

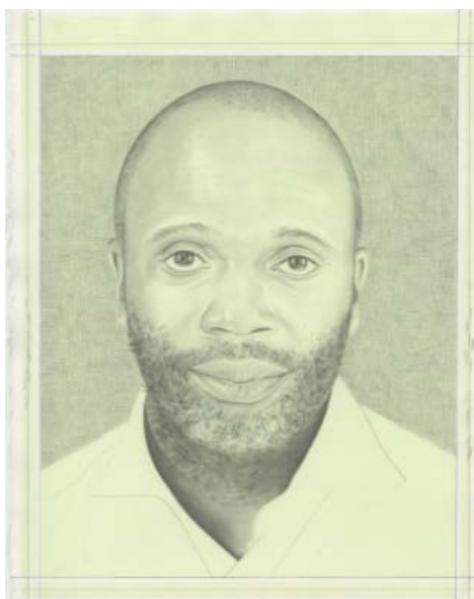
GAGOSIAN



THEASTER GATES with Phong H. Bui

“The way that I make sense of the world is with my body and through my body.”

Phong H. Bui



Portrait of Theaster Gates, pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

It has always been the artist’s desire to manifest their social and political subversion in the creation of a work of art, according to the context of its multitude of provided spaces, either as an overt implication or as a subtle poetic conceit. As Henri Lefebvre once stated, “Nothing disappears completely ... In space, what came earlier continues to underpin what follows ... Pre-existing space underpins not only durable spatial arrangements, but also representational spaces and their attendant imagery and mythic narratives.” What compels our response often depends on how the issue of scale correlates to the magical power of the material that embodies the aura of presence, including the worn surface or skin wrapped over a substructure. One thinks of this relationship as a hard-won unity of form and intentionality that is seamlessly whole, a profound mediation from which abstract force in disguise of human certitude can be infused with different modes of spatial production. Theaster Gates is a rare artist whose worldview is as broad as the scope of his various fields of discipline and social innovations, all of which are aimed to impact real changes through the energy, invention, and power of art. On the occasion of his monumental and first-ever New York exhibit we sat down with our teas for an in-depth Zoom conversation about the mysteries of his immersive ambition. The following is an edited version for your reading pleasure.



Theaster Gates's studio, Chicago, 2020. Artwork © Theaster Gates. Courtesy Gagosian. Photo: Chris Strong.

Phong H. Bui (Rail): Since your biographical narrative is fairly known fact at this point, I'd like to delve into the philosophical side that correlates to your political and social activities. Knowing that you love singing, I'm paraphrasing a passage from Diderot, writing about the salon of 1765, "Beware of those who conform to the practice of society, who seek to please people in order to fit in. They have no demon in them," he says. "They are not gloomy, somber, melancholy and whatnot. They're like birds, the canary, the lark, the chaffinch, who chirped and twittered all day long, and then went to sleep, with their heads tucked under their wings. Then someone took a lamp and shined it upon them. These solitary, and untenable birds opened their throat and began to sing and break the silence of the night." What Diderot was saying, essentially, is that below this artificial person there's another person with a dark, angry, intense temper, who if properly disciplined is capable of achieving great things in life.

Gates: To your earlier point, my career has gotten to a stage where I don't really separate who I am from what I do. I feel very strongly that I should have a unified life. I'm always living and I'm always making art. I don't stop at 5 p.m. And the fact that I feel very strongly about the places that I'm around suggests there are a lot of ways to read "singing." But if singing is the expression that allows you to break the silence, which in this case also means pushing through the status quo and trying to find and make noise, make energy, against the nihilism or against the passivity then, in that sense, the music of my life, the activity of my time, really matters because I feel I'm very clear about what I was put on earth to do. And if I commit to doing that work, the selfish part is that there's a tremendous amount of internal equity. That my heart feels good means I'm one with myself. Again, music and singing for me provide opportunities not only to express my energy and actions but also to demonstrate endless other possibilities.

Rail: I appreciate how you start singing spontaneously during any public talk to break up the rigid convention.

Gates: There's definitely a way of being thoughtful that is supposed to be devoid of anything emotional, or internal, or passion-filled. And I just think that's not the way that I'm being thoughtful. The way that I make sense of the world is *with* my body and *through* my body. And so sometimes, you may like to, as Haki R. Madhubuti says, "Don't cry, scream."



Installation view: Theaster Gates: *Black Vessel*, 2020. © Theaster Gates, Photo: Robert McKeever, Courtesy Gagolian.

Rail: That is not to say it's only the rationalization of one extreme form against another—Black vs. white, rich vs. poor, normal vs. abnormal, winning vs. losing, or for example, two cowboys shooting each other at the O.K. Corral—the images of intense violence upon which this country is founded.

Gates: Yeah, but in my case, it feels important to say—especially because I also live in an academic world, an art historical-positive world—that the artist doesn't have to show up with a PhD in art history. An artist—any artist—definitely has the right to show up with his, her, their tools.

Rail: Amen!

Gates: Whatever they are, our tools can respond to any events in our world, and whatever comes out is a form of intelligence. Singing is an extension of a part of my intelligence. Not only does it feel good, it also feels important to say that in part, for the future, in this conversation, when we talk about the importance of claiming the things that we do as the most powerful act possible, we talk about believing where we're from, who we are, what we are made of, how we are trained as, and so on—even if they're different, these are good attributes to what you do in life.

Rail: I recently felt compelled to re-read Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* (1835), which evokes the fragility of democracy as an ongoing experiment. Chapter 26 of the second volume is an adaptation of Machiavelli's 26 chapters in *The Prince* where Machiavelli played the number 26, as a multiple of 13; one half is good and the other half is evil as a chance operation for him to overcome. Theaster, let's take Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X, as two examples who are often seen as extreme contrasts in the struggle of civil rights and against white supremacy: While Dr. King is often portrayed as a non-violent insider, Malcolm X is represented as a necessary political renegade. Yet we also know where and how they grew up was so different. Dr. King grew up in an upper-middle class family who ran the most important Black church in Atlanta. Malcolm X experienced serious racial trauma at an early age, including the

murders of four of his uncles from his father's side by the KKK. How are we to mediate or control these subtle and not so subtle intensities of difference?



Installation view: Theaster Gates: Black Vessel, 2020. © Theaster Gates, Photo: Robert McKeever, Courtesy Gagosian.

Gates: Maybe in the beginning, Dr. King and Malcolm X had lots of differences, but in the end, their political and racial and social intention became more and more aligned. I think that for me, and for many of us, we live with both of them inside us. If both can constitute the rage that one feels as a result of feeling subjugated, and then the desire to do something as a result of that rage through the love that one feels, through the desire to have grace and be forgiving, because one also lives in a world where one has experienced love, you begin to understand how important forgiveness is; that one has to have the right balance of when to strike with love, when to strike with a letter, when to strike with a protest, or when to strike with art. I'm talking about the manifested forms required in order to get to the outcome that one believes in. I think in that sense, I'm a student of many forms. Not in any specific order: Planning is a form; religious theory and spiritual interest is a form; knowledge is a form; making objects is a form; and so on. I think that I'm just trying to use all of these different forms to get to the outcomes that I believe in.

Rail: It's hard to imagine, the image of the Left in the first half of the century, or at least up to the '60s, was that racial issues would be solved the same way the immigration issue was solved at the beginning of the 20th century: by throwing everybody into a big melting pot and let them melt together. But it didn't work, partly because WASPs might marry Italians or Poles or Jews. Rarely would either group intermarry with Blacks or persons of color. My other point is when the war in Vietnam ended in 1975, most of the progressive thinkers, the so-called public intellectuals, went to the academy, which became the model for the generations who followed their footsteps, and they remain hermetically sealed within the sanctuary of the academy. As a result, they lost the discourse of national politics ever since—not to mention the ferocious competitiveness among the specializations, be it Asian studies, African American studies, gender studies, and so on. If you put them in one room, they would kill each other instantly.

Gates: That's the reason why making art is my political and social platform, and my spiritual and emotional platform. And that having an artistic practice as the primary platform allows me to move in and out more fluidly of the limitations that are fraught within other parts of hierarchical structures, including city government, including the academy, including queer gender studies,

among other interdisciplinary fields as you had just mentioned. I want my protest to be in the labor of my artistic practice.

Rail: How would you describe your first impulse to study urban planning and ceramics at Iowa State University? Which one was purposeful and which one was accidental?



Theaster Gates's studio, Chicago, 2020. Artwork © Theaster Gates. Courtesy Gagosian. Photo: Chris Strong.

Gates: At the time, Iowa State University had a program called Community and Regional Planning. I was pre-pharmacy for the first year of college, then decided to switch to urban planning, which seemed to suit my personality, because in high school I had studied drafting as a pre-architecture track. I was very interested in architecture, but my math wasn't the best; so then I thought, what I really want to do is affect policy more than I want to build buildings. So urban planning was the closest thing I could get at the school, to be governing how things are built as opposed to building the buildings—so it became my primary learning, my discipline, my major. Like many schools, the planning department was in one building called the College of Design at the university. The hierarchy was interesting: urban planning was located on the first floor, landscape architecture on the second, graphic and industrial design on the third, then architecture was on top floor, and the fine arts were in the basement. The artists were always in the basement with no light, always by the parking lot, always by the admissions.

Rail: It wasn't like that in the Renaissance [*laughs*].

Gates: Not at all. So, I minored in ceramics, or studio sculpture, and my material emphasis was primarily clay.

Rail: Was urban planning by design and art by chance?



Theaster Gates's studio, Chicago, 2020. Artwork © Theaster Gates. Courtesy Gagolian. Photo: Chris Strong.

Gates: Yes. I did not go to college thinking that I would be interested in art at all. I wanted to get a degree that would give me a job, as I was pretty agnostic going in. And then I took a world religion class; I took an Old Testament class, a New Testament class, also one on traditional African religion, and I found myself very close to a minor in religious studies. So, I just stayed one extra year and finished my minor in religious studies as well. But all this was really driven by the hunger of a young person who desired to understand the world, to understand the histories of religious formation, of city formation, the whole history of the creative arts, and so on. I've always been interested in how things work, how their origin stories are drawn. What's the origin of Christianity? I wanted to go to a place where Christianity was the third or fourth iteration of something that was actually Black, where the origin story that I knew growing up as a Christian was actually 2 or 3,000 years old, if not older. So it was really affirming to understand that this narrative about Jesus and the Holy Ghost is related to Isis, Osiris—Mary and all other figures. Just to think that there was a Hebrew version, an Egyptian version, a Chinese version, Armenian version, etc.—it was like, wow.

Rail: But it was the making of ceramic objects, that also fortified a certain aspiration, which prompted you to spend a year in Tokoname, Japan, in 1997, a city that is known for its ceramic productions since the Heian period; and then another two years in South Africa in 1996–98, where one of the oldest archeological and human fossil sites in the world is located, and where you received your MA, at the University of Cape Town, in fine art and religious studies. Would you say both experiences shaped your early formation concretely?

Gates: Yes. The encounters that I had with Japan, and continue to have, are at the root of my practice. In other words, my understanding of aesthetics and philosophy is largely guided by Eastern ideas. It was special to be in South Africa where Christianity had obliterated traditional African religions, and apartheid had diminished people's spirit. And yet, with the loss of their gods and with this ongoing subjugation, these Black South Africans and their resistance were so amazingly powerful and resilient even in the face of danger and violence. So, by the time I got there in 1996, Nelson Mandela had been president for two years. They were in the middle of building a new constitution. And things were more hopeful than they are today. As a 24-year-old, I was soaking it all up. I just thought nothing could be better. And it also meant that I went from

a pretty dire situation in the US, where I was broke, to coming to South Africa on a Rotary scholarship, and with US dollars against the rand, I found myself temporarily wealthy. It was the first time that I felt my social standing could just flip. My poverty, my situation had nothing to do with who I am. It could be good one day, bad the next day, yet I'd found a way to enjoy all the good days, the bad days, and just keep everything even and real.



Theaster Gates, Brick Reliquary - Square with Marks, 2020. Wood fired brick, wood ash, magnesium dioxide, and black stain, 12 x 12 x 4 inches. © Theaster Gates. Photo: Robert McKeever. Courtesy Gagolian.

Rail: So you brought those two significant experiences back with you to Chicago. Would you regard the time working for the CTA, leading to your first major conceptual show *Plate Convergence* at Hyde Park Art Center in 2007—an eight-year interval as your period of gestation. Having a full-time job allowed you to think through things before bringing them to a potential synthesis?

Gates: I was a planner, and I made pots as a hobby. I read everything I could read. In the early 2000s, I was going to the pottery studio at Lillstreet Art Center and making pots, only to give them away. It felt really good to have a job, to have a love, a vocation. Every day after working from nine to five, from five to midnight, I made pots. And I would do it all over again. Anyway, the pots got weirder and weirder. And people in the studio would say, “Why are you wasting so much clay on whatever weird thing you’re making?”

Rail: Whaaaaat! [*laughs*]

Gates: I remember thinking, “Oh, I’m not a potter like you all. I’m something else, I don’t yet know what to call it.” I didn’t have a preoccupation with the word sculpture, even though I was aware of the works of Henry Moore, Miro, Calder, Duchamp, for example. I think by 2004 I was very proud to say, “I’m a potter.”

Rail: You were, of course, aware of the clay movement in California, including participants such as Peter Voulkos, Kenneth Price, Robert Arneson ...

Gates: Paul Soldner, John Mason and others. Yes, I also knew about the decorative arts, as well as the epics of art history. I was a fan of the patronage system, dating from the Medici family up to the de Menil family, and everything in between: the importance of Switzerland, Germany, and Austria, in terms of collectors who are also dealers, and who were dealing with artworks from Impressionism through modernism. From the rise of Picasso, and the French avant-garde, the complexities of Cubism to Surrealism, Dadaism, Abstract Expressionism; from Happenings, Fluxus, Land art, performance art to Situationists, and other kind of French middle-class movements; and then I could situate my favorite philosopher/sociologist, Henri Lefebvre, and then on to Jane Addams and Jane Jacobs and Allan Kaprow. I was starting to understand myself in relationship to all these sources that I was reading, and I'd say, "Oh, yeah, this sounds like something I'm interested in," or, "Oh, that's not my jam, but that's a really good story." By the time I got to the Hyde Park Arts Center with the exhibition *Plate Convergence*, I understood that I wanted to demonstrate to the world through a kind of conceptual lens that I had had an encounter with the East, which nobody would believe. And so, in order to help them believe it, I created a myth—even though I actually made everything in the exhibit, including all of the art-historical fiction writing, the film work, the original plank-shaped clay plates that were previously staged for the dinner in the video, as well as the sculptural pieces. I got to use all of my talents, while intermixing dinner, food, the topic of race, ceramic objects, and storytelling, all under the heading of the Yamaguchi Institute.

Rail: Shoji Yamaguchi being the fictional character who came to Mississippi, got married to a local civil rights activist, and together they made ceramic plates suitable for hosting meals for friends and guests from the neighborhood. In addition to it being a conceptual framework, does it refer to the idea of interracial marriage as a progressive and advanced idea?

Gates: What I was trying to do was to shift the binary from Black-and-white to Others. The possibility of a Japanese potter who was obsessed with Mississippi was inspired by one of my teachers in Tokoname named Ryoji-san. He would always go to Mississippi because he loved iron ore. I just love this idea of a Japanese potter who goes to Mississippi, searching for a dark clay body—which then allowed me to touch my own roots with Mississippi, my connections to Japan, and then through this union, a person like me could be more.

Rail: In your own terms, how would you describe the differences between the concept of need, the concept of want, and the concept of desire?

Gates: I believe that there is no need. There's only want and desire. If I'm talking about myself, the mentality of need drives desire. And sometimes we get them mixed up. Varying monastic traditions show us all the time. What we need is a little bit of rice, a little bit of protein, a little bit of water as our daily sustenance—but the engine of desire is what has propelled great civilizations. And as desire seems to be more closely connected to one's ego, the ego of a nation, the ego of a tribe, the ego of the individual seems to be the condition that is most easily solved for but so rarely wanted. Yes, it would be easy for us all to cure world hunger, to stop using plastic, to create a better and more sustainable economy: all those things are very possible, but because of want and desire, they'll never be attainable.



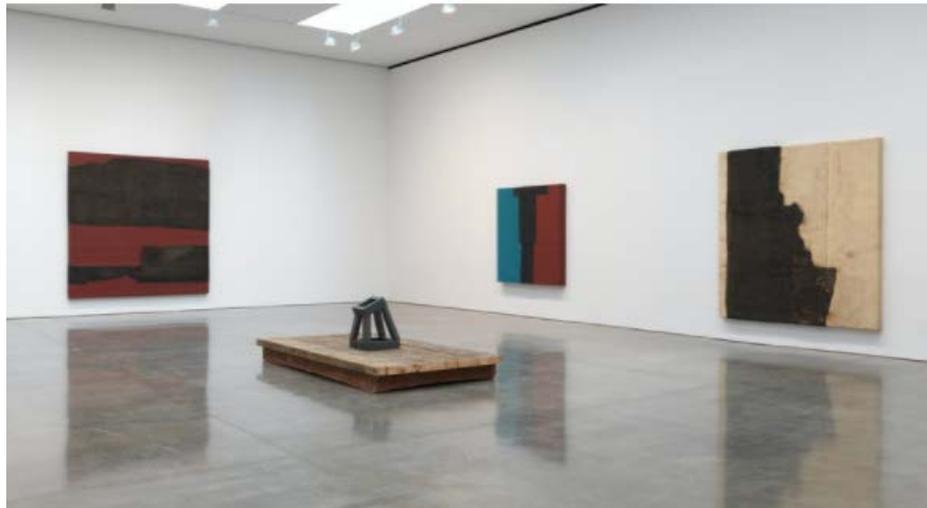
Theaster Gates, Brick Reliquary - Tea Compression of Rectangle with Melted Bowl, 2020. Stoneware tea bowl, kiln post, refractory clay, wood fired brick, wood ash, magnesium dioxide, black stain, and alumina carbide shelf, 18 x 22 x 9 inches. © Theaster Gates. Photo: Robert McKeever. Courtesy Gagosian.

Rail: I feel our culture needs to teach children to create, to make things out of literally nothing, so they can understand value as a condition that needs to be created as artists create works of art. I've been reading John Dewey's writings on art and his ideas on education reform. As we both know, he and his wife Alice founded the Laboratory School at University of Chicago in 1896, based on the aspiration of democratic learning—learning by doing, the importance of the dual context that individual learning—that each individual student brings something unique from their experiences to the classroom—and learning in the group, learning from others who are unlike oneself. Dewey's teaching philosophy is imminently democratic, therefore it would work if we were to treat each other as instruments in the orchestra, where each contributes a unique sound to the symphonic whole.

Gates: Dewey was both an autonomous thinker, and a lead executive administrator at the founding of the University of Chicago—an institution builder with autonomous ideas. He is both “me” and “we”: he built a philosophy of integrated learning, where one is learning all the time, and where learning is available to all, while at the same time benefiting from extreme wealth and privilege. And I think the situation I found myself in over the years—and this is neither self-deprecating or self-congratulatory—is having to make the decision to work autonomously in order to advance things that I believe in for the larger good. Because if I choose to build the collective and we all function as equals, with everyone making decisions all together with the same ideas at the same time, thus far it hasn't worked so well for us. I'm admitting that I am one part individualist and one part or two parts collectivist, because I need a portion of my time to have the right to an autonomous thought. It is my hope that that autonomous thought leads to collective opportunity. It's a two-step process. I have friends who are part of collectives that they've created, and collectives are usually best at the beginning because there is always an aspiration and a goal. What usually happens over time in collectives is that, at some point, the individual's will flares up and the collective doesn't have the ability to absorb the truth of the ego—especially if we're talking about collectives that are based on ideology. Now, collectives based on money tend to work pretty well. They're called corporations: If we make this object, we sell this object, we all make more money—let's commit to doing that. If someone's not pulling their weight, someone else can say so. I am thinking about my studio practice, for example, where I work with others and when some of my ideas are thrown around; my collaborators then

have a tremendous amount of autonomy in the execution of those ideas. And there's this kind of tension between one's personal identity and ability, and autonomy held in tension with possibility.

Rail: People in general tend to have heartbreaks when any collective breaks up. Allan Kaprow once talked to me about Hansa Gallery, the first collective gallery that he helped to create in New York City. It was called Hansa because it was created by students who had studied with Hans Hofmann, so it was partly named after Hofmann's first name and partly named after the 13th-century merchant guild Hansa. Kaprow told a story of how George Segal (one of the last members) brought with him the young dealer Richard Bellamy to meet the art historian Meyer Schapiro, knowing that his older brother was a very wealthy banker with the hope that he might support the gallery, or at least introduce them to his wealthy friends who would buy works of art to keep the gallery alive. Instead of making the introduction or getting involved in other ways, Meyer gave a parable of a flower having to bloom in full only to die naturally in good faith. So they closed Hansa Gallery after a seven-year run (1952–1959). But however briefly the gallery existed, it is cemented in history hence it lives forever as it continues to have ripple effects for younger collectives across the country.



Installation view: Theaster Gates: Black Vessel, 2020. © Theaster Gates, Photo: Robert McKeever, Courtesy Gagolian.

Gates: Again, one should always choose the collective over the individual. But the truth is, there would be no Ford or Mellon or Carnegie or MacArthur if there weren't these giant individuals, whose money was given back to the public, which the public deserved in any case. What I've built has made an impact and it will continue to inspire others, as in your story of the Hansa Gallery. The challenge is that there are people who aren't inspired to believe in the power of human ability. As long as my work was small, nascent, and symbolic, people wanted to make me a hero. When it became real, intangible, and transformative, they started to question it—like, who does he think he is? Which individual has the right to work at this level? And all I was doing was pushing my limits—like, oh, I could do this, oh, we could keep doing that, let's keep trying this. This is fun. This is impactful. This is important. This is curious. This is self-destructive. As an artist, I want to experience all these things; I want to feel the fucking ground quake. Ultimately, my goal was always to make art, but I knew that part of the art production had a demonstrative quality. For example, while I don't want to be a public housing administrator and make public housing per se, I want to demonstrate that quality affordable public housing can be made possible for people through art; I don't want to own a café, but I do want to demonstrate

that a café should live in a Black neighborhood: there are exercises in space. I generate exercises in space; I'm a spatialist—a spatial theorist and a spatial practitioner. I'm not a real estate developer. What I've tried to remedy from this narrative is when an artist approaches housing, it should be an artistic approach to housing, not a developmental approach to housing. Which means there are a million ways to do it, and I'm excited to explore those options. And I'm willing to not accumulate wealth for the sake of being able to exercise my spatial theories through artistic freedom. People often imagine that you have to choose between success and political exactitude, that you can't have sincere beliefs *and* have resources. And what I tried to demonstrate is that even when I didn't have a lot, I could use whatever I had to create my own values. That's it.

Rail: I hunger therefore the object becomes food; it's not the food that lies before me that drives my hunger.

Gates: That's exactly right. And I would continue on to say there's nothing that I need. I don't *need* another space. So why do I keep making these spaces?

Rail: Yes, why?



*Theaster Gates, Walking Prayer, 2018–20. Bound embossed books and vintage Carnegie cast iron shelving, 83 x 320 x 19 inches.
© Theaster Gates. Photo: Robert McKeever. Courtesy Gagosian.*

Gates: I have a deep desire to take the energy of a place and match it with the beauty of that same place. Sometimes one space has energy and no beauty; another space has beauty but no energy. So the question becomes how to establish equity between the energy that is latent in a place and how people perceive it. What is satisfying for me is watching a place go from no order to a visible order. There've been talks about Afrofuturism, which is important, as a cultural aesthetic that aspires to create an alternative, a parallel, an alterity; I'm creating what you can refer to as an "Afro-craft futurism."

Rail: Cool!

Gates: I want to live with handmade things that are made by my workshop and my collective. I want to take these rotten trees and I want to give them a purpose. I want to make unconventional things. I want to eat and live by the things made by human hands.

Rail: Your perpetual desire is indeed evident in this exhibition *Black Vessel*. How did the concept emerge as the guiding principle, and how long did you work on it?

Gates: I had conceived of this exhibition as one that would allow me to focus on fire, the flame that produces my ceramic works, the brickworks, and the tar works. And I thought that I would use Heidegger's reflections on the vessel as a container that allows us to gather, and also, in this case, as an object of desire or an object that has the capacity to contain the world. What does it mean to be a person who makes objects for containment, and in my case, buildings, cultural institutions, vessels? I wanted this exhibition to be a little bit representative of my practice, without it being a survey-like presentation. And because it is one the largest American exhibitions that I've had to date, I wanted it to be very clear that there would be a room of paintings, a room of ceramic objects, and a room that is more of an installation—all based on poetry, literature, architecture, knowledge, among other things that I love. We went back and forth on the title, since I often have the qualifier “Black” in front of things. It was initially “Vessel,” but in this case, I thought it was potent to use the word black so that I could also implicate myself as the vessel. With the need to be generative and to generate in an utterly excessive way with the sub-politics of a place and ambition in mind, *Black Vessel* includes paintings that embody an evolution in my roofing ability and my aesthetic sensibility, which moving a formalism like a Carl Andre version of roofing into portrait and landscape painting.



Theaster Gates, Red City, 2020. Industrial oil-based enamel, rubber torch down, bitumen, wood, and copper, 72 x 108 inches. © Theaster Gates. Photo: Jacob Hand. Courtesy Gagolian.

Rail: And as a perpetual homage to your father, who was a proud roofer and good craftsman.

Gates: Yes, as I'm constantly acknowledging ceramics and roofing as my origin stories. The poetry is about my history with slam poetry in Chicago, as a way of relating things back and not being embarrassed by having a history.

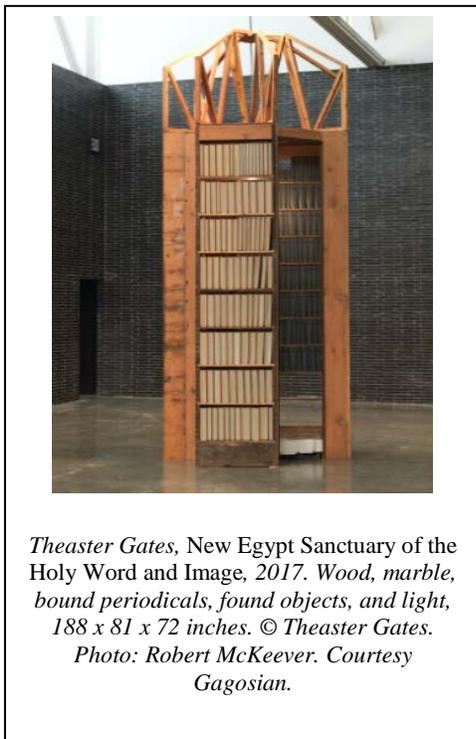
Rail: Toni Morrison said once that “the first sentence of our childhood that we all remember, the phrase, ‘once upon a time.’” Do you remember?

Gates: Yes, I do.



Installation view: Theaster Gates: *Black Vessel*, 2020. © Theaster Gates, Photo: Robert McKeever, Courtesy Gagosian.

Rail: Also, my first impression of the large installation, apart from being overwhelmed yet embraced by the great warmth of the surrounding *Brick Reliquaries* (2020), was seeing the relationship between the two large-scale archive works, *New Egypt Sanctuary of the Holy Word and Image* (2017), which housed the bound volumes of the famous Black American magazine *Ebony*, and *Walking Prayer* (2018–20), which displays a collection of published books on the Black experience. The former is constructed as a vertical form, while the latter is horizontal. Do you think this decision might refer to Mondrian’s vision of the urban environment and to your deep knowledge of urban planning?



Theaster Gates, *New Egypt Sanctuary of the Holy Word and Image*, 2017. Wood, marble, bound periodicals, found objects, and light, 188 x 81 x 72 inches. © Theaster Gates. Photo: Robert McKeever. Courtesy Gagosian.

Gates: Mondrian isn’t the first impression that comes to mind, although there are multiple trajectories within European art history that fit the bill. We could consider Malevich’s cross, which functions for me as a political mechanism and a kind of moralism, while Beuys’s use of the cross is situated between the environmental and the shamanistic. Neither of those trajectories are necessary for this work. Embedded in the horizontality of *Walking Prayer* is what a 1970s Black nationalist might consider the sisterhood or the brotherhood. The books that comprise *Walking Prayer* are books that were made to be read by everyday people. While many of the writers were academics, they were also political actionists, passionate community members, and professionals in other fields beyond the academy, simply trying to help their sisters and brothers understand the world. The verticality of *New Egypt* is slightly more dubious for me. The shelving structure recalls the 11 floors of John H. Johnson’s corporate office. It is about a kind of corporate ascension as much as it is a sacred home that invites one person at a time to be deeply embedded in this cannon. It is at once

the corporate ladder, Jacob's ladder and Osiris's ladder. In this way, the architecture of the gallery with its brick, combined with Carnegie's industrialist intent, combined with my makeshift Egypt, offers together a reflection on Black space that is in many ways trying to be literal in the heterogeneity of Black space. Embedded in Black space are Carnegie libraries and vestiges of an unknown Africa. Chorus sits adjacent to these works and functions as a nod to my Black Baptist Church, Pope.L's *Choir* (2019), and Jimmy McGriff's "Spinning Wheel" (1970). Chorus offers us a spatial tuning that cleanses, clarifies, and creates accord every seven minutes.

Rail: I appreciate the visual rapport between and among the rooms. The installation, in the largest west gallery, perhaps represents your head, your imagination; the paintings are your body, surrounded by and made of things that you know super well, having grown up with them; and the ceramics are like your strong neck, your vessel that you had to travel East to find, which connects the head and the body.



Theaster Gates, *Chorus*, 2020. 1 Leslie speaker, digital sound file. 41 5/8 x 29 1/4 x 20 5/8 inches.
© Theaster Gates. Photo: Robert McKeever.

Gates: That's beautiful.

Rail: In Asia, as you know, we were never taught to be individualistic, unique personalities. All of our religions were created—Taoism, Confucianism, Hinduism, Buddhism, or Shintoism—to really get rid of the uniqueness of the individual. Which is the opposite in the West. So clearly the little man trying to stop the advancing tank of the People's Liberation Army on June 8, 1989 in Tiananmen Square is David confronting Goliath. The rest is China learning how to adapt capitalism's free-market economy while keeping the Communist Party intact.

Gates: The power of the small thing is very real. The individual brick itself is not so useful or intimidating, but 50,000 bricks together lining an entire gallery? Pretty intense. I remember thinking about Richard Serra when I saw his exhibition, *Forged Rounds*, in 2019 in the same space my exhibition now

occupies—the 50-ton round steel works—and I thought I'd do the opposite. I wanted my artwork to disappear in the west gallery. I wanted people to come into that gallery and imagine that the bricks had been there forever. I wanted it to be like the experience Richard Wright talks about—that there's black all around, but you don't see anyone. You don't see anything. And so, the room and the art disappear, and it leaves you with a feeling of sanctity and openness.

Rail: One technical question: how would you describe the clay wall sculptures installed in the first room? How were they made? They look so ancient ...

Gates: The same brick material that made the walls is the material that made those sculptures. The only difference is the sculptures were made by over-firing the bricks; as the bricks start to melt, they became self-fusing. And then they started to fuse with all the other things inside the kiln. I intentionally increased the temperature, so that before falling apart, the bricks became stronger. As a result, the bricks take on the character of metal.

Rail: Which I suspect is not an easy thing to achieve, in terms of getting the right form and the right surface?

Gates: Yes, it requires very close attention in the kiln to not completely melt the brick. Then all of the black metallic substance that's coming out of the brick is the metal oxidizing within the clay body. It's a Zen-like demonstration of how through intention, low materials can become high.

Given the right context and conditions, a thing that seems to have no value can have the most beauty, the most value by adding heat. It just requires context; it requires facility; it requires opportunity. To see the bricks in two separate rooms, at first, they don't seem related, but in fact, they are the very same material; no difference. And even the bronzing on the ceramic objects derives from the same material as the brick. So I'm just showing the ways in which different contexts create new opportunity.