

GAGOSIAN

Esquire

Theaster Gates: "Liverpool Has The Complexity Of Race In Its DNA"
Ahead of his new show at Tate Liverpool, the Chicago artist talks creativity, blackness and roller skates

Miranda Collinge



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Close to midnight on an early October night in central London, at a pop-up social club hosted by Prada, the artist Theaster Gates performed some gospel hymns from his childhood. The club was dark, the racially and sartorially diverse crowd noisily drinking and yapping, but Gates, who is 46 and comes from Chicago, decided to change the mood. Up on a small stage and dressed in an olive-green boiler suit, with a simple piano accompaniment from his band, The Black Monks, he removed his glasses and began to sing. The crowd took a little cajoling — the drinks were free, after all — but eventually, an unusual serenity descended. It felt, if you tried not to be too English about it, a little spiritual.

“It was my intent initially to just play an album and I would have done my job,” says Gates on the phone a week later, after he has flown from London to New York where he is currently artist-in-residence at the Park Avenue Armory, a vast cultural space on the Upper EastSide. “But I

decided there would be real value in being even more intimate; that if I could pull it off, it might help other people be more intimate. You know what it's like when you come to someone else's town and there's a lot of hype. I just decided to come and be as humble and present as I could. I feel like I left London with a bunch of new friends."



A 1969 Hahn firetruck from 'My Labor is My Protest' (2012), White Cube Bermondsey, London

In Gates' case, the hype is quite something, as are the friends: he can count Kanye West, Venus Williams and Barack Obama among his high-profile supporters (did I mention that nestled between The Black Monks on stage in London was Naomi Campbell?). Gates is undoubtedly one of the most celebrated artists in the world right now, with shows, as you read this, at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis and the Haus Der Kunst in Munich, with his first major UK exhibition opening at Tate Liverpool this December. On top of those, he's preparing for a major display of new work at Gagosian Gallery in New York next spring.



Theaster Gates, plus records © Jeremy LiebmanEsquire

"I feel like the clip is especially fast at the moment," he says. "I probably said yes to a lot of things two or three years ago and those things are coming home to roost, but artists are always busy making, just sometimes we don't have a light shone on the work."

Come, come now. “It may be that I’m a little more busy than some,” he concedes. “But I think there’s a kind of urgency to make. There are all these different ideas in my little head.”

A work by Theaster Gates might be a performance, or a film, or a sculpture, or a song. It might also be a housing development, or a cinema or a library; in the South Side of Chicago where Gates lives (he’s a professor of visual arts at the University of Chicago), he has pulled off a remarkable transformation, taking over old buildings near his studio – including a former crack house – and transforming them into cultural hubs that celebrate and preserve black culture and its history. It breathed new life into his block, then his neighbourhood, then his city. “We brought some heat,” as Gates put it in his 2015 TEDTalk (for which he received a standing ovation).

Gates, who grew up on Chicago’s West Side with eight older sisters – his mother was a schoolteacher and his father a roofer – is in fact uniquely qualified for such a varied oeuvre. At the Iowa State University, he studied urban planning with a minor in sculpture (he focused on ceramics), though even he didn’t suspect that both would come in handy later. “I thought I would be an urban planner,” he says. “Those were my first legit art classes ever in my life.”



A video installation included in the ‘Freedom of Assembly’ exhibition (2015), White Cube Bermondsey

Though he was always the “most artsy” member of his family, that kind of creativity was not a priority at home. “We were working-class people, so it was like, how you were going to eat was creative. We weren’t painting and drawing. I didn’t wake up and everybody’s singing. My family was a family of super-practical people that could creatively solve problems. I actually think that’s the part that I inherited from my parents. You work, and you do the best you can. And if I’m going to spend my time do-ing something, it should have meaning.”

At Tate Liverpool, Gates will show a body of work called Amalgam, which focuses on a little-known chapter in American history. In 1912, the last of the black, white and mixed-race residents of Malaga, a small island off the coast of Maine, were driven from their homes by the

state, which had decided they were not living at an acceptable standard. The community was disbanded, given minimal funds to resettle and in some instances institutionalised; their dead were disinterred and reburied on the mainland. The island has been uninhabited ever since.

Gates came across the story by chance, while he was artist-in-residence at Colby College, a liberal arts college in Waterville, Maine. “I was going about my business in Maine, when friends of mine started saying, ‘Hey, let’s go get some fish and chips and some clam chowder. And by the way there’s this island where the rumour is it used to be an island of mixed-race people and the governor kicked them all off.’ So we got on a boat and we went, and that was the beginning. This exhibition is a kind of first attempt at unpacking the complexity of blackness, and how whiteness is inexplicably tied to blackness.”



*‘Malaga Department of Tourism’ from Amalgam (2019), Palais de Tokyo, Paris
Chris Strong Photography*

Choosing a Liverpool gallery to show *Amalgam* – the elements of which include bronze casts of African masks on a field of wooden plinths, a film made with choreographer Kyle Abraham, and an imagined headquarters for Malaga’s Department of Tourism – should have resonance given that the city was a major slave port into the early 19th century.

“I think it’s different from other parts of the UK and other parts of Europe that were a little bit protected from the presence of blacks,” says Gates. “They just received the money that came as a result of slave labour. Liverpool has the complexity of race built within its contemporary DNA in a more palpable way.”

When we speak the Tate Liverpool show is still several weeks away, which by Gates’ schedule is an age; two days after our interview he would launch his annual Black Artists Retreat at the Armory, a gathering for black visual artists to commune and share ideas, and his other reason for being in New York. There would be talks, screenings, conversations and, on the closing day, a roller disco (or, more specifically a “Chicago-style, James Brown-infused skating party”).

“My roller skates just arrived from Chicago,” says Gates, with audible vim, “and the first thing on my agenda is to test the floor.”

How's his skating these days? Does he worry he could be a bit rusty? In the context of Gates's expansive ambition, the prospect of getting up on roller-skates aged 46 is, apparently, no biggie. "Oh," he says, lightly, "once it's in you it never leaves you."