About Theaster Gates

Theaster Gates (American, born 1973) lives and works in his native city of Chicago. In addition to his studio practice, he has worked with local builders, architects and hired hands to transform buildings in Greater Grand Crossing on the South Side of Chicago into art galleries, library archival collections, and spaces for community engagement and performative works.

Education

- Ceramics and Urban Planning, Iowa State University (MS, 2006; BS 1996)
- Fine Arts and Religious Studies, University of Cape Town (MA, 1998)

Materials Matter

“By elevating the material and my dad’s skill, could we start to think about tar just like clay, in a way, shaping it differently, helping us to imagine what was possible?” – Theaster Gates

Many of Gates’s works incorporate what he has described as “humble” materials such as clay and tar. These materials carry with them the historical associations of their traditional uses but also connect with Gate’s personal roots. *The Steeple* (2016) is a traditional coil pot clay base with a conical plaster top that suggests the tower structure of a steeple, making reference to Gates’ personal upbringing in the church. Gate’s use of tar has a biographical connection to his father, who owned a roofing company, taught Gates how to work with tar, and gave him his tar kettle when he retired. In works such as *Squirt* (2013), made of tar, wood and rubber, Gates acknowledges the labor of his father’s trade and elevates these building materials, claiming tar as part of his artistic vocabulary.

- What skills or interests have you “inherited” from your parents?
- What materials would you associate with your childhood?
An Object Tells a Story

Theaster Gates often works with raw or discarded materials by reclaiming and placing them in new contexts, affording these materials new power. In some cases, the materials and titles of Gates’ artworks relate to historical events and invite conversations about milestones made toward racial equality. Dirty Red is part of Gates’s “Civil Tapestry” series of works made of decommissioned fire hoses. In the civil rights struggles of the 1960s, fire hoses were used both to disperse peaceful protesters from gathering in public, and to extinguish fires set to black churches.

- Think of an important object in your life (in your bedroom, home or school). What has this object “seen”? How would it describe you? Has it changed over time? Try narrating something meaningful that has happened to you from the perspective of an object that “saw” it.
- What issues or causes are important to you? What object or objects would you choose to represent a cause that you support? Why?

Collecting

Collecting and preserving black history is an important aspect of Gates’s artwork. Over time, the artist has acquired collections of black culture magazines such as Ebony and Jet, vinyl records, as well as thousands of volumes of art and architecture books. Some of these collections are incorporated into artworks while others are housed in Stony Island Arts Bank, a community space operated by Gate’s non-profit Rebuild Foundation.

- What do you collect? What does your collection say about you?
- What spaces are dedicated to preserving collections?
- Why is it important to preserve our cultural history?

Performance

In addition to his sculptural practice, Theaster Gates uses performance as a way to engage in cultural dialogue. Music, in particular has been a significant aspect of his artistic practice. Since 2008, Gates has directed a band called the Black Monks of Mississippi, an experimental music ensemble of Chicago-based vocalists and musicians who take inspiration from the diverse traditions of Gospel, Blues, and Buddhist chants.

- Both music and art can communicate ideas beyond spoken or written language. Think of your favorite song or musical composition. What tactics do the musicians use to convey ideas or emotions?
- How does the experience of attending a live performance differ from hearing about it or watching a video of it?
Creating Change
“*How to start with what you got, how to start with the things that are in front of you, how to make something out of nothing, how to reshape your world at a wheel or at your block or at the scale of the city …*”
– Theaster Gates

A decade ago, Theaster Gates had a vision for creating rebuilding communities through art. Gates grew up in West Chicago, where he witnessed black neighborhoods shift from thriving spaces of industry, commerce and community to areas blighted by abandoned buildings and crime. Working in the Greater Grand Crossing area, Gates began to restore architectural spaces into cultural art centers using salvaged materials from condemned buildings. This endeavor, called Dorchester Projects, included the Black Cinema House, the Archive House and the Listening House. It has since evolved with the addition of the Stony Island Arts Bank.

Project: Transformation

When you get back to your school, brainstorm a project that could create positive change in your school or community.

- Take a walk around your school and surrounding neighborhood.
- Make a list of things you see that feel complete and things that could be improved.
- Think about how art could be used to create a positive impact in these spaces.
- Develop an action plan, including sketches, a written proposal and the cost of the project.
- Present your plan to your principal, PTA and local school board and ask for their support.

Additional Resources


Theaster Gates TED Talk: *How to revive a neighborhood: with imagination, beauty and art*  
[https://www.ted.com/talks/theaster_gates_how_to_revive_a_neighborhood_with_imagination_beauty_and_art](https://www.ted.com/talks/theaster_gates_how_to_revive_a_neighborhood_with_imagination_beauty_and_art)


The Black Monks of Mississippi Perform: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VFpA0K1K_oA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VFpA0K1K_oA)