

Newcity Art

High Spirits: Artist Theaster Gates can't stop reaching new heights

By Rachel Furnari

When I arrived at Leroy's, Chicago artist Theaster Gates was recording sound pieces with the Black Monks of Mississippi for his upcoming show at the Milwaukee Art Museum. Leroy turned out to be an actual person and the place turned out to be the converted first floor of his house in Humboldt Park, not the rehearsal space I assumed I was headed to when Gates invited me to watch a mass-choir rehearsal for the opening in Milwaukee. Of course, this wasn't a rehearsal at all, and my insistent knocking during the recording session brought a Gates collaborator, Dara Epison, to lead me into the makeshift studio. Gates silently handed me headphones and I watched as he led the group with an understated confidence through a series of rhythmic Om chants that somehow blended the traditional low, repetitive hum with the intonations and shifting vocalizations of gospel and the blues. As the group passed the leadership of the chanting back and forth, Gates shifted seamlessly between his roles as the generative force in the collaboration and just another member of the chorus.

Although it was already after 8pm on a school night, it turned out that Gates was hoping to fit our interview in between another interview, for a Loeb Fellowship at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, and a dinner at the Illinois Arts Council. On the way to the California Clipper, he apologetically picked up the call from Harvard. While I waited for Gates to return to his cosmopolitan, I had ample time to consider Gates' recent rise to prominence in the national art scene.

Growing up in Garfield Park, and as the youngest of nine and the only son, Theaster, now 36, remembers listening to his parents' Delta Blues records, Gospel Jubilee, and the music of his sisters' youth: Al Green, Luther, Stephanie Mills, Earth, Wind & Fire. He began singing in the choir at the New Cedar Grove Missionary Baptist Church at Ohio and Pulaski when he was twelve. By the time he was fourteen, he was the choir director. The rich connection between music and spirituality (sometimes Buddhist, sometimes Christian, sometimes spirituality with a small "s") that so often informs his performances and projects was forged in relationship to the Black Church. So was his sensitivity to the emotional experience of music; as a choir director, "my job was to make people feel."

During his college years, Gates realized that "the conversation of the choir seemed too narrow." "My sense of the political world was sharpening. I had as much zeal for the political and social as I did for God and the choir was either praise or eternal suffering but couldn't embody politics or tactical strategies for living or acknowledging history. I found myself split into several people—I'm not very good at living that way. I wanted all the forms to become jumbled. I wanted the choir to be

able to make and sing songs that addressed social injustices, and not only in religious ways, but in practical and sometimes assertive ways.”

After getting his BFA in urban planning and ceramics at Iowa State University in 1996, Gates went to South Africa for graduate school and did an MA that focused on the study of traditional African religions. In 2006, he completed another master’s degree at Iowa that combined all three fields: religious studies, urban planning and ceramics. The complexity of his artistic practice reflects the diversity of his interests and experience. He makes objects and he performs; he is a museum artist who also utilizes informal and unusual spaces; he is concerned and careful about the formal aspects of his materials (both physical and musical) and he is committed to the political and social impact of everything he does. When I asked him what nomenclature he prefers, e.g., “visual artist” vs. “performance artist,” he replied, “A practice takes years to grow and even longer for people to know all the pieces. Any one label can be used at a given time so long as people are ready to be shocked when an entirely different set of interests and personal vocabularies avail themselves. This can be fun as it keeps the lecture quite lively. Artist is fine.” Artist it’ll be then.

When it comes to his artwork, Gates has no problem overreaching. Arrange for the 200-plus members of the South Shore Drill Team to perform for 150-plus white academics at the University of Chicago where he works and then deliver a companion lecture declaring “you need niggers”? Not a problem. Decide to redevelop an entire block at 69th and Dorchester under the name Dorchester Projects? Walk into the Prairie Avenue Bookstore during its closing days and ask for all of the books to create a reading room on the South Side? Absolutely. Gates will tell you a lot about his ambition, but he’s also a realist. “I can’t finish Dorchester Projects by myself, it’s big enough to receive other people.” He’s also not afraid; and until he’s described the effect that this fear has over cultural and social development in the black communities of postindustrial cities like St. Louis, Milwaukee, Detroit and Omaha, it’s hard to understand how powerful this self-assurance is. He claims easily, “I don’t ask myself ‘What right do I have to live on my block and think I can do all of this?’ I have the right.”

In the last year, Gates has completed ambitious collaborations with artists, museums, musicians, historians and the Kohler Company, culminating in an invitation to participate in the 2010 Whitney Biennial, which opened in New York at the end of February. At the Biennial, Gates was given the outdoor sculpture court for an “impresario piece” titled “Cosmology of Yard.” Gates has said that one of the fundamental questions of the project was: “How do you overcome Marcel Breuer,” the museum’s architect? His response to the spatial and social problem of the Brutalist cement pit at the Whitney was in some ways intentionally incomplete. Perhaps there is no way to overcome Breuer’s architecture and Gates sought to embrace the space’s prosaic functionality as both a food court and smoker’s lounge. His solution was to build out a temporary kind of architecture that includes a central pavilion, a looped sound and video piece, and several of the oversize, fantastical shoeshine chairs built for his performance called “Shine,” in 2009.

Gates worked with Ken Dunn of the Creative Reuse Center in Chicago to fill the court with ware boards, a material used in pottery (to rest your wares on), which were also present in “Temple Exercises,” his installation at the MCA, in 2009. But his intentions exceed recycling and reuse, he is instead interested in how these discarded materials are redeemed. “Bigger than reconstituted or upcycled; how could I not only deal with the tremendous burden of the boards, but also situate them so that their history of obscurity, was, in some way, as poetic as their presence in the museum.”

Many of the shoeshine chairs at the Whitney, and concurrently on view at Kavi Gupta Gallery, were designed and built in collaboration with Matthew Metzger, a Chicago-based painter. Metzger describes the collaboration: “He told me, ‘I want you to build a blocky, chunky, sexy shoeshine stand.’ And I asked, ‘So you want them to look like really thick, chunky minimalism?’ and he said ‘Hell yeah.’ He gave me a loose outline of how he wants the stand to read conceptually, the subjects he wants them associated with, as well as the potential narratives that he wants them to embody. I went out and found scrap wood at his house and used as much found material as possible, the inner core of the chairs stemmed from that, but the vinyl [seating] turned them into some kind of fucked-up eighties throne. Then, when adding the cladding to the armrests and headers, Gates said he wanted them ‘high,’ high enough to ‘get you all the way to heaven.’”

For the run of the Biennial, Gates’ courtyard installation will be altered by various artists and historians, invited to a sort of monastic residency whereby specialized tasks and ritualistic activities will be performed. The structure of the residencies is intended to challenge and critique the museum’s curatorial and institutional authority, and the shoeshine chairs have caused some unexpected pressure from Gates’ community to authentically or affirmatively represent the black experience.

Related to his larger “shining” project (a word he uses to describe shoeshining as well as a certain kind of performance and interaction), Gates believes the chairs evoke any number of intimate experiences with rituals, including work, family and daily life. But dismayed comments like “C’mon, man, a shoeshine?!” have frustrated him. Gesturing widely, he retorts: “Nothing watermelon about the fucking shoeshine. You can’t be in New York City and think that shoeshining is only a black thing.” This attitude, always keeping blackness in play but never wanting to be essentialized, is in keeping with his expansive rethinking of race and urban development in Chicago. What would happen, he asks, if the people who run the Chinese restaurant in his neighborhood didn’t go home to another community at night? “How would the landscape change if my Chinese and Korean brothers and sisters grew their cabbages in my neighborhood?”

In some ways, Gates subscribes to a radical utopianism, as if the very force of reimagining what’s possible when he places communities, neighborhoods and institutions in new conversations with one another will bring fragile but indivisible bonds into being. Just don’t call him a community activist. He quickly refuses the sobriquet: “It’s not what I am, I just live in a place. When you’re black and you live in your own environment you’re an activist by virtue of your geography.” While this

denial clearly targets the structural oppression of Chicago's divided city, it feels almost ironic coming from an artist with an urban-planning degree dedicated to revitalizing his immediate environment in Woodlawn. But he's serious—and one gets the impression that this seriousness is born out of a conviction that the economic and social conditions of places like Woodlawn require revolutionary intervention based on the imagination of its residents, not another community activist. Gates is a believer in the ethical and transformative power of artistic action.

On the one hand, this action is about “getting people together”: localized performances, curated conversations, community development, and reimagining cultural rituals and forms of social experience like religion and song. On the other hand, he's also had a consistent emphasis on objects: most particularly, pottery. In one instance, the actual art object doesn't seem that important, in the other, craft is paramount. His new show at the Milwaukee Museum of Art, “To Speculate Darkly,” combines these practices in a dialogue with Dave the Potter (also known as David Drake), a former slave whose large, poetry-inscribed pots from the mid-nineteenth century now fetch tens of thousands of dollars at auction. In a residency at Kohler this January, Gates designed elaborated ceramic speakers for the exhibition out of the company's famous sinks; “union white men” did the actual labor. Gates speculates energetically, “What if Kohler hired Dave to work on an industrial process? What would he do for his people and community? How would he shift the function of the ceramics in the same way that his (originally functional) ceramics have been shifted as collected objects? Dave would have offered ceramic speakers to the community: ‘Kohler Speakers Thumping Wisconsin—Designed by David Potter.’”

Another facet of the show involves incorporating many of Dave's known verses, which have been understood as a political gesture because slaves were forbidden to read or write, into a hymnal that represents a kind of poetic dialogue between the two artists. I asked Gates how he understands the dialogue between the craft-based practice, with its connection to labor, mastery and traditional aesthetics, with the more relational and social one.

“I am interested in things, spaces and people. The projects follow my preoccupations of the moment and the availability of things that seem worth talking about. Craft taught me how things should be cared for, the labor by which a thing is made and the value of that labor, both in the market and its potential to create intrinsic value for the maker. I carry those ideals with me as projects move through my shop although I have never been able to live up to the standard.

“I have come to realize that my work as an artist is very different than that of, say, a painter or true craftsman. I have decided to take on museum audiences, race problems, curatorial bias, cultural deficiencies; hell anything over my head! Making art is just a part of the fun. I have always been wired to think about the structures of organizations and the possibilities within them. I cannot separate my interest in these structures or in people from the objects that I make. As a result, sometimes the work is messy, with lots of cooks in the kitchen and presented in a way that would give a modernist a headache. So be it. It's not for everyone.”

This slipperiness sets Gates apart, as does his total commitment to his block and the Dorchester Project—an effort to reinvest in his community and create new forms of commercial, social and aesthetic experiences right where he lives. As much as he stakes claim to a great geographical mobility, Gates wants to be here, in Chicago, in Woodlawn, knowing the people around him. No matter where the work takes him, he's here to stay. “I might invent myself as some other motherfucker but it isn't going to change my politics.”