

Theaster Gates: A Clay Sermon

29 September 2021 – 9 January 2022

Galleries 1, 8 & 9 | Free Entry

#TheasterGates

London galleries collaborate with artist Theaster Gates on a multi-venue presentation dedicated to clay

Whitechapel Gallery, the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) and Serpentine are delighted to jointly announce a multi-venue presentation dedicated to artist **Theaster Gates's** (b.1973, USA) clay practice for 2021-22. The programme features a major solo exhibition of the artist's clay-based work, collection displays and new commissions.

This ambitious collaboration is led by Whitechapel Gallery's exhibition, *Theaster Gates: A Clay Sermon*, opening on 29 September 2021. Here Gates's transformation of clay – from geological substance into utilitarian and artistic material – stands as a powerful metaphor for his socially-engaged work and wider artistic practice. Featuring ceramic objects, sculptures, installations, film and studio materials from the past two decades, this in-depth exploration from the critically acclaimed artist considers the material and spiritual legacies of clay.

The research for these projects has been developed in conjunction with the V&A South Kensington and V&A East, where Gates has been Emeritus Fellow at the V&A Research Institute (VARI). He has been working with its ceramic collections to examine the relationship between Eastern and Western aesthetic practices and political histories within craft. An intervention in the V&A's Ceramics galleries opens this autumn.

Gates will also conceive the 2022 Serpentine Pavilion, the Serpentine's annual architectural commission and platform for live summer programmes.

The exhibition at Whitechapel Gallery will begin with a survey of the artist's clay works – from examples of his early ceramic production to 'Afro-Mingei' sculptures and large vessels – alongside examples by those who have shaped Gates's approach to clay. They include David Drake, an enslaved African American potter who worked on a plantation in South Carolina. Drake wrote poems and signed his stoneware pots when literacy among enslaved people was outlawed. The exhibition also includes potters who exchanged traditions from different cultural contexts, such as Bernard Leach and Shoji Hamada, who established the influential Leach Pottery in St Ives, Cornwall in 1920, and Ruth Duckworth, who fled the Nazi regime, studied in the UK and made her mark with monumental stoneware murals in Chicago. Working in partnership with the V&A and drawing from other public and private collections, Gates has selected a number of historic objects for his Whitechapel Gallery exhibition that speak to the significance of ceramics in global trade, colonial expansion, slavery and abolitionism in the UK.

Press Release

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Theaster Gates: A Clay Sermon further includes a new film by Gates and his most recent body of work: large stoneware vessels installed on custom-made plinths of hand-milled wood and stone. Their forms derive from a range of sources, including African sculpture, the human body and industrial and utilitarian objects.

Lydia Yee, Chief Curator, Whitechapel Gallery said: “Clay has been foundational to Theaster Gates’s intertwined artistic and social practices, bringing together research, ideas, process and production. His interests and investigations span clay mineralogy, industrial and studio pottery production, the use of clay in teaching and community building, and the ceremonial and ritual use of ceramics.’ The exhibition at Whitechapel Gallery explores Gates’s work with clay, his affinities with potters internationally and the relationships among his various studio, social engagement and urban regeneration projects.”

Notes to Editors:

- *Theaster Gates: A Clay Sermon* will run from 29 September 2021 – 9 January 2022 and is curated in close collaboration with Theaster Gates by Whitechapel Gallery Chief Curator Lydia Yee and Assistant Curator Cameron Foote.
- It will be accompanied by a fully-illustrated catalogue with contributions by the exhibition curators alongside Monica Miller, Professor of English and Africana Studies, Barnard College, New York; poet and novelist Ben Okri and a conversation between Theaster Gates and the artist and author Edmund de Waal.
- Tickets for the exhibition are free.
- *Theaster Gates: A Clay Sermon* is supported by White Cube, AKO Foundation, Cockayne Grants for the Arts, Henry Moore Foundation, London Community Foundation, and the Theaster Gates Exhibition Circle.
- ‘The Question of Clay’, is a multi-institution project by Theaster Gates which will take place in 2021-22 across Whitechapel Gallery, Serpentine and the V&A. The project seeks to investigate the making, labour and production of clay, as well its collecting history, through exhibitions, performance and live interventions, with the aim of generating new knowledge, meaning and connections about the material. *Theaster Gates: A Clay Sermon* at Whitechapel Gallery will bring together research and a survey of Gates’ clay works from across two decades, including new sculptures and a film. As part of the project, Gates is currently a V&A Research Institute / V&A East Emeritus Fellow, funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. During the Fellowship, Gates has researched the V&A’s ceramics collection with the response being exhibited as part of the Whitechapel Gallery exhibition, and in the Ceramics Galleries at V&A South Kensington. In 2022, Gates will conceive the 2022 Serpentine Pavilion, the Serpentine’s annual architectural commission and platform for live summer programmes. Alongside these projects, White Cube is pleased to present a solo exhibition by Theaster Gates at Mason’s Yard from 17 September – 23 October 2021. New works, many made at the Archie Bray Foundation in Montana, and an accompanying film, focus on the history of clay practice in the UK, US and Japan, whilst building on the themes and ideas the artist explores in *A Clay Sermon* at the Whitechapel Gallery.

About Theaster Gates

Theaster Gates (b.1973) lives and works in Chicago. Gates creates work that focuses on space theory and land development, sculpture and performance. In all aspects of his work, he contends with the notion of Black space as a formal exercise – one defined by collective desire, artistic agency, and the tactics of a pragmatist. Clay has been central to Gates’s practice since earning an MA in urban planning and ceramics at Iowa State University in 1996 and subsequently studying pottery in Tokoname, Japan. Gates 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. He has recently exhibited and performed at TANK Shanghai, Shanghai, China (2021); Prada Rong Zhai, Shanghai, China (2021); Tate Liverpool (2019); Palais de Tokyo, Paris, France (2019); Sprengel Museum Hannover, Germany (2018); Kunstmuseum Basel, Switzerland (2018); National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C., USA (2017); Art Gallery of Ontario, Canada (2016); Fondazione Prada, Milan, Italy (2016) and Whitechapel Gallery, London, UK (2013). Gates has been the recipient of numerous awards and honors including the Arts Mundi 6 Prize (2017); the Légion d’Honneur (2017); the Nasher Prize for Sculpture (2018); the Urban Land Institute, J.C. Nichols Prize for Visionaries in Urban Development (2018); the World Economic Forum Crystal Award (2020); and an Honorary Fellowship from the Royal Institute of British Architects (2021). Gates was inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 2021.

About Whitechapel Gallery

For over a century the Whitechapel Gallery has premiered world-class artists from modern masters such as Pablo Picasso, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Frida Kahlo, Eduardo Paolozzi and Hannah Höch to contemporaries such

as Zarina Bhimji, Sophie Calle, William Kentridge and Michael Rakowitz. Its historic campus houses exhibitions, artist commissions, collection displays, historic archives, education resources, inspiring art courses, talks and film screenings, the Townsend dining room and the Koenig Bookshop. It is a touchstone for contemporary art internationally, plays a central role in London's cultural landscape and is pivotal to the continued growth of the world's most vibrant contemporary art quarter.

Visitor Information

Gallery Admission: Free

Opening times: Tuesday – Sunday, 11am – 6pm; First Thursdays, 11am – 9pm

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