

Theaster Gates Black Vessel

by Leigh Taylor Mickelson

After nine months of distancing myself from New York City in its entirety, I masked up and drove to town this fall to see Theaster Gates' first-ever solo exhibition in New York. Held in the heart of Chelsea at the prestigious Gagosian Gallery, "Black Vessel" put ceramics—and its ability to convey a powerful message—center stage.





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1-3 Theaster Gates' "Black Vessel" (installation views) at Gagosian Gallery. Copyright Theaster Gates. Photos: Robert McKeever. Courtesy of Gagosian Gallery.

Born in 1973 in Chicago, where he still lives and works, Theaster Gates is considered “among the most conceptually and materially rich in contemporary art, anchored equally in canons of art history, the racial ideology of the Black diaspora and the artist’s own personal history.” Clay captured his interest and his heart early in his academic career, and while clay is always present in his language of expression, he is certainly not bound to it. Gates wears many hats: he is an artist, urban planner, performer, musician, non-profit executive, and community leader. Often referred to as a social innovator, Gagosian asserts that Gates “merges the language of abstract art with the legacies of racial injustice,” all while lifting up his community, the common man, and the materials they use. With a string of solo exhibitions and multiple works in museum collections around the world, a showcase in New York City was well overdue.

Acts of Creation

Black Vessel features a commanding array of works in painting, sculpture, installation, and sound in the most common of materials: clay, brick, tar, wood, and archived/found objects. Despite the wide array of media, clay is featured in every one of the expansive galleries, sometimes prominently, sometimes inconspicuously; and while I know that Theaster Gates is a lot more than a clay artist, I couldn’t help but wonder if he considers himself a clay artist at heart. So, I asked him. His response confirmed my curiosity.

He said, “Committing to learning ceramics feels a lot like learning the law. One could choose to use the disciplinary knowledge and skill set to do other things. I imagine that I would be a horrible lawyer and really bad professional potter, but clay turned me on to the possibility of making and the evolutionary nature of making, which has allowed me to feel comfortable exploring other materials, ideas, and conceptual tropes. 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 launching pads that encourage advanced practice, reflection, trial, and iteration. I am practicing acts of creation.” But in Black Vessel, it just so happens that clay—and the voice that Gates gives to it—is what ties this incredible exhibition together.

Elevating Materials and Techniques

After a high-tech temperature scan, I rounded the corner into the first gallery, which featured *Brick Reliquaries*, a series of six abstract wall sculptures comprised of manganese-coated brick clay, wood fired and adhered to silicon-carbide shelves with a heavy layer of wood ash. Taken well beyond the brick clay’s usual firing temperature, the compositions are intentionally overfired, showing Gates’ experimental side, the side that loves what clay can do and the surprises it can give you. While these works could easily have been left

with the single title, they are donned with abstract subtitles such as *Bad Tea*, *Square with Marks*, and *Tea Compression of Rectangle with Melted Bowl*. The manganese and black oxide coating blisters in the excessive heat, and the brick clay bows and cracks, transforming into something other than itself. With wheel-thrown objects and kiln posts sometimes thrown into the mix, *Brick Reliquaries* are enshrined experiments that narrate and give homage to the material nature of clay—its limits, its natural beauty, and the magic that happens inside a high-temperature wood kiln. He has elevated the common brick, and perhaps the bricklayer, not just to high art, but to relic status.

Gates takes the same approach to his tar paintings, elevating common roofing materials and techniques into large-scale experimental and abstract works that give homage to the common man, presumably including his father, who was a roofer. About these larger-than-life works that hang in three of the four galleries, Gates states, “I wanted to take on the idea that being a roofer was good enough for painting, that in a way I could bring something of my history to this genre and to this field. I could use a mop like one

might use a brush. I could use the copper roofing nail the way one might secure canvas. I could think about how the frame holds itself in space, not unlike how a painter thinks about a canvas.” While this work is a completely different material than ceramic, once torched, stretched, and cooled, the earthly qualities of tar and asphalt mimic those of clay. The paintings’ surfaces look like molded and scorched earth, a landscape of labor. Then, in the middle of the largest gallery of tar paintings is *Vessel #29*, an abstract ceramic sculpture sitting on top of a large plinth made of repurposed wood. The object seems to reference a simple foot stool, but its top is slanted and hollow. What is this sculpture doing there? Why does he call it a vessel? What does it reference? It almost feels like the room was not complete without a ceramic sculpture in its midst, but it invites more questions than answers.

Immersed Among Vessels

Upon entering into the next gallery, my breath was taken away by a grouping of large-scale ceramic vessels standing at various heights



4 *Vessel #18*, 3 ft. 5 in. (1.1 m) in height, high-fired stoneware, glaze, custom-made plinth, 2020. 5 *Vessel #20*, 34 in. (86 cm) in height, high-fired stoneware, glaze, custom-made plinth, 2020. 6 *Vessel #16*, 32½ in. (83 cm) in height, high-fired stoneware, glaze, custom-made plinth, 2020. 7 *Black Vessel*, installation view at Gagosian Gallery. 4–7 Copyright Theaster Gates. Photos: Robert McKeever. Courtesy of Gagosian Gallery. 8 *Vessel #2*, 34 in. (86 cm) in height, high-fired stoneware, glaze, 2020. Copyright Theaster Gates. Photo: Chris Strong. Courtesy of Gagosian Gallery.



9 Video still of Theaster Gates at his studio as he prepared for his exhibition at Gagosian Gallery, New York, this past fall, 2020. Artwork copyright Theaster Gates. Video copyright Chris Strong. Video editing and postproduction: Parallax Postproduction. **10** Brick Reliquary-Square with Marks, 12 in. (31 cm) in height, wood-fired brick, wood ash, magnesium dioxide, black stain, 2020. Copyright Theaster Gates. Photo: Robert McKeever. Courtesy of Gagosian Gallery.

on the floor and handcrafted wooden plinths. I felt like I was suddenly in a crowded room of people, something I hadn't experienced since before the pandemic. But no, it was a room of 24 pots—a room of diversity of form and content; vessels drawing inspiration from African, Eastern, and Western cultures. While these works are certainly modernized and personalized, my ceramic history came flooding back; Korean moon jars, Pre-Columbian stirrup spout pots, African water jugs, Peter Voukos' smokestacks, and even a Jun Kaneko-like dango. A total of 20 vessels are glazed in black, brown, and bronze hues; 3 in chalky, crackly white engobe glazes; and 1 in blue, a jar that stands in the middle quite tall, perhaps referencing our cross-cultural affinity with cobalt and the Asian aesthetic. To me, the room of vessels conveyed a message of hope; that we can be of different backgrounds and cultures and stand solid in the same room, belong together, and learn from one another. But when I asked Gates if he had any of these intentions, I discovered there was no hidden meaning. He said "there was no intention other than filling the room so that people would be immersed among the vessels. The pots are nod to all of the creative cultures where makers were involved not only in the creation of functional vessels, but through handmade things. They also articulate style, reverence, skill, prowess, value, rank and, sometimes, individuation from one group of people to another. Potters have always been aesthetes . . . I wanted to amplify the truth of vessels in my practice in a myriad of subtle ways."

The room of vessels led to Gagosian's most expansive gallery. Walking in, I saw two large installations in the middle of the gallery, but also noticed that the room was encapsulated by black Roman brick walls, built with bricks that are characteristically longer and skinnier than standard modern bricks. Nothing was hanging on the walls, and it took me a few minutes to realize that the brick walls were not always there, that this was another installation by Gates, a brick sanctuary. Crafted from reconstituted run-off brick from a North Carolina factory that specializes in colored brick, Gates customized the bricks by coating them with manganese dioxide and dye, fired them over a year-and-a-half period, and installed them around the perimeter of the gallery, essentially creating a skin. The installation, comprised of 40,000 bricks, turned out to be the largest sculpture ever exhibited in the space—outsizing Richard Serra and Michael Heizer. It was astounding. I was standing inside a monumental *Black Vessel*.

And in that vessel were two of what Gates describes as "large-scale archive works, both rich repositories of historic Black printed matter." They are vessels within a vessel, created to hold archival materials that Gates has collected over time. *New Egypt* holds the complete volumes of *Ebony*, a publication that promoted and celebrated the realities of Black American middle-class life from 1945–2016; and *Walking Prayer* consists of original cast-iron Carnegie open-access library shelving units that hold a wide-ranging historical collection of published books on Black experience, rebound and retitled. Gates also inserted sound into the installation with *Chorus*, a Leslie speaker at the back of the room which emitted a single chord from a Hammond B3 organ—the standard instrumental companion in the Black church. The sound is a familiar one to anyone that has been in a formal organ-bearing church, but it is particularly important in the Black liturgy, as this chord "sets the tonal opportunity for the advent of the spirit." As we walk through his vessel, and peruse these weighty archival sculptures, he wants our spirits to be open. And there, on top of the speaker, sat a small vase made of the same black brick clay. The didactics don't mention it, but one of Gagosian's curators eloquently stated, "both are black vessels, albeit of vastly differing scales and capacities. This modest vessel provides a punctum for the exhibition, poetically underscoring the relationship between the clay brick and the clay vessel that courses through it." For me, I wondered if Gates placed it there out of compulsion—as if this repurposed piece of furniture felt empty without a ceramic object on top.

There are so many things going on in Theaster Gates' *Black Vessel*, that when I left, I felt rather overwhelmed by it all. So, my last question to Gates was a selfish one. I asked him what he hopes people will walk away with after seeing the exhibition. He responded, "I want people to have a better sense of the poetics embedded in craft practices and the journey possible when one opens up to the understanding that making goes hand in hand with thinking. I want people to know that true conceptual practices can begin in the heart, the head, or the hand." Making is thinking, no matter what material you are using, and Gates' *Black Vessel* shows us how it's done.

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