

# TRANSCRIPT

*Hear, Now*  
Episode 14

Theaster Gates:  
A Clay Sermon

A Podcast from Whitechapel Gallery

JS: Hello, and welcome to Hear, Now, a Whitechapel Gallery podcast that delves into the stories behind the exhibitions on view at the gallery here in the heart of East London. Each episode invites a curator to be in conversation with artists, collaborators and other thinkers about the works and themes explored in the displays, giving special access to the ideas that shape the artworks. My name is Jane Scarth, Curator of Public Programmes, introducing you to today's episode featuring Whitechapel Gallery Chief Curator Lydia Yee in conversation with artist Theaster Gates about his new exhibition at the gallery, A Clay Sermon, an exposition into the significance of clay and its material and spiritual legacies, explored through his own work and that of other potters from throughout history.

We also hear from historian Jason Young about the work of David Drake whose work features in the exhibition. Drake was an enslaved man whose pottery, engraved with poetry, was an act of resistance in the nineteenth century American South. The exhibition is free to view in galleries one, eight and nine and is on display from the 29 September 2021 until the 9 January 2022.

LY: Hello, Theaster, I wanted to start by saying thank you so much for making such a beautiful exhibition for Whitechapel Gallery. We're very proud of it and we can't wait for you to come and see it. I wanted to give people a little bit of an idea of what they'll be seeing and, I mean, I'm sure you've pictured this in your head too, but it's essentially three groupings of work or three sections of the exhibition. It opens on our ground floor gallery, this part of the exhibition provides an overview of your clay based works and it ranges from early small wheel-thrown vessels to large Afro-Mingei sculptures. It looks at the significance and history of clay and its material and spiritual legacies.

Upstairs we have your amazing new film, it's an honour to debut *A Clay Sermon*, which you filmed last winter while in residence at the Archie Bray Foundation for Ceramic Arts. Finally, we have a suite of recent works from the past two years that you've made both in your studio and at the Archie Bray residency. It's in a beautiful light-filled space and we see new combinations of vessels, some of them tarred, some of them unadorned, some of them glazed and they sit on different plinths that you've hand milled, they're made out of stone and wood. So it's a really terrific formal space but I think the ground floor galleries maybe, in some ways, lay the ground work for the journey up the stairs, through the pilgrimage in the film and then on to the beautiful vessels in our upstairs gallery.

I wanted to start by asking you about this relationship in your work between clay and religion. I think, quite early on you thought to do a show about clay, in fact I remember having a conversation with you first, I believe it was at a lunch during the 2015 Venice Biennale. I had just started at Whitechapel and you had recently shown *Soul Manufacturing Corporation*, a pottery studio that you set up in the back of Whitechapel Gallery. Can you talk a little bit about why you wanted to do this show on clay and what you were thinking at that time?

TG: Well Lydia, first, thank you so much for your curatorial leadership and your care in presenting this show, it was a lot of work, there were a lot of parts and there were a lot of collaborators. And I think that you handled those relationships with great care and I'm really thankful to you and your team, Cameron Foote to Chris [Aldgate] from the preparator team, for all of the people at Whitechapel who

worked so hard to help me do that, along with my collaborators and maker friends.

There's a lot I could say related to your question, but I think for me, if before talking about religion I could talk about the origins of one's artistic practice. In this case I've been very fortunate over my art career to have opportunities where I could make almost anything that I wanted, that I've felt no boundaries with material specificity, with forms of relatability and relational activity, the creation of temporary companies, I've done whatever I've wanted. And I've felt like this opportunity at Whitechapel was a chance for me to actually give back to a, kind of, origin story within my own practice, but also for me, an origin story of contemporary art or sculpture that, for me, I really believe that ceramics is a kind of originating material that precedes other kinds of artistic activity. That it's, in a way, the beginning of the plastic arts because it allowed, you know, you could take this material, you pinch it, it grows. You stretch it apart and you coil it, you roll it and it's a way of channelling the earth in making the earth do lots of other things.

And I think then, from there, other kinds of artistic practices grew, at least, in my body or in my practice, it went from clay to other materials. But I also think that that's been the trajectory for lots of people. So on one level the project was to first honour and acknowledge the truth of ceramics in my life in a way that was not trying to be bombastic or overwhelming or trying to make any new inroads into the contemporary. It was actually trying to revert back to something quite familiar and simple and home-like. So in some ways that origin story already feels like a, kind of, interesting spiritualism, that it had no pretences, it had no special airs. And the work, to me, is really attempting to be stripped down, sparse, quiet, as quiet as I can be.

So I feel like the beginning of the spirituality or spiritualness is what clay brings out of itself, and then what it brings out in me. And that's not about religion, it's not actually about God, it's about how the material world already has rooted in it power and energy and that power and energy is important to me. Now, I decided to layer on top of that the truth of one of my other origin stories, which is the Black church and the ways in which, growing up in a Missionary Baptist Church and being an artist allowed me to then complicate both of those singular narratives so that I became an artist reflecting on the Baptist Church and that had its own form. Or I could give shape to a new form that ultimately became A Clay Sermon.

LY: Theaster, I think that's a really nice way to, kind of, get into your social practice. You made a very nice comment, I think it was during a TED talk, where you were talking about the art of being a potter, that it was very humble, but at the same time as a potter you learn how to shape the world. So I'm wondering, you've studied ceramics, you've studied religious studies but also urban planning, how did you bring all these things together and how did it shape your approach to materials? Not only clay but you've worked with brick, you've worked with other forms of clay.

TG: Well Lydia, it seemed that initially they were all very separate projects, that they were, like, three disciplines that I was interested in and I segmented them. Not really compartmentalised them but they didn't seem to be related initially, so when I was studying planning I was a planner, you know, and then with ceramics I thought I would be a planner and a hobby potter. And it happened that my, you know, if I felt anything like a calling, maybe if I wasn't studying planning I would have studied religion or

something. And so they were like interest sets, they were not trying to create a trans-disciplinary or inter-disciplinary thought. And it took some years before that started to happen.

I think I would make a plug here for how wonderful it was that the art world wasn't interested in me in my early 20s and I wasn't interested in it. I was just a guy who liked to read and I made pots in the evenings and on Saturdays at my little studio. And then I, you know, I no longer went to church but I was very interested in religious music and I was interested in spirituality and interested in my own interrogation of the religious things that I had been taught. So I was, kind of, a questioner in my 20s and 30s, okay? But what started to happen as I thought about urbanism, that word came to be, I thought that maybe there was a way that the arts could play a role in the transformation of communities. And I was thinking in very broad strokes, like the importance of art spaces, artist run spaces, community spaces.

But then also the power of public art and the importance of, like, the opera and ballet and I was thinking a lot about ways of funding these things. And so it started out like I was thinking more with my policy hat on, about the relationship between urban planning and the Arts, big A with an s. Not contemporary art, not conceptual art, I was thinking about the Arts. And then I think what happened was that over time my belief in my own artistic practice made me think that art could do something that urbanism couldn't and art could be even bigger in terms of a platform. That there was this chance that I could say, you know, what if I was to bring this interest in spirituality and this knowledge of urban planning under big A Art, no s, not a sector but a calling?

What if art was actually the calling and I was supposed to do all these things through that function?

And that's when I think I started to think about Dorchester Projects. I started doing things where I was bringing these materials from my neighbourhood into the museum. And then the Whitney happened in 2010 where I took over the courtyard at what is now The Breuer. And then in 2012 I'd been part of Documenta (13) with Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev. And those two moments were solidifying moments where art could absorb the city instead of the city using the arts. And I think that is really where things started to pivot for me, where urban planning became the technical skill set that allowed art to get bigger.

LY: I think one of the things that is really eye-opening in the exhibition is how expansive your approach to clay is. And part of this is described or part of it is articulated through the objects you've chosen, from the Victoria and Albert Museum collection and other private and public collections. You've made a series of vitrines and juxtapose examples from your own work with these historic objects, some of them going back 2000 years. A brick from China to another vessel, but also objects from Iran and Korea and then we have another case that focuses on the relationship of clay to global colonial trade. So we see clay as commodity, ceramics as commodity, we see items from the Staffordshire potteries that were made, some of them deeply racist and offensive. But other objects very redeeming, like Josiah Wedgwood's medallion that advocated for the abolition of slavery.

I'm wondering if you can talk us through a little bit of why you chose some of these historic objects and also how they relate to your own interests and your own collecting.

You've put some of your items from your own collections in these cases as well.

TG: When I was a younger maker I probably would have said that clay is an extremely poetic material. What I meant by that then was that there was a tremendous amount of metaphor that could be taken from the material and you could, you know, if you know enough about the chemistry of ceramics you could find yourself giving a sermon about clay and the human condition pretty easily. But now I feel like, and especially as you walk through the ground floor of Whitechapel, clay is not only poetic, it's also instructive, it's historical, it's uncanny, it's comparative, you know, it has the ability to allow you to understand all these things about culture. And, for me, I think looking at the amazing excellence of a porcelain work caught inside of a Chinese saggur, or looking at a brick that is, with the stamp of Nebuchadnezzar or thinking about British makers like Michael Cardew or Bernard Leach.

Or the encounter with Japan, or at least the East in a generic and perverted sense, the British encounter with the East and then the fallout of varying forms of tea within British tradition, but also the tea ceremony in Japan and the, kind of, the relationship between Japanese imperialism in Korea. That there are all these stories and all of these amazing histories that I became more interested in the single material. And that the material kept revealing to me more and more stories. And so I think that what happens is, then those stories started to translate into my own creative empowerment to make the material say more, not just poetic but sometimes bombastic, sometimes fantastic. You know, sometimes instructional and didactic, that there are times when I'm really trying to get at what does it mean for



me to have been a young African-American presenting as a potter in Japan?

And then those first encounters with extreme Japanese technique and feeling like I didn't know anything, I felt like an imposter because I was in the presence of people who had been the ninth or tenth generational maker in their family and they had a tremendous amount of discipline and skill around it. And I thought, this is something that I really want to have as part of my life. So then there were questions of artistic assimilation, appropriation, what I call transmission and feeling as if I'm as much an emerging Japanese potter as I am an advanced contemporary artist. Or that I'm at the beginning of my ceramic journey at almost 50 years old and I cannot say yet that I know how to make a good pot. And maybe I'm a great workshop leader and it's possible that some of the participants in my workshop, some of my staff, they are probably better makers than I am because they spend more dedicated hours per day, making.

So then you get into questions of economy and ecology, and in my case, what does it mean for me to be a person who believes deeply in philosophy and I can share big ideas with my staff who believe deeply in ceramics? And we move back and forth between making and thinking, and then that then translates into other forms and I feel like the exhibition gives you a sense of the breath of that journeying and questioning.

LY: Theaster, this past winter, I think it was in January and February, you undertook an important residency at the Archie Bray Foundation for Ceramic Arts in Montana. This place set up in part by Peter Voulkos and Rudy Autio, two important American ceramic artists. You not only made an incredible body of work there and part based on Voulkos,

but you made this terrific new film. I wonder if you could start telling us about this residency, what it meant for you to work there, and also a little bit about your new film, A Clay Sermon?

TG: Absolutely. Well, first, I want to say that, you know, one of the benefits I think of being, you know, an artist, I can call myself now a mature artist, is that there are moments when organisations like the Archie Bray reach out and say, hey, we would love to have you be present here. And I think Archie Bray, they were challenged by the truth of Black Lives Matter, George Floyd, questions about diversity and inclusion. They found that the Bray had never done a tremendous amount around outreach to people of colour, potters of colour. And that maybe, perhaps, the number of makers of colour was a small number and they didn't know how to reach out to that network, and so I was invited. And I said that if I come I don't want to be a token maker, I want to find a way to be deeply involved in the activity of the Bray and let my presence there be a signal to others that the Bray is open for business and excited about having new kinds of makers present, right?

And so I decided that I would bring my band, The Black Monks and that I would use the month or month and a half that I was there, along with the time that I spent creating this, kind of, Afro-Mingei workshop where residents of the Bray worked with me to make a body of work, that I would use this time to demonstrate how an ambitious a maker could use the Bray as a kind of tool for not only diversity and inclusion tactics, organisational tactics, but really a tool to advance one's practice, you know? So there I was, you know, with The Monks and we decided that we would use the architecture of the Bray, including many of its abandoned buildings, it's old kilns, the brick manufacturing

plant which was no longer active, and the old conveyer belts and the cooling houses and storage buildings, we would use all these buildings as sites to make this film, A Clay Sermon

And A Clay Sermon was essentially a sermon, it was an amalgam of musical moments that had happened over about a week and a half where me and The Monks were making music. And then I was left at the Bray by myself for another two or three days and then the sermon became very specific, it was me reflecting on nature, reflecting on the big sky of Montana, and then ultimately singing and talking about the nature of ceramics, using the black pulpit vernacular as the delivery style. And so this film, it's a film that I've wanted to make for a long time, it includes a lot of biographical, kind of, historical footage of me as a young maker. It includes moments where I'm looking at clay diggers in India, diggers in Japan, Shoji Hamada, you know, I think the western Japanese hero, the hero for so many western potters is this guy, Shoji Hamada.

And then, you know, maybe an attempt at the emotional ecstasy that I feel in spirituality, how that is connected to the ecstasy that I feel when I'm making. And so I can't thank the Archie Bray enough and I look forward to having a, kind of, ongoing dialogue with the organisation. But I also feel like it's a moment where ceramics is being taken seriously and in new ways and I'm very, very excited that the museum community and the art community is excited to graft this material into the lexicon into contemporary art.

LY: Theaster, thank you so much for your wonderful insights into the exhibition and your work and I look forward to carrying on this conversation with you in London.

TG: Thank you so much Lydia.

LY: Thank you.

TG: I'll see you soon.

JS: We now hear from Jason Young, an Associate Professor of History at the University of Michigan. He teaches and researches in the field of nineteenth century US history, African-American history and the African diaspora. He is currently co-curating an exhibition on the legacy of African-American potters from Edgefield that will feature a number of jars by David Drake, due to open at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in September 2022.

JY: My name is Jason Young and I'm an Associate Professor of History at the University of Michigan. I'm also a co-curator with partners at the Metropolitan of Art in New York and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston of a travelling show that focuses on the legacy of enslaved and newly freed black potters from Edgefield, South Carolina.

Theaster Gates has selected a storage jar by David Drake, Theaster sees these jars as almost having a brand identity that set them apart from anonymous jars made in Lewis Miles Pottery. Edgefield, South Carolina was one of the centres of ceramic production in the United States during the nineteenth century, the region's rich clay deposits made possible the production of a vast array of wares, from monumental storage jars to everyday utilitarian vessels. The virtuosity of David Drake's jars attest both to the strength and dexterity of his hand, but also, even more so, to his intellectual and artistic ingenuity. In the very act of inscribing his name on his wares he was committing an illegal act as literacy was forbade by law under slavery's brutal regime.

Add to this the biting, though deft, political commentary that one finds in his rhyming couplets and you realise in David Drake, not only a maker but a mind hard at work.

LY: Theaster has also selected a face jug from around 1850, it's attributed to the same community of potters in Edgefield, South Carolina, but it's very small compared to the storage jar and doesn't appear to have a functional purpose. Could it have had a ritual purpose, does it relate to African tradition such as minkisi, and could British face jugs have also been a possible model?

JY: This is one of the most fascinating fields of emerging enquiry related to Edgefield pottery. We know that a significant number of people who found themselves enslaved in area potteries were originally from west central Africa where the Congo Nkisi tradition was widespread. At the same time several European goods, including British toby jugs emerged as much desired commercial items in west Africa during the late nineteenth century. We're learning more and more about the uses of these items and I'm convinced that much of this material exceeded mere utilitarian use and was, in fact, deployed for spiritual purposes.

LY: Jason, your co-curator, Ethan Lasser organised Theaster's exhibition, *To Speculate Darkly*, Theaster Gates and Dave the Potter, at the Milwaukee Art Museum in 2010. Theaster has mentioned that it was important for him to have a named black potter to ground him as an African-American working in clay. How has Gates in turn paved the way for David Drake's story to be told in the twenty first century?

JY: The work of Theaster Gates has been a crucial part of the resurging interest in David Drake. I'm most impressed by

the exploding of old traditional boundaries that Gates' work represents. This is true not only of the show at Whitechapel but also of Gates' larger takeover of London in recent weeks and months. Clay is, to be sure, a product of the hand, but David Drake made clear that working in pottery requires a kind of technical skill and intellectual ingenuity that traditionally has not been recognised and celebrated, certainly not for an enslaved potter from rural South Carolina. In this way Gates' work is, to my mind, a provocation of traditional curatorial practices, a kind of clarion call to open the doors of these and other spaces to include, the all of us.

JS: Thanks for listening to this episode of Hear, Now. You can find all of our other episodes online at [www.whitechapelgallery.org](http://www.whitechapelgallery.org), on the Bloomberg Connects app, as well as iTunes, Spotify, Stitcher and SoundCloud. Don't forget to visit the exhibition, Theaster Gates, A Clay Sermon, from the 29 September 2021 until the 9 January 2022. Bye for now.

**Transcribed by 1<sup>st</sup> Class Secretarial Services.**