

Theaster Gates: The Gift and The Renege

**Contemporary
Arts Museum
Houston**

How do we make Freedmen's Town's brick preservation and return sacred?

– Theaster Gates

Theaster Gates: The Gift and The Renege comprises large-scale paintings, sculptures, and installations that reckon with histories of labor, material legacies, and the sociopolitical dynamics of Freedmen's Town in Houston's Fourth Ward. Established in 1865 as Houston's mother ward, Freedmen's Town is a community built by newly freed Black people who formed a vibrant community anchored by the brick streets they made and laid by hand. Today, those same brick streets serve as the enduring reminder of the possibility of Black places. *The Gift and The Renege* contends with the physical traces of displacement and economies of labor while honoring the battle residents continue to wage—against decades-long forces of segregation, redlining, and gentrification—to protect their history and heritage. Theaster Gates (b. 1973) is an artist and social innovator who translates the intricacies of Blackness through space theory and land development, sculpture, and performance. Through the expansiveness of his approach as a thinker, maker, and builder, he extends the role of the artist as an agent of change. His work reframes longstanding tensions between municipal policies and a community's desire for self-determination while offering a powerful reminder of the necessity of persistence and creativity. Throughout his career, Gates has combined his training in urban planning with a multifaceted art practice to invest renewed cultural value in divested, underrecognized neighborhoods, soulfully elevating our understanding of Black labor, materials, place, and community. His work powerfully highlights the true value Black spaces hold—although often devalued—as sites of American resilience, liberation, and redemption. For over 20 years, he has worked to transform the Southside of Chicago through initiatives that preserve, reclaim, reimagine, and continue the neighborhood's vital role as a nucleus for Black ingenuity and creative production. His dynamic practice, which demonstrates the dual importance of cultural resistance and the artist's role in building community, has made him one of the most significant artists working today. This exhibition is a catalyst to the larger effort by the Freedmen's Town community, now supported by a partnership between Houston Freedmen's Town Conservancy and Contemporary Arts Museum Houston (CAMH), with the City of Houston, to preserve Freedmen's Town's historic and cultural assets for generations to come. The exhibition uplifts the radical imagination and on-the-ground labor necessary to realize the historic bricks' complete preservation and sacred return to their rightful home in the streets of Freedmen's Town.

Theaster Gates: The Gift and The Renegade was developed throughout the planning and engagement process of Rebirth in Action in partnership with Houston Freedmen's Town Conservancy. 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.

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Retaining Wall for Revolution and Resurrection, 2024

Thirty-one custom steel gabions, hardware store inventory, studio objects, and building materials

Retaining Wall for Revolution and Resurrection (2024) is comprised of contents of Halsted Hardware, a neighborhood hardware store in the Southside of Chicago that closed and went out of business in 2020. Facing the closure of this community cornerstone, Gates purchased the store and its contents and subsequently collaborated with its proprietor, Mr. Ken, to reimagine its inventory as the components of this artwork. The resulting artwork defiantly proclaims ‘we already have the tools we need to resurrect our community.’ The work reflects Gates’s concern about the neglect of Black spaces and offers a potent metaphor for the efforts required to support and revitalize these communities.

“I continue to grapple with the questions of economy within Black space and the apologetic prerequisite that very few care enough about Black space to try to save it. While my attempts are at best, often laughable, I nonetheless grapple, in Black space with my truth and its truth. A muscle worked is better than a lazy muscle. [This work] works my muscle and offers me ways into new material and spatial configurations.”

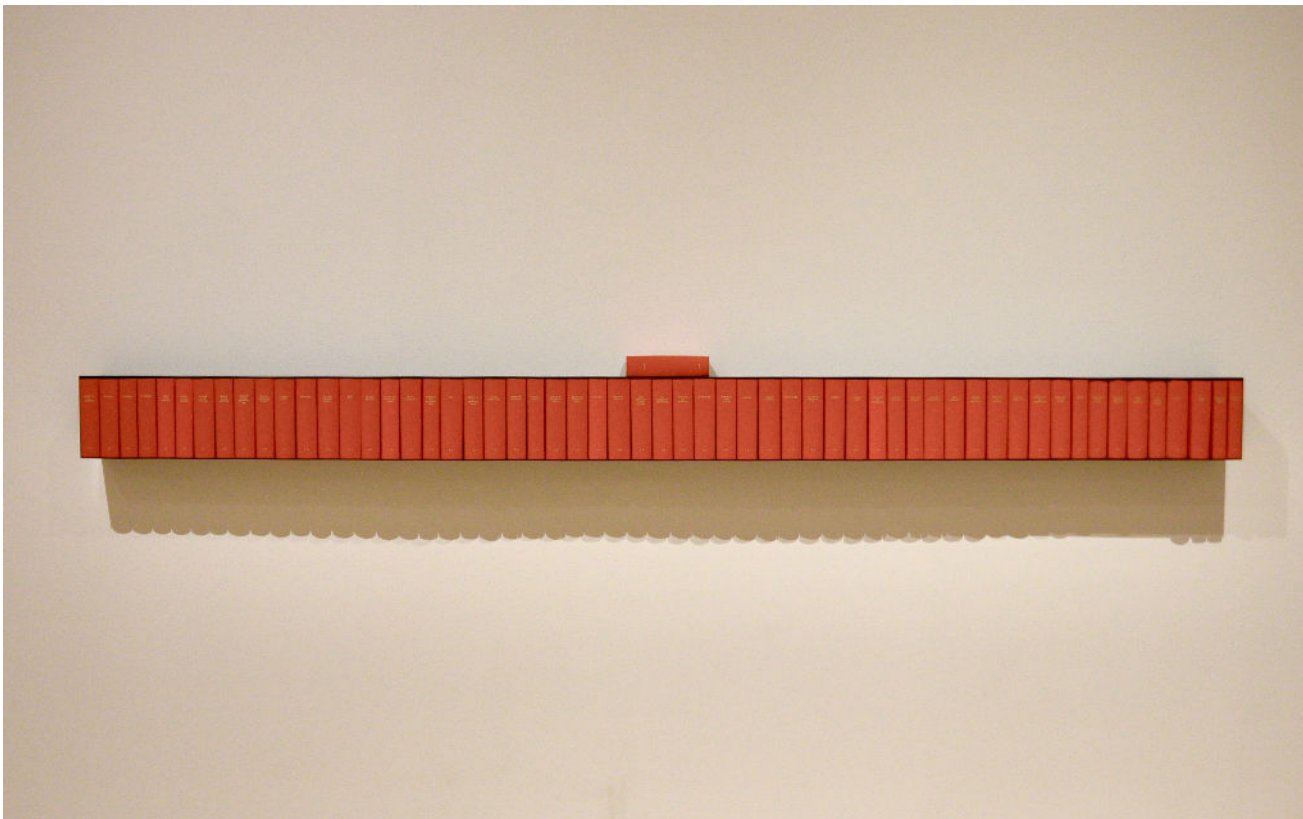
– Theaster Gates



New Egypt Sanctuary of the Holy Word and Image, 2017

Wood, marble, bound periodicals, found objects, and light

New Egypt Sanctuary of the Holy Word and Image (2017) features a large-scale archive of works housed in a towering wood sanctuary. The centerpiece, *New Egypt*, contains bound volumes of *Ebony* magazine (1945–2016), celebrating Black American life. The original magazines were rescued by the artist, following the liquidation of the Johnson Publishing Company, and then bound and collated by decade. The use of colors and architectural references to Africanized forms connects the Black American experience with historical African kingdoms modeled from the teachings of Dr. Maulana Karenga, the founder of Kwanzaa, and an early figure in the Africana studies. This work emphasizes the importance of preserving and reflecting on Black cultural history.



From My People and My Skin, 2019

Bound books, aluminum shelf

From My People and My Skin (2019) explores the relationship between personal identity and collective history through a collection of bound books displayed on a minimalist aluminum shelf designed by the artist. Theaster Gates highlights the significance of preserving Black literature and narratives in the context of Western histories while emphasizing the importance of Black stories in understanding and shaping cultural identity.



Bright Sunny Day, 2024

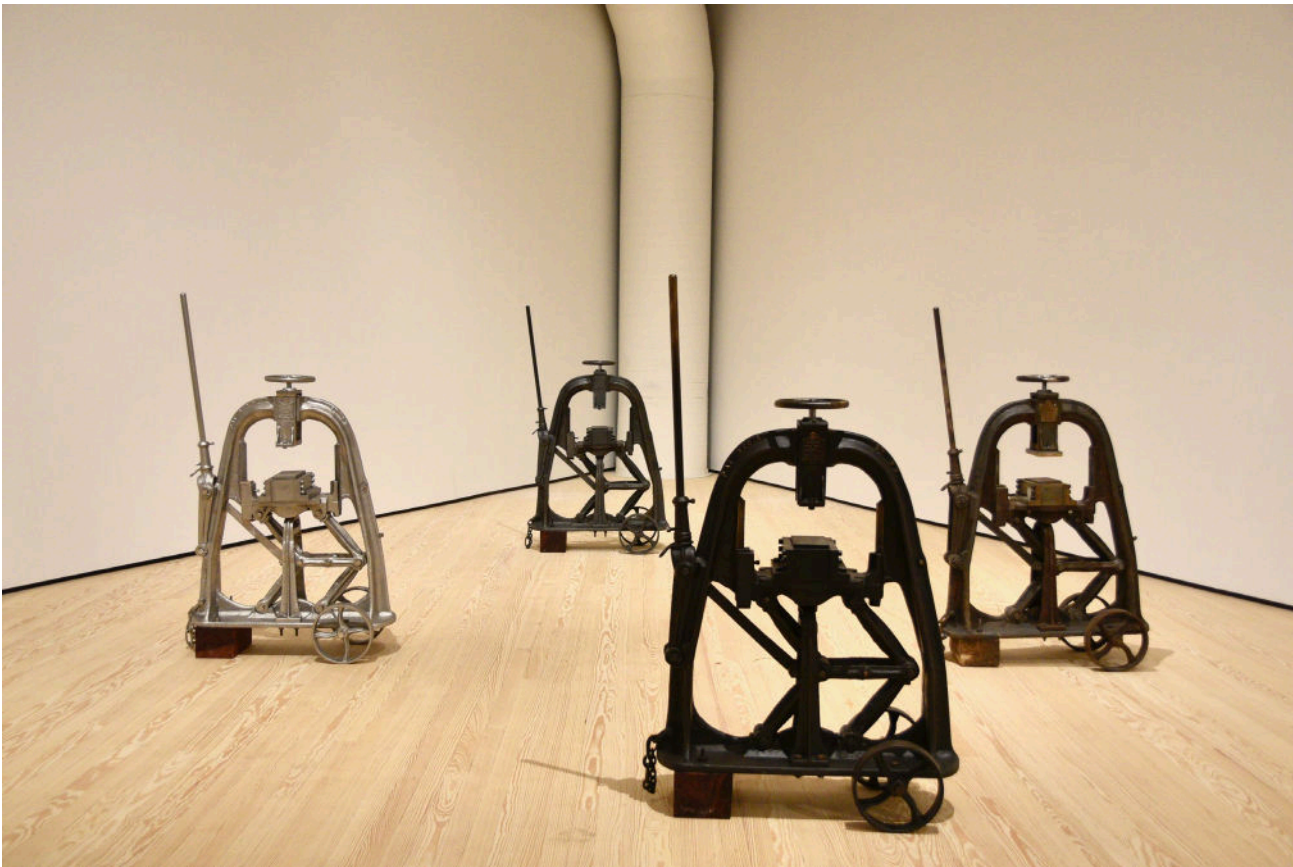
Torch down, bitumen, enamel- based industrial paint, and steel

In *Bright Sunny Day* (2024) Theaster Gates explores themes of renewal, hope, and legacy. The work draws directly from Gates’s relationship with his father, Theaster Gates Sr. The late, elder Gates was an entrepreneur, developer, and tradesman in Chicago. In 2012, the artist asked his father to collaborate on a series of new paintings, utilizing the Gates Sr’s tar kettle. Once, while cutting and trimming a corner, Gates Sr. said, “Don’t cut it like that, you don’t want [the painting] to leak.” This work allows that legacy and craft to shine.

**WE WILL SAVE OURSELVES, 2024**

Torch down, bitumen, enamel-based industrial paint, and steel

This artwork is inspired by Theaster Gates' experiences in Freedmen's Town, Houston, where he engaged with the community as part of *Rebirth in Action*, an initiative with its core focus being the historical significance of Freedmen's Town that aims to preserve this singular community, its agency, and heritage for future generations. Through conversations with Freedmen's Town residents about self-determination and overcoming challenges, Gates reflects on how communities can find strength and resilience. *How do communities make a way forward when the challenges seem impossible to triumph over?* This artwork is made of industrial roofing materials to symbolize the perseverance, self-determinism, and collective effort necessary to build a better future.



CLOCKWISE FROM REAR

Nation Building – A Collection of All of the Brick Presses

Brick Relief, 2024

Bronze

The Original Bray, 2024

Cast iron

Analog Investments, 2024

Bronze

Stainless Labor, 2024

Stainless steel

This collection showcases Theaster Gates' exploration of brick presses as symbols of construction and community building. Paying homage to the importance of bricks in Houston's Freedmen's Town and the freed Black residents who paved the streets with handmade bricks in the early 1900s. It speaks to the ways in which brick production was done in the past and the machinery needed to lay new bricks in the future. The work reflects his broader interest in materiality and the role of physical objects in shaping and supporting collective spaces and histories.