

Content Review

Theaster Gates: The Gift and The Renege
On view | May 17–October 20, 2024



Theaster Gates, *Retaining Wall for Revolution and Resurrection*, 2024 Thirty-one custom steel gabions, hardware store inventory, studio objects, and building materials. Artwork courtesy Theaster Gates. Image courtesy of Phillip Pyle, II

This content review is designed to communicate accessibility and powerful subject matters within this exhibition.

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Themes: Resilience, Community, Urban Renewal, Historical Memory

Theaster Gates: The Gift and The Renege explores the complex dynamics of Houston's Freedmen's Town in the Fourth Ward through a collection of large-scale paintings, sculptures, and installations, encapsulating themes of resilience, liberation, and urban transformation. Through his artistic practice, and by intentionally seeking to "add form," Gates interrogates the often-overlooked value of Black spaces in American history, emphasizing Black labor, materials, place, and community.

Featured Works

- 1. *WE WILL SAVE OURSELVES* (2024):** This painting is crafted from torch down, bitumen, and enamel-based industrial paint on steel, may suggest the resilience and self-sufficiency of community efforts, reflecting on the metaphor of self-salvation through collective action. It can be read as a chant, a slogan and speaks to protest posters that aim to be calls to action.
- 2. *Bright Sunny Day* (2024):** Using materials as mentioned above, and spanning 30 feet wide, *Bright Sunny Day* takes a new approach by using roofing shingles to contrast stark urban realities with the persistent optimism that fuels future transformations.
- 3. *Retaining Wall for Revolution and Resurrection* (2024):** Previously featured in the exhibition *How to Sell Hardware*, this installation uses steel gabions filled with hardware store items to represent the robust yet complex foundations that underpin community upheaval and renewal.
- 4. *New Egypt Sanctuary of the Holy Word and Image* (2017):** Made from wood, marble, bound periodicals, and found objects, this piece encourages reflection on the spiritual and historical influences shaping modern Black identity. It includes bound pages from *Ebony* magazine, which were gifted to the artist from the Johnson Publishing Collection.



Theaster Gates, *New Egypt Sanctuary of the Holy Word and Image*, 2017
Wood, marble, bound periodicals, found objects, and light. Artwork courtesy Theaster Gates.
Image courtesy of Phillip Pyle, II

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Theaster Gates' *Nation Building* (2024) features brick presses as sculpture.

- 1. *Brick Relief* (Cast in bronze):**
Significance: Bronze symbolizes durability and historical importance. Casting a brick press in bronze elevates a common tool, reflecting the enduring legacy and intrinsic value of Black communities and labor.
- 2. *Stainless Labor* (Crafted entirely from stainless steel):**
Significance: Stainless steel's strength and resistance to corrosion metaphorically represent the resilience of Black labor and industry.
- 3. *Analog Investments* (Made from bronze):**
Significance: Using bronze signifies tradition and value, reflecting the substantial impact of Black communities' historical and economic contributions. The term "analog" suggests a return to foundational practices amidst digital change.
- 4. *The Original Bray* (Constructed from cast iron):**
Significance: Cast iron's strength and industrial significance highlight the foundational role of Black labor during the Industrial Revolution.

Interactive and Educational Components

- **Extended Engagement:** Visitors are encouraged to tour both Contemporary Arts Museum Houston by emailing tours@camh.org and the African American History Research Center in Freedmen's Town by calling 832-393-1440. This center, dedicated to preserving and promoting African American history and culture, offers a rich collection of resources and programs that link visitors to the storied history of this city.

Accessibility and Visitor Information

- Touching is prohibited.
- Exhibition resources are available at the front desk for further reading and investigation.
- Thoughtful lighting designs enhance the visibility of specific works while creating an atmospheric focus.

The exhibition is organized by Contemporary Arts Museum Houston and co-curated by Ryan N. Dennis, Senior Curator and Director of Public Initiatives, and Hesse McGraw, Executive Director.