

LONDON

# Theaster Gates

## Whitechapel Gallery

In “A Clay Sermon,” Theaster Gates, who is best known for his socially engaged art and urban regeneration projects in his hometown of Chicago, offered an intimate self-portrait through clay. Viewers gained a sense of his tastes through a riveting selection of borrowed objects—from a Han dynasty jar to Modernist creations by Shoji Hamada and Ruth Duckworth—shown alongside his own work, and his values came through

in tributes paid to his heroes in the craft and to his father, a roofer. Though Gates was revealed as artist, educator, collector, curator, and shaman/preacher, this was not an exhibition about an individual: every object, down to the humblest brick, came with a rich story, and Gates thrillingly connected us to each one and to their makers across millennia.

Gates’s practice has its roots in clay; he trained as an undergraduate

in urban planning and ceramics and studied in Japan. He delved deep into the material, political, and spiritual legacies of clay in this show—part of a multi-venue London project encompassing a research fellowship at the Victoria and Albert Museum, an exhibition at White Cube, and a commission to design the Serpentine Galleries’ pavilion in 2022.

Religion, or perhaps spirituality, framed “A Clay Sermon.” A powerful new film underlines the symbiotic relationship between human beings and clay—after all, the notion that humans were formed from clay underpins the creation myths of many religions. “In the beginning was clay. Clay was without form,” Gates declares in the film (also titled *A Clay Sermon*). He grew up in the Baptist faith, and it is clear that, for him, making, faith, and music are intertwined. The film unites early footage of Gates as a pottery student with recent scenes of him throwing pots as he belts out songs, accompanied by his band the Black Monks, in an abandoned brick factory now owned by the Archie Bray Foundation for the Ceramic Arts in Montana. Shots of Gates kneeling and pacing

in this atmospheric space, interspersed with footage of digging for clay, a mesmerizing spinning wheel, and the drama of firing convey the ritual and raw energy of this ancient process.

Situated between the lower and upper galleries, the film functioned as a lynchpin. Downstairs, ceramic items, many borrowed from the V&A, filled four vitrines, embodying histories of global trade, colonialism, and slavery. Racist figurines of a Black boy eating a watermelon and a tobacco jar depicting a shoe shiner exposed white ignominy from a not-so-distant past. Other items spoke of resilience and courage, such as a storage jar made by Dave Drake, aka Dave the Potter, an enslaved African American who worked on a South Carolina plantation in the 1800s. Defying laws prohibiting literacy for slaves, Dave signed his pots and often inscribed them with verse. On a nearby wall, rows of black masks stared accusingly like ancestral ghosts of other potters deprived of their freedom and voice.

Elsewhere, stacked brick sculptures and a brick press celebrated this most basic building block and drew a link to Gates’s



**THEASTER GATES**  
Installation view of “A Clay Sermon,” 2021–22.



**THEASTER GATES**  
Two installation views of  
"A Clay Sermon," 2021–22.

architectural projects rehabilitating derelict buildings for Black communities. Two similarly sized pots stood on a plinth—one, a tectonic explosion of earthy slabs by the pioneering ceramicist Peter Voukos; the other, a sleek white vessel by Gates.

Upstairs, Gates gave free rein to his artistry. Sumptuous anthropomorphic pots resembling gourds, spiky totems, clay thrones, and globular tarred bowls inhabited this space, some placed on stone or wood blocks, others standing on the floor. Stories proliferated. *Drinking Cube*—exemplifying what Gates terms "Afro-Mingei," or works that fuse Black aesthetics with Japanese folk craft—consists of a wooden cube frame enclosing a

rock that bears a clay sake cup and a pile of ceramic African masks; the cultural hybridity references the import of Chinese immigrants to America after abolition.

"A Clay Sermon" was ultimately an exhibition about humanity. Gates uses this quotidian, egalitarian material to raise issues of identity, labor, economy, and aesthetics. In his work, we see how the primeval act of making a vessel by hand can be profoundly spiritual and political. And we are reminded that we, too, are vessels, destined to last vastly less time than those on display. With luck, Gates's clay objects will survive to tell their own stories to future civilizations.

—ELIZABETH FULLERTON

