

# REGEN PROJECTS

Hudson, Suzanne. "Theaster Gates." *Artforum* (April 2017) pp. 216 – 217 [ill.]

**ARTFORUM**

LOS ANGELES

## Theaster Gates

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For his first show at Regen Projects, "But to Be a Poor Race," Theaster Gates installed within the gallery's many rooms a sampling of clay vessels, paintings bandaged with hoses from decommissioned firehouses, wall panels studded with narrow floorboards sourced from a nearby Chicago public school gym assemblages of pelts, appropriations of African reliquary objects, found objects, and the single-channel video *My country tis of thee*, 2016. The video featured documentation of Gates and members of experimental music ensemble the Black Monks of Mississippi riffing on the US national anthem, the audio from which washed over the adjacent spaces. While the survey was seemingly comprehensive, nothing in the show dated prior to 2015, and the contemporaneity of its works ultimately undermined any retrospective function, emphasizing instead the vastness of Gates's project, which the present context could not—and did not attempt to—contain. The conspicuousness of the artist's Herculean efforts in archive making, community organizing, and urban planning on the South Side of Chicago has often led to the dismissal of his individualized pieces as merely a means of funding other ventures. This show



View of "Theaster Gates," 2017.  
Photo: Brian Forrest.

brought into sharp relief the tension between the contextually determined nature of Gates's works themselves and their self-sufficiency as discrete objects.



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Taking his direction from a line of W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903)—“To be a poor man is hard, but to be a poor race in a land of dollars is the very bottom of hardships”—and further particularizing a commitment to the history encoded in the author's related series of sociological studies on the advancements of black Americans in the decades after the Civil War, Gates rendered statistical data as hard-edge shapes. Thin aluminum panels bear stark geometries that trace the outlines of their source images but lack the originals' captions, leaving the viewer to consult the primary source to gain understanding of the work's meaning. *Mountain Aura*, 2017, floats a craggy summit on a blank ground, its gradations of black, brown, and yellow paint correlating to the swells of a population chart tracking the increasing numbers of “negroes” and “mulattoes” from 1800 to 1890. Likewise, *Bar Freak with Yellow Feet*, 2017, owes the ratio of its large black and smaller yellow rectangular forms to a table charting race amalgamation in Georgia during this same period, and *Line Drawing for Black People*, 2017, images the valuation of property owned by the titular population. *Painting Genre with Employed Turtles*, 2017, a field of squares and rectangles at first glance indistinguishable from exemplars of Dutch Neo-Plasticism, in fact recapitulates yet another infographic illustrating the various professions of free blacks (e.g., demonstrating that black grocers and undertakers were more numerous than black bankers).

These paintings (and other works in the show) pose a core question regarding representation: What is communicated in the field of the image, and what reading and learning must be brought to bear on it? The works do not so much inject “content” into a supposedly autonomous form of modernist abstraction as insist that the context for making and circulating such paintings is a necessarily social field. In this way, they are deictic. In their pedagogicality, these paintings echo Gates's adjacent wall-mounted sculptures of black hardcover books, each volume containing back issues of *Jet* magazine. Here, Gates nods to the project—done in collaboration with *Jet*'s publishing house—of archiving a complete set of the discontinued publication. (As does so much else in the installation, from a bronze cast of a roofing tile that relates to his father's labor to the inclusion of ceramics, a medium of long-standing import for the artist, the *Jet* sculptures point not only backwards and sideways, but to Gates's own biography.) With gold phrases penned by Gates embossed on their spines, the sets read as poetry—to be looked at and implicitly (if not actually) to be removed from their cases, read, circulated, and reassembled to create new associative chains. Elsewhere Gates showed how the works themselves contain the possibility of other modes of engagement: particularly in *Study for Pavillion*, 2017, a pile of handmade bricks. This work resonated especially with a point the artist made in conversation with Hamza Walker on the occasion of the exhibition, regarding his desire to “build the museum, not just have work inside it.”

—Suzanne Hudson