

Theaster Gates

Teaching Resource

2018 Nasher Prize Laureate

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?



Gates at his Chicago Studio. Photo: Kevin J.



LEFT: Theaster Gates, *The Steeple*, 2016. Glazed ceramic and plaster. Nancy A. Nasher and David J. Haemisegger. Photo: Kevin Todora. RIGHT: Theaster Gates, *Squirt*, 2013. Wood, Tar, and rubber. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Kevin Todora

The Nasher Prize is an annual international award presented to a living artist whose work has had an extraordinary impact on the understanding of sculpture.

Founder's Circle Sponsors: The Eugene McDermott Foundation and Nancy A. Nasher and David J. Haemisegger. Presenting Sponsor: JPMorgan Chase & Co. Principal Supporters: Regen Projects and White Cube. Nasher Prize Month Sponsors: National Endowment for the Arts and The Donna Wilhelm Family Fund. Presenting Media Partner: Belo Media Group. Media Partners: KERA's *Art & Seek* and *PaperCity*. Public Transportation Partner: Dallas Area Rapid Transit (DART).


Nasher Prize
Nasher Sculpture Center

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.



Theaster Gates, *Dirty Red*, 2016. Decommissioned fire hose, wood. Lune Rouge Collection. Photo:

- 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?



Theaster Gates, *Square Work. 2000s with a little bit of 60s*, 2015. Bound *Jet* magazines, steel. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Kevin Todora.

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.



Theaster Gates in performance with the Black Monks of Mississippi. Performance was a part of the exhibition *Theaster Gates: My Labor is My Protest*, 7 September - 11 November 2012, White Cube Gallery, London. Photography: Benjamin Westoby, courtesy of the artist

- 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



Dorchester Projects, 2008-ongoing. The Listening House and the Archive House located on Dorchester Street in the neighborhood of Greater Grand Crossing on the South Side of Chicago. White Cube/Sara Pooley © Theater Gates and White Cube, London, courtesy of the artist.

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

Becker, C., Yun Lee, L. and Borchardt-Hume, A. (2015) *Theaster Gates*. New York: Phaidon Press Ltd.

Theaster Gates on Art21: <https://art21.org/artist/theaster-gates/>

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

Theaster Gates at White Cube Gallery: http://whitecube.com/artists/theaster_gates/

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