

RICHARD GRAY GALLERY

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How Theaster Gates Has Changed Chicago

The prolific artist, whose community-focused projects have revitalized Chicago's South Side, has his first show in the city in more than five years

By [Lane Florsheim](#) April 4, 2019 10:23 a.m. ET



Theaster Gates. © THEASTER GATES

In this series, we get the inside story from artists about their upcoming exhibitions and installations—plus, learn about their mantras, rituals and what they're up to next.

The Artist: When Theaster Gates is asked how he divides his time between his artwork and his community-focused projects, he says, “Yeah, they’re one thing.” Gates, 45, is not just a prolific visual and performance artist—with one show on view now at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris and another opening this month at

Richard Gray Gallery in Chicago—he’s also a force in his community. Since earning his master’s in urban planning from Iowa State University in 2006, Gates has led an impressive number of revitalization efforts in Chicago’s South Side. The visionary spaces he’s created include the Dorchester Art and Housing Collaborative, a complex with areas for theater and dance as well as 32 units for artists who receive low-income housing support to live; the Stony Island Arts Bank, a formerly abandoned building he bought from the city for \$1 and converted into an arts and archival center; and the Black Cinema House, which presents screenings and discussions of movies by and about black people.

Gates’s art examines historical moments in the black American experience. Some of his most recognizable works are his Civil Tapestries, made from decommissioned fire hoses, which reference the ones the police used on marchers during the Civil Rights movement. “[My art] covers big ideas that are rooted in where I live or where I am, and the way those things are born can take so many shapes,” he says. “If I’m having a conversation with friends about the lack of cultural venues on the South Side, I could either write an op-ed about it, or I could build a temporary club, or I could make a painting about a club that I long for—and what feels wonderful about my practice is that there’s no hierarchy between those three.”

His Latest Show: *Every Square Needs a Circle* opens April 4. The show is Gates’s first exhibition in his home city in over five years. “It feels kind of like my Chicago story,” he says. To him, squares represent the rational world, whereas circles are of the realm of the “magical, irrational and zany”—and many of the works in the show incorporate one or both shapes. Gates’s tar paintings, for example, are square; neon works that reference W.E.B. Du Bois’s sociological data studies integrate both squares and circles. A large platform for viewers to see the works from the center of the gallery is a raised square made from brushed steel.

One striking piece, a hulking neon sign that once hung outside a now-closed branch of Rothschild Liquors in Chicago, is neither of the two titular shapes but of equal significance to Gates. “In my case, when people think a thing is a found object, it rarely is,” he says. “It’s a relationship. We got a call from Mrs. Rothschild, who was a third generation liquor distributor in what are today black



Gates added his own words, “Mama’s Milk,” to the middle of the Rothschild Liquors sign. The family-owned company had, at one point, a total of eight or nine stores in Chicago; many have closed in recent years. © THEASTER GATES. COURTESY RICHARD GRAY GALLERY. IMAGE BY JIM PRINZ.

communities.” He added his own words, “Mama’s Milk,” to the middle of the sign. “It’s a play on my part about the role that Rothschild plays in economically depressed neighborhoods,” he explains. “It’s the beginning of a kind of urban studies through visual culture. I wanted to honor this object and accept that it’s part of the Chicago landscape.”

His Process: For the show, Gates found himself wanting to practice “being quiet with the work” in order to think about circles and squares. “The title was quite basic,” and he says, “and that just allows me so much head space to be reflective.”

His Reading List: Gates is currently rereading Darby English’s *How to See a*

Work of Art in Total Darkness, while also studying a 2004 book on the history of music theory called *Musical Morphology* and a third book on dance strategies. “Basically, I’m learning new vocabularies in music and dance as a way of thinking about the performance aspects of my practice,” he says.



Progress Mill’ is one of two original neon works in the show depicting W.E.B. Dubois’s data visualizations that depicted the progress of former slaves three decades after emancipation. © THEASTER GATES. COURTESY RICHARD GRAY GALLERY. IMAGE BY JIM PRINZ.

His Mantra: The question, “What would Okwui do?” serves as a guide for Gates. “Okwui Enwezor was a really important Nigerian-born curator who recently died,” he says. “He was a dear friend and I’m often thinking about what would his words to me be? What would Okwui do?”

His Talisman: Gates never leaves home without his journal.

His Influences: One of Agnes Martin’s works, *Little Sister*, served as a point of departure for *Every Square Needs a Circle*. “I would see her work wherever I was,



Gates's figure of Madonna, cast in bronze and surrounded by a cage is titled 'Alls my life I has to fight,' after the Kendrick Lamar song 'Alright.' PHOTO: © THEASTER GATES. COURTESY RICHARD GRAY GALLERY. IMAGE BY JIM PRINZ.

but when I saw it at the Tate, it really knocked me off my feet,” he says. “Reading her biography, I feel like Agnes and I have lots of ideas in common. She has a deep silence that I feel like I’m learning a lot from. I like that sometimes works of art can hold secrets and they live between you and the work, you know?”

Gates also cites a number of his peers as influences: conceptual artist Glenn Ligon, painter Titus Kaphar and sculptor Martin Puryear. “These people, not only does their work inspire me, it’s their humanism, their logic, their quirkiness, their humility,” he says. “I could say the same for 20 more friends in the arts. Spirit isn’t lost on artists—you feel it more in artists. I’m just so glad the world has makers and not just finance people, that there’s a vocation set aside for beauty.”