank Gehry, Peter Zumthor, Ai Weiwei and Olafur Eliasson who since 2000 have conceived temporary structures for the Serpentine.

Gates was awarded the commission for the 2021 pavilion, but the pandemic delayed the project. This year's pavilion opens Friday, and runs through Oct. 16. It will host a program of events including talks and debates; performances of choral and experimental music, jazz and soul; and a clay workshop.

Hanging high on the pavilion's inner wall are seven panels of rubber roofing material coated with a reflective paint. The paintings are a tribute to the artist's father, a roofer who taught Gates how to work with his hands, and who died three weeks before the pavilion's inauguration.

At the official presentation of "Black Chapel" this week, Gates thanked his father for teaching him the skills to produce works such as the seven shiny panels hanging behind him. He then spoke of the meaning behind the structure.



The Serpentine Gallery commissions a temporary pavilion each summer from an architect or artist. Credit...Lauren Fleishman for The New York Times

"Black Chapel is about Blackness," he said. "For me, Blackness has something to do with the ability to remain open, to remain optimistic, to remain active in one's cultural and spiritual life," even though "the truth of subjugation" is "around you."

The artist then stepped outside and rang a bronze bell sitting on the lawn that was salvaged from St. Laurence Catholic Church on the South Side of Chicago, where he lives, after the church was demolished in 2014. The bell — another marker of Gates's interest in the sacred, and of the role that the church played in his upbringing — will serve as a gong for the events program throughout the summer.

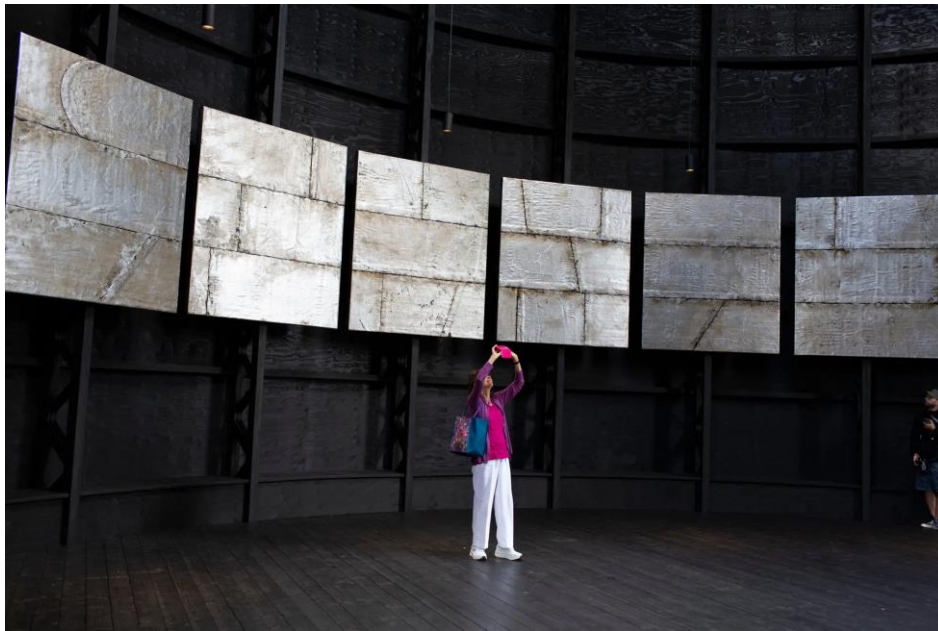
The day before, in an interview at the Serpentine, Gates spoke about the pavilion, his childhood in Chicago and his calling as an artist. The following conversation has been edited and condensed.

Entering your pavilion, there is a sense of being in a place of contemplation and worship. How did this structure come about?

I was trying to marry the ceramic part of my life, plus the architectural part of my life, plus my interest in the invisible and the vertical. The chapel was a great way to bring those things together.

I wanted to create a sacred space. What I didn't imagine three years ago was that I would also have to be dealing with the mourning, with the passing of my dad. The piece now has another resonance, in another register: the register of memorial.

My dad gave me my hands, so in a way I don't feel sad today. I feel like the inheritance that he gave me was my desire to work and labor.



Seven panels of rubber roofing material coated with a reflective paint hang inside the chapel. The paintings are a tribute to Gates's father, a roofer. Credit...Lauren Fleishman for The New York Times

Many architects and artists have created a pavilion for the Serpentine before you. Did you look at theirs?

I looked at them all, with extreme intimidation. In Chicago, the buildings that I worked on were restoration projects, not from the ground up. For the pavilion, I had a defined perimeter and a blank slate. What others had done and their architectural problems — I didn't feel I had those skills.

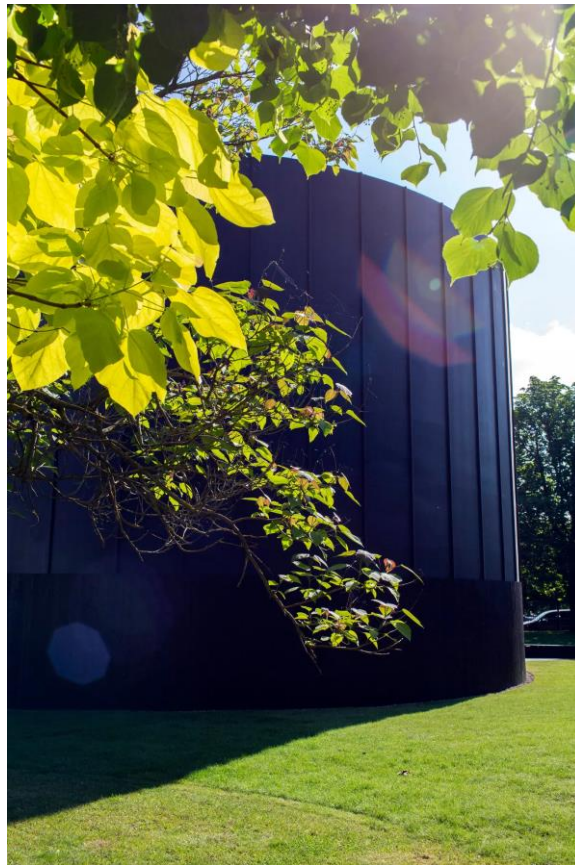
I know how people vibe in a space. I know when I'm in the presence of a space that makes me feel awe and makes me want to settle in. So I was thinking more about the psychological implications of space.

You grew up in 1980s Chicago in an atmosphere of violence and drug abuse. The church offered you a sanctuary. Can you talk about that?

Most kids have after-school programs. They can go to jujitsu, they can play a sport. I was into fashion; I was a little bit feminine in my behavior. We didn't have words for it in the '80s, but I was a nonbinary, queer kid. So I didn't want to play football, or do what other boys did.

And I had to deal with the truth of my neighborhood: You could get caught up in the middle of things that had nothing to do with you. If you had a nice backpack, and people assumed that they could scope you out about some money or something, you might lose your life for the backpack, or at least get stuck up.

In the church choir, I got to be with the cool kids who were as fashionable, as weird and quirky, and from varying walks of life. And all of them could sing.



Gates joins a long line of architects and artists including Zaha Hadid, Frank Gehry, Peter Zumthor, Ai Weiwei and Olafur Eliasson who have designed pavilions for the Serpentine. Credit...Lauren Fleishman for The New York Times



“I know how people vibe in a space,” said Gates. “I know when I’m in the presence of a space that makes me feel awe and makes me want to settle in.” Credit...Lauren Fleishman for The New York Times

As part of your art practice, you’ve opened cultural centers in areas where people were deprived of basic necessities. How did you win them over?

Initially, people were definitely skeptical, saying this must be a front by some white institution trying to take over, that gentrification is inevitable, et cetera. But I think that we’ve been at it long enough where I now have a good rapport.

The truth is that even while we are struggling to pay our light bill, we are still dancing and laughing and making music. We’re still cultured and cultural people who sometimes don’t have money to do some of the basics.

My calling is to manifest culture where it’s really needed, and then share the culture that I have in gross excess, share the resources that I have in gross excess, with the people around me.

I decided that more of my time would remain with the people who have always taken care of me.

You’re spending time with the haves as well as the have-nots, and you’re now “a have” yourself. How do you reconcile the two?

What do people do with the fact that I have? They come to me with their desire to have, and say, “How did you do it?” It doesn’t immediately turn into class hate.

The people I'm around are aspirational people. Everyone has a sense of what they want in the world and who they want to be in the world if they had more.



A circular opening in the pavilion's ceiling lets light into what is otherwise a dark and contemplative space. Credit...Lauren Fleishman for The New York Times

Since Black Lives Matter and the death of George Floyd, the art and museum world is finally opening up to Black American art. Will this be lasting, or is it a flash in the pan?

I'm happy to see the light that's being shone on Black artists, artists of color, women, queer artists, Indigenous artists. I think that Western museums are in a conundrum, where part of the work is a little bit of a grab to demonstrate a new kind of wokeness. If all of those excluded communities weren't already on their mind, they're asking curators and art historians to catch up. But until there's a full infusion at every level of the museum, buying a Sam Gilliam doesn't remove the fact that the institution might be a racist institution. It just puts a Sam Gilliam in a racist institution.

Our boards have to change. New collectors need to come to the table, and new patrons need to come to the table.

Where are we with race in general? Are we on the brink of civil war, or making progress?

At the same time that we're seemingly making social progress, we have the truth of gun violence at an all-time high. What the correlation demonstrates to me is that there's a tremendous amount of fear by established white power that the world is about to shake and leave them behind. And people do not want to relinquish that power.

There is progress — and that progress has always created war. I'm curious about the inevitable, consequential violences that erupt when equity is at stake.