



SMART MUSEUM OF ART
THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

5550 S. Greenwood Ave.
Chicago, Illinois 60637
smartmuseum.uchicago.edu

UNTO THEE

THEASTER GATES

Smart Museum of Art announces solo Theaster Gates exhibition

The exhibition will open September 23, 2025 and run through February 22, 2026 and will mark the artist's first solo museum show in his hometown of Chicago.

CHICAGO, IL — The Smart Museum of Art will present an expansive solo museum exhibition of Chicago-based artist **Theaster Gates** from September 23, 2025, through February 22, 2026. *Theaster Gates: Unto Thee* centers on the multifaceted practice of Theaster Gates and explores how he employs sculpture to expose the complexities of surrender and accumulation through a series of large-scale installations, music and film, and the redeployment of deaccessioned objects from the University of Chicago, where Gates is currently Professor of Visual Arts. This exhibition is made possible by Northern Trust and the Terra Foundation for American Art.

Organized by the Smart's Dana Feitler Director **Vanja Malloy** and curator **Galina Mardilovich** in close collaboration with the artist, the exhibition will incorporate objects that have been foundational to Gates's practice and his custodianship of culturally significant collections. The exhibition will also present Gates's latest work that continues to build on the material legacies of underrecognized histories, voices, and, in some cases, institutional structures first mined in these University objects, and considered as a whole for the first time.

“Theaster Gates redefines what it means to be both an artist and a civic leader—his work doesn’t just hang on walls, it transforms spaces, communities, and conversations. Nowhere is this more powerfully felt than in Chicago, where his visionary projects have revitalized neighborhoods and reimagined the role of culture in public life. His practice reminds us that art can be a force for restoration, justice, and hope,” commented Vanja Malloy.

Gates’s recent work includes a series of monolithic ceramic vessels, paintings, and films. These works are imbued with formal gestures and personal references from the use of materials like tar, paying homage to the inheritance of skilled labor from his father, who was a roofer by trade, to the artist’s original artistic training in Japanese ceramics. As emphasized by their positioning with deaccessioned University objects, these works and exhibition will amplify Gates’s investment in elevating invisible labor, interrogating artistic legacies, questioning economies of power, and, equally, celebrating Black artistic and intellectual contributions.

“*Unto Thee* explores my own relationship with the accumulation of objects, particularly objects that I’ve gleaned from the University of Chicago over the last 20 years,” remarked Theaster Gates. “This exhibition is, in many ways, a retrospective of these materials, demonstrating how they’ve been redeployed and are being returned back to the University of Chicago as a temporary resting place. I hope this exhibition demonstrates how an artist’s adjacency to an institution can create new forms and new meaning from things that were cast off but are absolutely essential and central to the artistic canon.”

The large-scale solo exhibition will also be accompanied by a site-specific installation in the museum’s lobby gallery, part of the Museum’s Threshold Series, that will be on view through July 2026.



Theaster Gates: Unto Thee underscores the artist's belief in the "life within things," including a block formerly abandoned and derelict buildings on Chicago's South Side that he has rescued and reconstituted into spaces for experimental artistic projects. To that end, in collaboration with Gates, the exhibition will be accompanied by programming with the artist, scholars, students, educators, and community partners. With insights from leading experts in conceptualism, craft, critical archival practices, urbanism, and ethnomusicology, programs will respond to works on view and the exhibition's themes, as well as act as a shared space for creative production, generative knowledge, and cultural discourse. Drawing on Gates's own performance practice, the Museum will present an array of programming organized on-site at the Smart and off-site around the South Side, including a performance by The Black Monks. Programming also includes screenings of Gates's film-based projects.

The exhibition's accompanying catalogue will further examine Gates's artistic practice and its multidisciplinary implications and possibilities. Co-edited by Mardilovich and Malloy, published by the Smart Museum of Art and distributed by the University of Chicago Press, the volume will feature an interview with Gates, as well as five scholarly essays by a diverse group of contributors, each of whom will center on a specific theme raised by the exhibition and Gates's work.

This exhibition is made possible by Northern Trust and the Terra Foundation for American Art.

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Additional support is provided by the Smart Museum's Board of Governors, and SmartPartners.

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About Theaster Gates

Theaster Gates is an artist whose practice finds roots in conceptual formalism, sculpture, space theory, land art, and performance. Trained in urban planning and within the tradition of Japanese ceramics, Gates's artistic philosophy is guided by the concepts of Shintoism, Buddhism and Animism - most notably honoring the "spirit within things." Foundational to Gates's practice is his custodianship and critical redeployment of culturally significant Black objects, archives, and spaces. Known for his recirculation of art-world capital, Gates smartly upturns art values, land values, and human values. In all aspects of his work, he contends with the notion of Black space as a formal exercise - one defined by collective desire, artistic agency, and the tactics of a pragmatist. Through the expansiveness of his approach as a thinker, maker, and builder, Gates extends the life of disappearing and bygone histories, places, and cultural traditions.

Gates has exhibited and performed at the Albuquerque Foundation, Sintra, Portugal (2024); The LUMA Foundation, Arles, France (2023, 2024); The New Museum, New York, (2022); The Aichi Triennial, Tokoname (2022); The Serpentine Pavilion, London (2022); The Victoria and Albert Museum, London, UK (2021); Whitechapel Gallery, London, UK (2013 and 2021); Tate Liverpool, UK (2020); Haus der Kunst, Munich (2020); Walker Art Center, Minneapolis (2019); Palais de Tokyo Paris, France (2019); Sprengel Museum Hannover, Germany (2018); Kunstmuseum Basel, Switzerland (2018); National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C. (2017); Art Gallery of Ontario, Canada (2016); Fondazione Prada, Milan, Italy (2016); Kunsthaus Bregenz, Austria (2016); Punta della Dogana, Venice, Italy (2013); and dOCUMENTA (13), Kassel, Germany (2012).

Gates is a professor at the University of Chicago in the Department of Visual Arts and the College. He is the recipient of numerous awards and honorary degrees including the Guggenheim Fellowship (2025); Isamu Noguchi Award (2023); National Buildings Museum Vincent Scully Prize (2023); Frederick Kiesler Prize for Architecture and the Arts (2022); an Honorary Fellowship from the Royal Institute of British Architects (2021); the World Economic Forum Crystal Award (2020); J.C. Nichols Prize for Visionaries in Urban Development (2018); Nasher Sculpture Prize (2018); Sprengel Museum Kurt Schwitters Prize (2017); and Artes Mundi 6 Prize (2015).

theastergates.com

About the Smart Museum of Art

The Smart Museum of Art at the University of Chicago is a site for rigorous inquiry and exchange that encourages the examination of complex issues through the lens of art objects and artistic practice. Through strong community and scholarly partnerships, the Museum incorporates diverse ideas, identities, and experiences into its exhibitions and collections, academic initiatives, and public programming. Admission is always free.

smartmuseum.uchicago.edu

About Northern Trust

Northern Trust, presenting sponsor of *Theaster Gates: Unto Thee*, has a longstanding commitment to enriching communities through arts, culture, and philanthropy dating back to its founding in Chicago in 1889. Over the past decade, Northern Trust employees have volunteered over one million hours in community service, and the firm has donated more than \$240 million to charitable causes worldwide — approximately \$85 million of which has been designated to arts and cultural institutions, exhibitions, and education. Through the Northern Trust Foundation, the firm supports 16- to 24-year-olds from Chicago's South and West sides in the areas of food security, affordable housing, accessible healthcare, and quality education.

Northern Trust Corporation (Nasdaq: NTRS) is a leading provider of wealth management, asset servicing, asset management and banking to corporations, institutions, affluent families and individuals. Founded in Chicago in 1889, Northern Trust has a global presence with offices in 24 U.S. states and Washington, D.C., and across 22 locations in Canada, Europe, the Middle East and the Asia-Pacific region. As of March 31, 2025, Northern Trust had assets under custody/administration of US\$16.9 trillion, and assets under management of US\$1.6 trillion. For more than 135 years, Northern Trust has earned distinction as an industry leader for exceptional service, financial expertise, integrity and innovation.

northerntrust.com

About the Terra Foundation

The Terra Foundation for American Art, established in 1978 and having offices in Chicago and Paris, supports organizations and individuals locally and globally with the aim of fostering intercultural dialogues and encouraging transformative practices that expand narratives of American art, through the foundation's grant program, collection, and initiatives.

terraamericanart.org

IMAGE CREDIT

Theaster Gates: Assembly Hall, September 5, 2019 through January 12, 2020, Target Gallery. Photo by Bobby Rogers for Walker Art Center, Minneapolis.