

Theaster Gates *Oh, The Wind Oh, The Wind*

17 September – 30 October 2021

White Cube Mason's Yard

'My hope was to strip the material back to its most basic form then call forth the potency of ritual, utility and philosophy and end up at new bodies of work and new ways of thinking about other forms.'

– Theaster Gates

White Cube Mason's Yard is pleased to present 'Oh, The Wind Oh, The Wind', an exhibition of new works by Theaster Gates. Forming part of a multi-venue presentation in London dedicated to Gates' involvement with clay, it coincides with 'A Clay Sermon' at Whitechapel Gallery and a two-year-long research project and intervention with the Victoria & Albert Museum's collection. The full clay project will culminate with a presentation at the Serpentine Pavilion, London, in June 2022.

Treating the medium of clay as an expanded field for enquiry, the exhibition consolidates many of the artist's thematic preoccupations from the past two decades, and reflects upon Gates' own identity in relation to this ancient and earthly material. As he says: 'Clay made me and is forever the root of my artistic interest, but I don't feel limited by any origin story to work solely within the confines of my origins. Blackness, clay, immateriality, and space are all launch pads that encourage advanced practice, reflection, trial, and iteration. I am practising acts of creation.'

The exhibition as a whole takes its title from Gates' new film *Oh, The Wind* (2021), presented in the lower-ground floor gallery. Evoking the Black sermon and Baptist hymnody as a way of connecting Black religious music traditions to the history of ceramics, it was filmed in an abandoned conveyance structure for a brick manufacturing company – a site of intense ceramic production for over 50-years and now part of the Archie Bray Foundation. Standing in the building's cloistered space, the artist sings an improvised hymn, musing on wind and fire, to an invisible congregation. Poetically reinvesting the abandoned building with a powerful, living presence, the film connects the theme of nature in Chinese poetry and Buddhist thought with the Black sermon.

In the ground-floor gallery, a series of 13 single-drawer wooden filing cabinets line the walls, and house a collection of hand-thrown ceramics made during the artist's recent residency at the Archie Bray Foundation in

Montana. Reminiscing the way Gates collects and stores ceramics and objects in his home and studio, the pots are both nestled within the cabinet drawers and displayed atop it, the variation in their styles, colours and glazes creating a visual cadence. Thrown by the artist as well as other makers at the foundation, the vessels are the product of a 'durational performance'; a synthesis of ritual, culture and time. Whether cup, tea bowl or sake bottle, each vessel is an object of deep significance and exists somewhere between the functional, the symbolic and the spiritual:

'More than anything, I want to be moved by forms and invest deeply in older ways of making and the forms that ensue. I want to recall the truths within forms; eat from them. The bowl, jar, teapot, vase and cup offer me a form of lexicon that allows the bust, head, ceremonial offering and modes of abstraction to flow more easily. I have forms to push against and to agree with and venerate.'

Three figurative sculptures form part of the new series 'Mississippi is my Africa: Reflections on Mud People in the Delta', in which Gates considers Black archetypes in the tradition of African reliquary. Made from wood-fired stoneware, but left unglazed and covered with wood-ash from the kiln, these are hand-carved amalgams of traditional sculpture and Southern folk-drawings that feature the idiomatic figures of *Nanah*, *Papaw* and *Queen Mother*, *My Madonna* (all 2021). In the centre of the gallery is a stoneware jar from 1857 by David Drake or 'Dave the Potter', a figure of reference and reverence for the artist. An African-American slave, Drake worked on a plantation in South Carolina, writing poems and signing his name to the stoneware vessels at a time when literacy among enslaved people was illegal.

Gates' 'Brick Paintings' – wall-based ceramic panels in high-fire stoneware – combine the industrial with the handmade. Employing the same material used in modular building units, Gates pushes the medium of clay towards the realm of painting in treating its surface like a canvas. Making manifest the interaction between maker and medium, Gates scores, compresses and punctures the wet unit. Every panel is glazed with oxides, stains, engobes or manganese dioxide – the latter a volatile and highly reactive glaze that features in the work of British ceramicist Hans Coper, another of Gates' role models – to create a diverse range of tactile surfaces. 'I think even when I was learning clay, it wasn't about clay. It felt like clay was a philosophy. The more you learn about the material, the more you understand its philosophy,' the artist has said.

Biography

Theaster Gates was born in 1973 in Chicago where he lives and works. He is a professor at the University of Chicago in the Department of Visual Arts and the Harris School of Public Policy, and serves as the Senior Advisor for Cultural Innovation and Advisor to the Dean.

Gates has exhibited widely, including solo exhibitions at TANK Shanghai (2021); Prada Rhong Zhai, Shanghai (2021); Spelman College Museum of Fine Art, Atlanta (2020); Tate Liverpool, UK (2020); Haus der Kunst, Munich (2019); Walker Art Center, Minneapolis (2019); Martin Gropius Bau, Berlin (2019); Palais de Tokyo, Paris (2019); Fondazione Prada, Milan (2018); Kunstmuseum Basel (2018); Sprengel Museum, Hannover (2018); National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC (2017); Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto (2016); Fondazione Prada, Milan (2016); Kunsthaus Bregenz, Austria (2016); Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago (2013); Whitechapel Gallery, London (2013); Seattle Art Museum, Washington, DC (2011); Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (2011); Milwaukee Art Museum, Wisconsin (2010); and St. Louis Art Museum, Missouri (2010).

Gates has participated in numerous group exhibitions including New Museum, New York (2021); Virginia Museum of Fine Arts and Crystal Bridges Museum, Arkansas (2021); SFMoMA, San Francisco (2020); Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (2017); 14th Istanbul Biennial (2015); 56th Venice Biennale (2015); Prospect 3, New Orleans (2014); Documenta 13, Kassel, Germany (2012); and Whitney Biennial, New York (2010).

Gates is the recipient of numerous awards and honorary degrees including an Honorary Fellowship from the Royal Institute of British Architects (2021); the World Economic Forum Crystal Award (2020); J.C. Nichols Prize for Visionaries in Urban Development (2018); Nasher Sculpture Prize (2018); Sprengel Museum Kurt Schwitters Prize (2017); and Artes Mundi 6 prize (2015). In April 2018 Gates was appointed the first distinguished visiting artist and Director of Artist Initiatives at the Lunder Institute for American Art, Colby College, Waterville, Maine. He was the visiting artist in residence at the American Academy in Rome (2020); and was inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 2021.

Perhaps Gates' most ambitious projects are his social practice entities in Chicago, including Dorchester Art and Housing Collaborative (DAHC), his Chicago Arts and Industry Commons, The Stony Island Arts Bank, Rebuild Foundation, and B.A.R. (Black Artist Retreat). Many of these projects use abandoned buildings in Chicago as sites of community transformation and

gathering in a bid to reverse the trends of social and economic fragmentation in the city.