

**Theaster Gates: A Clay Sermon**

29 September 2021 – 9 January 2022

Galleries 1, 8 &amp; 9 | Free Entry

#TheasterGates

**Theaster Gates delivers conceptual sermons on the meaning and significance of clay in expansive new survey.**

Whitechapel Gallery is pleased to present *Theaster Gates: A Clay Sermon*, a major solo exhibition by **Theaster Gates** (b. 1973, Chicago, USA). The exhibition initiates the artist's year-long, multi-venue investigation into the material and spiritual significance of clay in craft, labour, community building, religion, colonialism and global trade.

Bringing together pottery, sculpture, film and research materials, the exhibition surveys works by Gates across two decades, from his early hand-thrown pots to his large-scale Afro-Mingei sculptures, a hybrid form which combines two strands of his works: Black aesthetics and Japanese philosophy.

New large-scale ceramics created by Gates at the Archie Bray Foundation for Ceramic Arts, Montana, are seen here for the first time. These are displayed alongside other large, tarred vessels which have been 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.

The artist also unveils a new film titled *A Clay Sermon* (2021), delivering a musical sermon that blends elements of gospel song with improvised jazz music. Having learned to sing in a Baptist church choir as a child, Gates began giving performances at the pottery wheel in the 1990s. Here he sermonises about a pilgrimage to Mino, Japan and the beauty of Oribe glaze in Japanese pottery. Shot in the abandoned brick factory of the Western Clay Manufacturing Company, now part of the Archie Bray Foundation, vocal solos by the artist are interwoven with improvisations from members of his ensemble, The Black Monks, and archival footage from across Gates's career. Together they demonstrate the connections between the community of Black American church music and the collaborative ethos of ceramic-making.

As part of his multi-venue investigation into clay with Whitechapel Gallery, the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) and the 2022 Serpentine Pavilion, Gates has selected objects from the V&A collection for *A Clay Sermon*. Early ceramics from China, Korea and Iran dating from 206 BC are on display on the ground floor, alongside objects that speak to the significance of ceramics in global trade and colonial expansion. Those who have shaped his approach to clay, for example, include Shoji Hamada (1894–1978) and David Drake (1801–1870s), an enslaved African American who worked on a pottery plantation in Edgefield, South Carolina. Other significant potters include Michael Cardew (1901–1983) who established the Abuja Pottery School, Nigeria, in 1950; pioneering studio potter Ladi Kwali (1925–1984) who trained under Cardew; stoneware muralist Ruth

**Press Release**

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Duckworth (1919–2009); and Abstract Expressionist ceramicist Peter Voulkos (1924–2002).

**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.’ *A Clay Sermon* explores Gates’s work with clay, his affinities with potters internationally and the relationships among his various studio, social engagement and urban regeneration projects.”

The transformation of clay – from geological substance into utilitarian and artistic material – acts as a metaphor for the artist’s wider practice. Gates reworks found objects, musical traditions, archive and library holdings and derelict buildings, giving them new form, meaning and purpose. Speaking both of clay and communities, Gates says: ‘One needs to continue to get to know a thing by being directly engaged with the thing.’

#### 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 forthcoming 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 and pre-booking is recommended.
- *Theaster Gates: A Clay Sermon* is supported by White Cube, AKO Foundation, Cockayne Grants for the Arts, London Community Foundation, Henry Moore Foundation, and the Theaster Gates Exhibition Circle.

#### About *The Question of Clay*

*The Question of Clay*, is a multi-institution project by Theaster Gates which takes place in 2021-22 across Whitechapel Gallery, White Cube, 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 brings 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 until 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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