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Theaster Gates, first American Nasher Prize winner, makes a case for art as urban renewal

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By Danielle Avram

The first time I encountered the work of 2018 Nasher Prize Laureate Theaster Gates was while waiting in line for the 2010 Whitney Biennial. Standing outside in the chilly New York air, I could hear a low rhythmic sound emanating from a wooden, box-like structure in the courtyard below.

The piece was *Cosmology of Yard*, a low-slung pavilion built out of wood salvaged from the Wrigley gum factory in Chicago, inside of which a video played on a loop. The work, part of his divine “Temple Exercises” series, elevated the simple act of shoe shining, turning it into a meditation on power structures, migration and community building, and the art of making.

And making things — rehabbing things, transforming things, collecting things — is what the Chicago-based artist and urban planner does. [Announced as the Nasher Prize winner](#) last September, Gates will address his multi-disciplinary artistic practice in a town hall-style meeting at the Wyly Theater on April 6, and attend a black-tie gala in his honor at the Nasher Sculpture Center on April 7.



Artist Theaster Gates photographed at his studio in Chicago for *The Dallas Morning News*. (Nan Coulter /Special Contributor)

That Whitney Biennial piece was his first national opportunity, he said in a recent interview, and “I wanted to do something that reflected the truth of my everyday life.”

Born in Chicago in 1973, Gates is the youngest of nine children, raised by a roofer father and schoolteacher mother on the working-class West Side. Home to the Illinois chapter of the Black Panther Party in the 1960s, in the following decades the area was rife with crime, drugs and impoverished housing projects and was often the target of aggressive and brutal police. While the physical structures of the neighborhood disintegrated, the palpable impact of civil rights era grassroots energy remained, and residents worked together to create a social infrastructure to combat the instability.

“He’s of an era formed by a political and cultural consciousness,” said Hamza Walker, director of the nonprofit art space LAXART in Los Angeles and a close friend of the artist. “Theaster is much more the product of Chicago than anything else. It’s a bare-knuckle town. There’s no mincing any of that kind of stuff. It’s all right there on his shoulder.”



Theaster Gates' *Tar Baby II*, 2016, styrofoam, Bondo, tar coloring, vinyl foil, fabric (Nasher Sculpture Center)

Much attention has been paid to Gates’ formative years in the Baptist church and his role in the church choir, but Gates credits his involvement in the city’s slam poetry scene and exposure to African and other non-Western art at galleries like Douglas Dawson and Mario Aranda’s Cielo Vivo with connecting his homegrown sense of racial consciousness and community activism to the worlds of art and craftsmanship.

“So as much as people talk about my history with the African-American church and such, I would say that there were all these other things that were formulative in helping me understand the complexity of the life of a thing,” Gates said.



[Content Title For the first time, an American artist captures the Nasher Prize for Sculpture](#)

Trained as a ceramicist, Gates also holds advanced degrees in urban planning and religion, and his studies merged with his personal history to form a practice that encompasses object-making, performance, installation, and experiments in neighborhood functionality and urban activism.

His longest running work, the Dorchester Projects, began in 2006 when Gates decided to start a “one-bedroom residency in my two-bedroom house,” as he put it, located on the South Side of Chicago. One house led to another, and over the years Gates has accumulated a plethora of real estate in the area, including apartment buildings, townhouses, several single-family dwellings, and a former Anheuser-Busch distribution plant. The entirety of Gates’ enterprise is overseen by his Rebuild Foundation and spans projects and services such as low-cost housing, artist residences, and cultural centers and performance spaces.

The foundation’s most ambitious project to date involved the restoration of a former bank to create the Stony Island Arts Bank, a hybrid gallery, library and community center that’s home to an archive of *Jet* and *Ebony* magazines and the record collection of Frankie Knuckles, the pioneering Chicago house music DJ.

"I was broke when I started this project. I knew that I was starting to do something that didn't have a name and that people didn't have a framework for it," Gates said. "But at that time I was very interested in the question, could I change the energy of where I live by making it a more interesting place? An everyday person doing everyday things can have a big impact."



- Theaster Gates' rehabbed storefront, Bing, on East Garfield Boulevard in Chicago, serves as a bookstore and community event space (Nan Coulter /Special Contributor)



- Projects from Gates' Rebuild Foundation include, from left, the Listening House, a renovated former candy store that now accommodates Dr. Wax records, portions of the Johnson Publishing Library, and remaining stock from the now-closed Prairie Avenue Books. The Archive House next door is a gallery, micro library, community space and also houses the University of Chicago

glass lantern slide collection (Nan Coulter /Special Contributor)



- The Stony Island Arts Bank on South Stony Island Avenue in Chicago is Gates' hybrid gallery, library and community center that's home to an archive of *Jet* and *Ebony* magazines and the record collection of Frankie Knuckles, the pioneering Chicago house music DJ. (Nan Coulter /Special Contributor)

Franklin Sirmans, director of the Pérez Art Museum Miami, explains that Gates' power stems from his ability "to walk the talk that a lot of art aspires to. To say, 'I'm not only going to make this visual thing happen but I'm also going to effect direct change with everything I got.' He lifts the idea of being an artist to a higher plane."

Although Gates' urban renewal project has provided him ample exposure, he maintains a highly skilled and respected object-making practice, combining formal modernist aesthetics with African spirituality, and real-world narratives. As demonstrated by works like those currently on view at the Nasher, Gates often uses salvaged materials (an interest piqued early on by his friendship with Chicago-based artist Dan Peterman, known for his work with recycled objects) that carry the weighty realities of black life in America. Rubber-marred gymnasium floors and creased and worn fire hoses are presented as museum- and gallery-ready studies in elemental formalism, while their obvious pasts allude to school segregation and police brutality against civil rights demonstrators.



Theaster Gates (left) and Nasher Sculpture Center director Jeremy Strick at Gates' studio in Chicago on Dec. 20, 2017. (Nan Coulter/Special Contributor)

“The things that are on my mind have to do with my desire to be in the real world and then see if there is a material form that allows me to dig into my interests in material objects and sculpture and making, while at the same time pointing to some of these moments that really need both poetic attention and sometimes concerted, practical, tactical effort,” Gates said.

In 2016, The Rebuild Foundation became the conservator of the deconstructed gazebo from the Cudell Recreation Center in Cleveland, where 12-year-old Tamir Rice was fatally shot by police in 2014. Gates said that his interactions with Rice’s mother, Samaria, helped inspire his upcoming project, *The Black Madonna*. The exhibition, which opens at The Kunstmuseum Basel in Switzerland in June, considers the ethnographic origins of Christ and the Virgin Mary along with the social and political role of the grieving mother.

“In these moments where tremendous suffering happens against the innocent, it reminds us. I think that’s why the civil rights movement was so amazing, because you got to see blatant racism against children. It was those moments where the world could see this wholly unnecessary kind of crucifixion,” Gates said.

[Theaster Gates: How to revive a neighborhood: with imagination, beauty and art](#)

Gates’ role as an archivist, historian, and storyteller of black narratives is foundational to his practice, but it is his ability to shift between the museum, the gallery and the street that has made him one of the world’s most influential artists. As a black artist in the 21st century, Gates is acutely aware of the position he occupies, and the amount of consideration and adaptation it takes to experiment, and possibly fail, on such grand scale.

“If we’re going to expand the territory and the possibility of art, we have to take risks, and we have to articulate why we’re taking those risks and what those risks mean,” Gates said.

Danielle Avram is a curator and writer based in Dallas

Plan your life

The general public is invited to a conversation with Theaster Gates about his sculptural practice at the "Nasher Prize Dialogues: Laureate Town Hall," April 6, 1 to 4 p.m. at the AT&T Performing Arts Center's Wily Theatre, 2400 Flora St. Admission is free, but RSVP required at nashersculpturecenter.org.