

Kunsthaus Bregenz

Karl-Tizian-Platz | Postfach 45 | 6901 Bregenz

Telefon +43-5574-485 94-0 | Fax 485 94-408

kub@kunsthhaus-bregenz.at | www.kunsthhaus-bregenz.at

Austria



KUB 2016.02 | Press Release

Theaster Gates

Black Archive

23 | 04 - 26 | 06 | 2016

Press Conference

Thursday, April 21, 2016, 11 a.m.

Opening Reception

Friday, April 22, 2016, 7 p.m.

Press photos per download

www.kunsthhaus-bregenz.at

“For as long as I can remember the everyday things of black people have had deep resonance for me. Looking at the collections of dresses in my mother’s closet, my father’s Florsheim shoes, my best friend’s collection of ski gear, my sister’s knives—all these things form my deep understanding of the importance of everyday things. Things that are special or things that are made special because we sharpen them, we shine them, we wrap them in plastic, we care for them, despite their ordinariness. This show for me, and this moment in my career, is about teasing out these moments that allow black things their rightful place in the world. I am honored that people would trust me, not only with their objects, but with the decades of gathering, deep contemplation, and time. It’s from this place of thankfulness and reverence that I start a more critical examination of how the world sees blackness and, by extension, how the world sees me.” Theaster Gates



The exhibition at Kunsthhaus Bregenz is Theaster Gates’ first institutional solo exhibition in Europe. For several years he has been acquiring historical figures that depict Afro-Americans in a stereotypical manner. This collection of so-called “Negrobilia” portrays devoted servants, friendly mamas, and dancing slaves; with protruding lips, curly hair, and ample behinds. Gates is concerned with the gaze, together with projected and perceived identity. “For me, the collection serves as a reminder of a history and a catalyst for ongoing examination.”

A small baby doll too belongs to this collection which was begun by Edward J. Williams thirty years ago and later acquired by Theaster Gates, to remove the objects from public visibility and further circulation. This neckless figure, only a few centimeters high, is on display at Kunsthhaus Bregenz as a hugely oversized work. The head, re-carved and painted black, lies on its cheek on a carpet covering the entire floor that has adopted the pattern of the embroidery. The original is in fact a pincushion. The pearls and gathered yellow ribbons have also been copied from the humiliatingly mawkish figure. Additionally a video of a film from 1935 featuring Shirley Temple that Gates has re-edited, is being screened. The curly blonde haired child star received the Juvenile Award, an Oscar for child actors, at the age of six. In a famous scene from the film *The Littlest Rebel*, Uncle Billy, played by the black actor Bill “Bojangles” Robinson, dances on a flight of stairs, the white girl imitating his virtuoso footsteps. In another one they both tap dance on the street to earn money. The scenes are repeatedly interrupted by blackouts. It is an approach to questions of what being black means and the forms and associations that have been attributed and continue to be attributed to it by whites.

On the first floor Gates is showing a series of tar works incorporating unworked roofing materials. Theaster Gates has produced the majority of the works on display, specifically for the KUB exhibition and on site in Vorarlberg with the assistance of Tectum GmbH in Hohenems. The viscous material runs turgidly across their supports. Gates regards these works as “paintings about black people.” The images appear as gloomy icons and dark accusations. Liquid tar adheres the sometimes bulky forms to the support, the viscous mass oozing from the seams. A structure of parallel forms emerges. Aluminum foil and rubber sheeting are materials also used in roofing. They serve both as sealing and to protect against wind, weather, and heat. A number of small pictures from this series were also produced in Hohenems. These consist of squares coated with several layers of rubber and tar. The elastic material sometimes stretching beyond the picture’s limits, with traces of working, drips, rivulets, glued and abraded areas remaining visible. One of the collages shows the cover of *Ebony* magazine, likewise from Gates’ collection, a document of Afro-American life during the 1970s and 1980s.



An important aspect of Theaster Gates’ work is the conservation, transformation, and archiving of objects. As part of the exhibition historic issues of the Afro-American magazines *Ebony* and *Jet* will be bound live at the Kunsthaus Bregenz to become books, in collaboration with the Vorarlberg bookbinders Otto Hofer and Manfred Keckeisen. An a cappella concert by the artist at an event on April 23 at 2 p.m. will initiate the process. The murmuring bookbinders commenting on their work will be accompanied by a singing Gates.

On the second floor Theaster Gates has arranged sets of *Jet* magazines chronologically bound in various colors, into large squares. This is a series of works that has also been created in Bregenz. *Jet* magazines are small format magazines, a variant of *Readers Digest* for black readers. They provide a counter-image to the humiliating figures and portrayals of a culture and media industry dominated by whites. Gates collects them and has them bound in order to conserve them. Each color corresponds to a decade. The idea of arranging the books in reference to Josef Albers’ series of paintings *Homage to the Square* was one which developed spontaneously in Bregenz. Albers was a Bauhaus student, forced to flee in 1933 to the USA, becoming one of the most influential teachers at Black Mountain College.

In addition, a statue of St. Lawrence is on display on the second floor. The figure was rescued from an abandoned church, located next to Gates’ studio in Chicago.

Dancing Minstrel on the ground floor is a racist figure originating from 19th century burlesque revues. Gates has enlarged his own version to more than four meters high. The figure was fabricated by the Bregenz Forest woodcarver Wendelin Hammerer. It dangles from the ceiling. In order to see this interactive sculpture moving and dancing, the visitors themselves have to dance, setting the spring that balances it in motion. As a result both viewers and dancers find themselves on display in the role of an embarrassing and ridiculous idol.

Once more Theaster Gates succeeds in transporting a centuries long American subject into issues currently relevant to Europe.





Theaster Gates was born in 1973 in Chicago, where he lives and works. He has exhibited widely, including group shows such as *Saltwater*, 14th Istanbul Biennial (2015), the Whitney Biennial, New York (2010), dOCUMENTA (13), Kassel (2012), *The Spirit of Utopia* at the Whitechapel, London (2013), and Studio Museum's *When Stars Collide* in New York (2014). In 2015 he was a participant in the Venice Biennale. Major solo exhibitions include *To Speculate Darkly: Theaster Gates and Dave, the Slave Potter* at Milwaukee Art Museum (2010), *Theaster Gates: The Listening Room* at Seattle Art Museum (2011/2012), and *Theaster Gates: 13th Ballad* at MCA Chicago (2013), as well as *The Black Monastic* residency at Museu Serralves, Porto (2014).

In 2013, Gates was awarded the inaugural Vera List Center Prize for Art and Politics, and in 2015 he won the Artes Mundi 6 Prize. Gates is also the founder of the non-profit Rebuild Foundation.

Since 2011 he has been the Director of Arts and Public Life at the University of Chicago and has been awarded an honorary doctorate by the San Francisco Art Institute.



The transformation of everyday and urban detritus is one of Theaster Gates' fundamental artistic strategies, one lending it a new utility as art. It is an approach that the works, some of which have been especially created for Kunsthaus Bregenz, encompassing sculptures and what are often large-scale installations, also adhere to. For the first time, elements of a collection that Edward J. Williams had assembled over many years and which Gate's has titled "Negrobilia," will be going on public display. The prominent banker's aim was to remove these objects from the market and thus from any obvious visibility. Gates' multilayered *Black Archive* and its critical engagement with social as well as political issues are addressed in the contribution by Romi Crawford. Thomas D. Trummer focuses on expounding Theaster Gates' artistic concept underlying the exhibition in Bregenz. In addition, the artist-authored catalogue essay enables him to provide wide-ranging insights into his own artistic practice.

Theaster Gates

Black Archive

Published by Kunsthaus Bregenz, Thomas D. Trummer;
with contributions by Theaster Gates, Romi Crawford, and
Thomas D. Trummer

Graphic Design: Kühle und Mozer, Cologne

German | English

approx. 328 pages, 24.5 x 30.5 cm, hardcover

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46 Euros

A limited edition piece of work will also be published to
accompany the exhibition.

KUB Online-Shop

www.kunsthhaus-bregenz.at

KUB Artist's Edition

Theaster Gates

Tar Baby



Exclusive special editions for Kunsthaus Bregenz are a result of close collaboration with artists and their production processes.

A work from the exhibition Black Archive provided the inspiration for the locally fabricated artist's edition that Theater Gates has created for Kunsthaus Bregenz. The child's head carved from basswood alludes to the motif of the lying head on the Kunsthaus' third floor. Black and somber, coated with tar, the child's head is an almost physical embodiment of the suggestive power of the color black, becoming an emblem for the realms of association it evokes.

Theaster Gates

Tar Baby, 2016

basswood, tar

20 x 22 cm, approx. 3 kg

limited edition of 25 copies +

5 A.P., signed and numbered;

Price on request

plus postage and packing costs, and custom duties

Contact

Caroline Schneider-Dürr

c.schneider@kunsthau-bregenz.at

Telephone +43-5574-485 94-444

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Austria



Upcoming

KUB Billboards | KUB Projects

KUB Billboards

Feminist Land Art Retreat

20 | 05 – 26 | 07 | 2016

Seestraße Bregenz

Opening and performance

Thursday, May 19, 2016, 7 p.m.

Press preview

Wednesday, May 18, 2016, 11 a.m.

KUB Projects

Gaylen Gerber & Studio for Propositional Cinema Exhibition

23 | 06 – 26 | 06 | 2016

Curator

Eva Birkenstock

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Kunsthaus Bregenz would like to thank its partners for their generous financial support and the cultural commitment that goes along with it.



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Kunsthhaus Bregenz

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Thomas D. Trummer

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Curator

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Curator KUB Billboards | KUB Projects

Eva Birkenstock

Marketing | Sponsorship

Birgit Albers | ext. -413

b.albers@kunsthhaus-bregenz.at

Press | Online media

Martina Feurstein | ext. -410

m.feurstein@kunsthhaus-bregenz.at

Art Education

Kirsten Helfrich | ext.-417

k.helfrich@kunsthhaus-bregenz.at

Publications | Artist's Editions

Katrin Wiethege | ext.-411

k.wiethege@kunsthhaus-bregenz.at

Sales Editions

Caroline Schneider-Dürr | ext.-444

c.schneider@kunsthhaus-bregenz.at

Hours

Tuesday to Sunday 10 a.m. – 6 p.m.

Thursday 10 a.m. – 8 p.m.

Ticket Office ext. -433