

WHITE CUBE

Theaster Gates

Afro-Mingei

24 May – 22 June 2019

White Cube Mason's Yard

White Cube Mason's Yard is pleased to present 'Afro-Mingei' by Theaster Gates. Featuring a new body of work, the exhibition draws attention to aesthetic modes and classifications; to pre-determined ways of understanding culture and to how these emerge from and connect to history, race and society.

Gates's practice poses nuanced questions about cultural production as a means to foreground a new type of cultural hybridity. In this exhibition, two key strands of his work – Japanese philosophy and Black identity – combine to forge a new aesthetic; one that attempts to retrace cultural roots that are often submerged and forgotten within the structure of what Gates terms 'Western-White sameness'.

The title of the exhibition deliberately blurs and brings together distinct cultural identities, each with their own rich history of aesthetics. The term 'Afro' refers to both African-American culture as well as to its iconic hairstyle, re-appropriated during the 1960s and 1970s by Black post-civil rights leadership as a symbol of Black identity and empowerment. The Japanese term *mingei*, coined by the philosopher and cultural figure Soetsu Yanagi, along with potters Shoji Hamada and Kanjiro Kawai, denotes folk or craft objects made by local, often unknown craftsmen. For Yanagi, craft challenged conventional ideas of art and beauty since it evolved from traditional practices where the divisions between art, philosophy and religion had merged or disappeared.

It is within this thematic framework that Gates introduces a series of objects, installations and interventions in the exhibition that address different ways of looking. Incorporating various elements from Japanese culture such as sakazuki and tatami, with elements from Black culture such as African masks, and a Hammond B3 organ, made popular by Jazz players and 1960s soul musicians, they highlight hybridity as a pathway for new conceptual exploration.

Gates has said that his work is rooted in 'a deterministic desire to show that objects [are] endowed with a life of their own and that the manifestations of life – which I sometimes call 'resurrections' – [can] be found not only in a piece of wood or concrete, but also in archives or in a building.' Exposing the layered narratives and histories embedded within objects, these new objects combine the forms and iconography of African and Shinto ritual. Composed from precious hard woods, stone and tar, they are conceived as 'new spiritual hybrid structures', re-working totemic cultural clichés to break apart aesthetic convention.

Through adapting, re-forming and hand-crafting materials, Gates calls into question the established hierarchies of an object's value, exposing how materials are not just aesthetic forces, but signifiers of religious, political and social meaning. His work reflects on social history through specificity and context, using forms and tropes as potent metaphors for marginalisation, exclusion and obstruction. Clay and tar have long been two fundamental axes of this approach, both mined from the earth and both connected to the history of craft and labour, as well as to Gates's own identity since he trained as a potter. Gates's new series of white 'Tar Paintings' combine processes used in his previous works to create complex, assertively three-dimensional, abstract constructions. Re-using various worn and tactile fragments – such as wood, textiles or frames – they adopt a *mingei* approach, cherishing and exposing the beauty in everyday matter, while employing tar as a transformative and alchemical component. Of his recent work Gates has said that he wants 'permission (from myself) to jump milieu and regimes and personal subjectivity making lineages within my practice. In this way, these amalgamated objects hold so much potential and invite an honesty over the object, absolute. I am searching for forms through history, within my imagination, among my peers and from the eternal.'

BIOGRAPHY

Theaster Gates was born in 1973 in Chicago, Illinois, where he currently lives and works. He has had numerous exhibitions internationally, including at the Palais de Tokyo, Paris (2019); Sprengel Museum, Hannover, Germany and Kunstmuseum Basel, Switzerland (2018); National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC (2017); Art Gallery of Ontario, Canada, and Fondazione Prada, Milan, Italy (2016); Punta della Dogana, Venice, Italy (2013); and dOCUMENTA (13), Kassel, Germany (2012). He regularly hosts live events with his musical ensemble, the Black Monks. He was the winner of the Artes Mundi 6 prize in 2014, recipient of the Légion d'Honneur in 2017 and was awarded the Nasher Prize for Sculpture 2018.

Gates is currently Distinguished Visiting Artist and Director of Artist Initiatives at the Lunder Institute for American Art, Waterville, Maine.

White Cube Mason's Yard is open
Tuesday – Saturday, 10am – 6pm.
Admission is free.

For further information, please contact
enquiries@whitecube.com
or +44 (0)20 7930 5373.

25 – 26 Mason's Yard
St James's London SW1Y 6BU
+44 (0)20 7930 5373
whitecube.com

Follow us:

Twitter: [@_whitecube](https://twitter.com/_whitecube)

Instagram: [@whitecube](https://www.instagram.com/whitecube)

Facebook: [White Cube](https://www.facebook.com/whitecube)