

RICHARD GRAY GALLERY

Chicago Tribune

Theaster Gates, back in Chicago, delivers art in gallery show, brand-new CTA station



After traveling to make art overseas, Theaster Gates is back in Chicago. Gates' installations are on display at the 95th St. Red Line station. (Antonio Perez/Chicago Tribune)



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In the span of a few days earlier this month, Theaster Gates was walking through his new gallery show just hours before it opened, explaining to visiting friends and journalists the thinking behind, for instance, one of its centerpieces, his reclaimed neon sign from a Rothschild Liquors store to which he has added the neon legend, “Mama’s Milk.”

“It’s less of a critique and more of a kind of acceptance of urban space,” the artist said. “The presence of the liquor store predated crack,” he said, and its offerings have been, in a sense, “the lifeblood, the milk, of immigrant communities and then black and brown communities over the last 75 years” -- emblematic of “the need to have our sins washed in one way or another.”

And then Gates was at the Chicago Transit Authority’s newly rehabbed transportation hub at 95th and State Streets, standing alongside Mayor [Rahm Emanuel](#) as they introduced Gates’ art works made for the \$280 million station reimagining. They are “america america,” two massive fabrications of decommissioned firehose and red paint that hang on a wall and, more radically, “An Extended Song of Our People (AESOP),” a deejay booth that, in Gates’ vision, will give daily commutes through the station a soundtrack of, perhaps, house music in the evening, maybe some jazz, like Sonny Rollins, in the morning.



Artist Theaster Gates shows Mayor Rahm Emanuel, his wife Amy Amy Rule, CTA President Dorval Carter and others his new art installation at the 95th St. CTA station on April 8, 2019. (Antonio Perez / Chicago Tribune)

“It’s an interesting kind of art intervention within the station so that it’s not just business as usual and standard ceramics and standard tile and concrete,” he said. Instead of that, he realized “there could be this moment where we celebrate (the former Hyde Park record store) Dr. Wax and the history of albums on the South Side and then just kind of have really good music while riders are waiting on their trains.”

These two stops, the gallery and the CTA station, represented some of the many hats Gates wears. In one of them, he’s a community builder, reclaiming unwanted materials, rehabbing spaces, turning an abandoned old South Side financial institution into a vibrant, art-and-music-filled community hub, the Stony Island Arts Bank. In another, he’s a social critic, holding forth on the different ways his native Chicago treats its white and brown people. And in yet another, he’s a fine artist of increasing international reputation; just before coming back to Chicago to put up “Every Square Needs a Circle” at Gray Warehouse, (2044 W. Carroll Ave.), he was busy

mounting “Amalgam,” his first solo museum exhibition in France, up through May 12 at Paris’ Palais de Tokyo.

And all of these roles blend into one and intertwine with one another. The Gray Warehouse show, free and open to the public, is “a way of describing my complex relationship with the city,” Gates said. The hung works at the CTA station, even more open to the public, are sort of mosaics that use the old firehose as a three-dimensional canvas, instruments of municipal protection that, during the Civil Rights era, became instruments of municipal oppression and now are meant to inspire reflection.

“The idea was born out of Chicago, with me thinking about the history of Civil Rights and whether or not that history actually fulfilled itself,” said Gates. “It didn't.”

Emanuel was pleased to have Gates’ work as the final part of his effort to reinvigorate art on the public transit system during his two terms as mayor.

“You have a person who's world renowned, right?” said the mayor, who noted he had attended Gates’ Paris opening while he was there for a climate change conference. “And he didn't leave Chicago when he became famous, but always comes home. “You have a person who’s rethought what art and community mean, as mirror images of each other... and you have the premier artist in what is, in my view, the premier station of the CTA.”

In another example of Gates’ worlds coming together, also on hand at the CTA opening was Paul Gray, who runs Richard Gray Gallery.

Later, on the phone, Gray talked about his formal relationship with Gates as his gallery representative here and about this second show together, the first in the bigger, Gray Warehouse space.

“He’s a remarkable artist, like very few that I’ve ever heard of, none that I’ve ever worked with before,” the gallerist said.

In “Every Square Needs a Circle,” “I think the nexus between many of the works is labor -- and the labor of black Americans,” Gray said, but they are also connected by Gates’ range of interests, especially in not just making art but in making change in the community and structures for the community.

“I love the breadth of it,” Gray said.

Beyond the doctored liquor sign — a gift from the Rothschild family, the artist said -- the works on display at Gray Warehouse are kind of a Whitman’s Sampler of the artist’s recent output. They include one of Gates’ black Madonnas, a figure originally found on a Spanish keychain, blown up to life size and protected by fencing the artist salvaged from a demolished Catholic church at 72nd Street and Dorchester Avenue. There is a neon fabrication amplifying one of W.E.B. DuBois’s charts about the state of blacks in America made for a 1900 world’s fair. There are a series of paintings Gates executed in roofers’ tar, brooding abstractions in which the medium is an especially pointed part of the message.

And there is an installation, upholstered chairs and a wall-mounted bookcase, modeled after furniture from the Johnson Publishing Company building, an echo of an exhibition celebrating the aesthetic vision of the Ebony and Jet publisher that Gates mounted at Stony Island last year.

“For me, the code of the exhibition has to do with that tension. You know, the desire to be able to get right up on a thing, and then it's like, Is the thing precious? Is it precious?” he said. Can



Artist Theaster Gates stands in front of one of two large tapestries made from colorful strips of decommissioned fire hoses that are sewn together at the new 95th St. Red Line CTA station on April 8, 2019. (Antonio Perez / Chicago Tribune)

you sit on the Johnsesque chairs, in other words, handle the books? Or is this, as something everyday that has been labelled “art,” merely there to look at?

Similarly the Madonna, in the original, was there to work miracles for the devoted and start their cars. Blown up and displayed in a gallery, she in part represents the way religions would modify their icons to attract new followers but also a bit of history Gates said he learned about black Madonnas.

“You learned that a church was burning, the Madonna receives all of the soot and smoke, keeps the church from burning, performs a miracle,” he said. “The black Madonna is really a white Madonna that ingested trauma, right? And the miracle of black women could potentially be, black women are just women who have suffered.”

He’s not stating this so much as posing it as a possibility. Part of the interdisciplinary nature of Gates’ work is that the descriptions can get a little esoteric.

“I thought maybe it would be a good time to kind of tell my city what I've been up to visually,” he said, “and instead of a narrative show that I would use this title, ‘Every Square Needs a Circle,’ to be both kind of a formal approach to talking about the things that are in the studio, but then also a way of describing my complex relationship with the city ... where policy meets creativity, or where linear thinking meets circular thinking, rationality meets spirituality.”

But that fuzziness, that aura of possibility and multiple meanings, is the pleasure of it, too. You can think about his tar paintings as an homage to his laborer father, as his attempt to master a profoundly challenging new medium (the stuff has to be hot to move), and also as an example of the animating principle of his practice, “the notion of Black space as a formal exercise,” as he puts it on his website.

And they are, collectively, aesthetically pleasing objects, too, windows into an always percolating mind done in metals and earth tones, each material choice within a piece a symbol of something more broadly resonant and no small number of them reclaimed from demolition projects or abandoned lots, transformed, quite literally, from garbage into art.

“I do like the idea that I can step away from the messiness of my studio and then have a place where these things can sit and be contemplated in a narrower form,” Gates said. “People come to my studio, there’s like 20,000 things to look at. It’s hard to focus.

“This is a moment where I get to determine which parts of the work people see. That doesn’t feel like a marketplace thing. It just feels like a beautiful table’s been laid. These are a little bit like gems from the varying museum projects that I’ve done over the last four years or so.”