

RICHARD GRAY GALLERY

Chicago Tribune

Harris: Artist Theaster Gates quietly brings about 100 black contemporaries to Chicago for retreat

Participants, hungry for practical knowledge, re-enact conversation from 1968 symposium

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Artist Theaster Gates sits with his large-scale installation, 13th Ballad, at Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art earlier this year. (Nuccio DiNuzzo, Chicago Tribune)

A little more than a year ago, New York magazine published a "rulebook" for how to make it in "the new art world."

Rule No. 4: "Be Young, Post-Black, and From Chicago." And there was Chicagoan Theaster Gates, exhibit A, on the cover of ArtReview.

Yet in late August, Gates managed to convene about 100 black artists, many of them internationally heralded, in Chicago for two days without any media outlet whatsoever taking note.

So much for the rule book being rewritten.

Gates, one of the most powerful figures in contemporary art, centered his inaugural Black Artists Retreat on a transcript of a 1968 symposium among seven leading black artists, including Romare Bearden, Sam Gilliam Jr., Richard Hunt and Jacob Lawrence.

Bearden, the moderator, began: "We are here to discuss some of the problems of the Black artist in America. I think one of the most perplexing is the problem of making a living. During the last two or three years this problem has been met to some degree by more teaching jobs being made available to us, but it's still hard for the Black artist to support himself."

Gates had performers re-enact the 1968 conversation at the retreat and then opened the floor to discussion, according to gallery owner Paul Gray, director of the Richard Gray Gallery, who attended. Among the attendees were two MacArthur "genius grant" winners, Carrie Mae Weems and Deborah Willis; Chicago photographer Dawoud Bey; and London-based artist Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, one of four artists shortlisted for this year's Turner Prize.

"My ambition was a couple of things," Gates said by phone last week after returning from China. "I was just curious about what would happen when artists got together without an institution to talk about the state of things. I also wanted young and emerging artists to be able to engage more with established, older artists."

And what conclusions did he reach?

"For most artists, things haven't changed so much, and that in the art world, while there have been some opportunities for one or two or 10 artists, by and large, the phenomena ratio is the same," he said.

"One out of 1,000 artists have the kind of representation they want. The industry favors a certain kind of beauty and flavor and star potential. Artists still often have to teach in order to make ends meet. The word 'business' around art is still a dirty word and, at best, we flounder to figure out what that looks like."

Gates said participants were hungry for practical knowledge, from how to incorporate a small business to how to acquire health care.

"These are things you think the field would have figured out by now," he said.

So Gates said he would offer more retreats. Definitely another one in Chicago next August, he said, and perhaps some gatherings in other cities in between. He's trying to figure out how to pay for it, musing about opening a real bar to pay for next year's BAR.

One can never tell if he's just musing or if he's serious, because, in addition to being an artist, he's a real estate developer. Debris from renovation projects makes its way into his coveted works of art.

And Gates has much under construction. He is beginning to turn an abandoned bank on South Stony Island Avenue into a cultural center. Renovations on his own studio on South Kimbark Avenue are well underway, and construction has begun on the Dorchester Artist Housing Collaborative on East 70th Street.

"All three are happening, and they constitute a \$15 million to \$20 million reinvestment in the South Side," Gates said.

His ambitions for his Grand Crossing neighborhood are simple yet difficult to achieve: "I want my friends to feel like they can spend their whole Sunday on the South Side. ... I want more to keep you South."

But it is striking to describe how far from the South Side the art world is taking him. This year, Vogue.com featured a gallery of photos from "An Event Honoring Theaster Gates at Art Basel," the Swiss art fair, hosted by Credit Suisse Group AG board Chairman Urs Rohner and former New Yorker and Vanity Fair editor Tina Brown, among others. In attendance were billionaire art collector Eli Broad and gallery owner Larry Gagosian.

So I wanted to know what Gates would describe as the best moment of his year. Would it be something glamorous? Or a quiet moment at the retreat?

"Yesterday I got a call from the city," he replied, referring to City Hall. "They said, 'We believe in what you do. And we're working very hard to help you do what you're doing.'"

That never would have happened in 1968.