

The CHICAGO SCHOOL

HOW *the CITY'S reigning cadre of ARTISTS, GALLERISTS, CURATORS, and COMMUNITY BUILDERS has sidestepped ART-WORLD clichés and created a STYLE all its OWN*

Story by STEPHEN MOOALLEM

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Theaster Gates has been thinking about monuments. “Young Lords and Their Traces,” his new survey at New York’s New Museum, is all about the way objects carry memories. It’s a familiar theme in Gates’s work, which often highlights the labor, craft, and life in reclaimed materials, like discarded floorboards or decommissioned fire hoses. The recent losses of some people who were important to him in different ways—like his former organ teacher and friend Alvin’s mother, Christine Carter, and University of Chicago film scholar Robert Bird—were weighing on him. So he decided to turn the entire show—a collection of sculptures, ceramics, paintings, repurposed items, and mixed-media works—into a memorial. “I used to think that monuments were about statues of old guys,” Gates says. “When I was doing my master’s thesis, I wrote about a synagogue on the West Side of Chicago that had been transformed into a Baptist church, a flea market, and a synagogue again over 80 years. The synagogue is a monument. It is a testament to the truth of many accumulated lives.”

Gates may well have been describing Chicago itself, a city with a rich cultural heritage—particularly when it comes to work made by artists of color. Chicago was home to a mid-20th-century literary renaissance; an incubator for blues, jazz, and house music; the land of Archibald Motley and Richard Wright, of Lorraine Hansberry and Gwendolyn Brooks. It was the birthplace of modern sociology and advertising, a locus of the Great Migration. It is a city that was razed by a fire and rebuilt as a forest of skyscrapers. It is also one that has been shaped by decades of segregation and systemic racism, which were not just the results of public policy, urban planning, and discriminatory real estate practices but the very aim of them. As Mies van der Rohe rose in Lakeview and Lincoln Park, neighborhoods on the South and West Sides were decimated by poverty, crumbling infrastructure, school closures, violence, and the exploitation and willful neglect of developers and public officials.

Some, though, like Hansberry and Brooks, believed that artists could help transform those communities. In 1940, the writer and activist Margaret Taylor Burroughs helped establish the South Side Community Art Center as a space for Black artists to create and commune. She and her husband Charles Burroughs, a poet, held salons in their Bronzeville home. In 1961, they founded the DuSable Museum (then the Ebony Museum) in their living room.

Gates, who grew up in East Garfield Park, bought his first

building on the South Side in 2006 on Dorchester Avenue—a former candy store he purchased with a loan and a subprime mortgage. Since then, he has used his own increasing stature as an artist to revitalize the area, undertaking projects through his Rebuild Foundation like the Stony Island Arts Bank, an exhibition and performance venue housed in a neoclassical structure that was abandoned for 30 years. He recalls going to the South Side Community Art Center as a young ceramicist in the early 1990s. “I remember cleaning the basement, setting up a potter’s wheel, and wanting to continue to bring energy to that space,” Gates says.

If there is a great creative tradition in Chicago, it is in that unerring sense of potential and place. It’s in the work today of artists like Gates and Nick Cave, who have cultivated practices and spaces that are a part of the neighborhoods that surround them. It’s in the plethora of public-art projects, like Kerry James Marshall’s mural at the Chicago Cultural Center honoring 20 women who helped shape Chicago’s creative landscape. It’s in the constellation of venues to see and exhibit art, which is vast and varied: from mainstays Gray, Kavi Gupta, and Rhona Hoffman; to independents Mariane Ibrahim, Monique Meloche, Patron, Document, Regards, Volume, Corbett vs. Dempsey, Stephen Daiter, and FLXST Contemporary; to nonprofits 3Arts, Art on theMART Foundation, Chicago Artists Coalition, ThreeWalls, Woman Made Gallery, the Arts Club of Chicago, and the Hyde Park Art Center; to artist-run spaces like Prairie. Even world-class museums, like the Art Institute of Chicago and the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, feel intimate and local, with robust slates of public programming and shows that reflect the changing face of the city, which has a growing Latin population. Among them: MCA Chicago’s new exhibition “Forecast Form,” on the art of the Caribbean diaspora. And it’s in Jackson Park, on the South Side, where the Obama Presidential Center broke ground in 2021 not far from where Michelle Obama spent her formative years and former president Barack Obama got his start as an organizer.

What’s happening in Chicago isn’t a scene. It’s also not being driven by the art market, which continues to maintain its pieds-à-terre in New York and Los Angeles. But it is, in many ways, a series of success stories that have helped create an extraordinary creative ecology and network of opportunity for artists and the communities that spawn them. Chicago is that kind of town. **HB**

THEASTER GATES

Gates, who has degrees in art, ceramics, religion, and urban planning, has helped transform the South Side through his work with his Rebuild Foundation.

“The CONTRIBUTIONS of GWENDOLYN BROOKS, MARGARET TAYLOR BURROUGHS, and LORRAINE HANSBERRY can’t be overstated.... They INVESTED deeply in the COMMUNITIES that they were a part of.”

ARTWORK: THEASTER GATES, A GAME OF MY OWN, 2017, WOOD, PAINT, BLACK STAIN, ALABAMA BALL CLAY



Shirt, MAISON MARGIELA.
Jeans, PRADA. Boots, his own.

CANDIDA ALVAREZ

Alvarez's paintings draw on history, memory, and her own Puerto Rican heritage. Her work is a part of two new exhibitions, "Forecast Form" at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago and "no existe un mundo poshuracán: Puerto Rican Art in the Wake of Hurricane Maria" at New York's Whitney Museum of American Art.

"There are a lot of GATHERINGS here, like a FAMILY. To have these amazing CREATIVE people surrounding you and being in CONVERSATION with you is a GIFT."

This page: Dress, SIMONE ROCHA. Earrings, TEN THOUSAND THINGS. Opposite page: Bar jacket, blouse, and pants, DIOR. Ring, CARTIER.

THIS PAGE, ARTWORK: PATRICK EUGÈNE, SEASONS CHANGE, 2021, COURTESY MARIANE IBRAHIM, CHICAGO AND PARIS; OPPOSITE PAGE, ARTWORK: CANDIDA ALVAREZ, ARE YOU LISTENING TO THIS?, 2022, ACRYLIC ON LINEN, METALLIC MARKER, LIQUID GLITTER, 84 x 72 IN (213.4 x 182.9 CM), COURTESY THE ARTIST AND MONIQUE MELOCHE GALLERY, CHICAGO

MARIANE IBRAHIM

The Somali-French gallerist, who relocated from Seattle to Chicago in 2019, has helped give a platform to international artists of the African diaspora, such as Amoako Bofo and Chicago-based Carmen Neely.



"PRESENTING a program focused on SOCIAL CHANGE and bringing ATTENTION to artists of AFRICAN descent—it's not something *trendy* in CHICAGO. It has existed here for a long TIME."

AMANDA WILLIAMS

Williams, a South Side native, explores race, space, value, and color in her work, which includes interventions, installations, paintings, and mixed-media projects. In October, she was awarded a MacArthur "Genius" grant.



"MARGARET TAYLOR BURROUGHS was PIVOTAL for me. She was an artist, an activist, an institution builder, a CIVIC LEADER. She told me and EVERY other CHILD that they were an ARTIST."

*Dress, PROENZA SCHOULER.
Ear climbers, medallion, cuffs,
and ring, ALMASIKA.*

NICK CAVE

Cave's deeply personal Soundsuits, which he began creating in 1992 as a response to the police beating of Rodney King, are part of a new retrospective, "Forothermore," at New York's Guggenheim Museum.



FOLLOWING SPREAD, ARTWORK: BETHANY COLLINS, SHE FLUNG THE ROSES IN THE AIR, 2022, ROSE BALLAD SERIES, CHARCOAL AND GRAPHITE ON PAPER, 26 1/4 x 14 1/2 IN EACH; AHI MAY THE RED ROSE LIVE ALWAY, 2022, ROSE BALLAD SERIES, CHARCOAL AND GRAPHITE ON PAPER, 26 1/4 x 14 1/2 IN EACH; COURTESY THE ARTIST AND PATRON GALLERY, CHICAGO

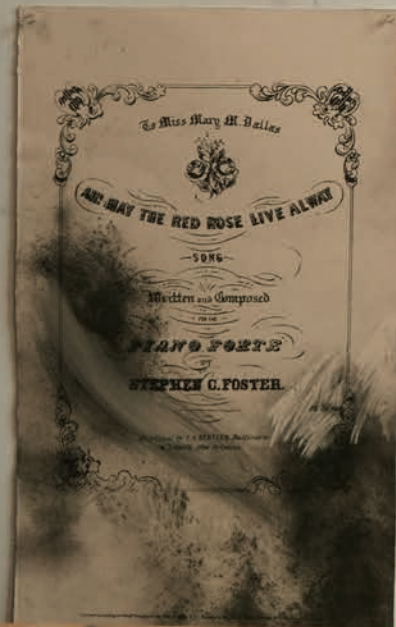
"When I ARRIVED here, RODNEY KING happened. I was feeling LOST and disconcerted about my IDENTITY and PLACE in the world. I knew no one here, but it gave me this space of reflection. It was the beginning of the SOUNDSUITS."

Clothing and boots, his own.

BETHANY COLLINS

The Alabama-born Collins examines the interrelationships between race, identity, and language in her practice. Her latest series involves working with archival sheet music from early American songs, where the lyrics were rewritten to support different social and political causes.

“CHICAGO was one of the main TRIBUTARIES out of the SOUTH during the GREAT MIGRATION, so on the SOUTH SIDE, it still has these ECHOES of HOME for me.”



LOUISE BERNARD

The director of the forthcoming Museum at the Obama Presidential Center, Bernard is overseeing a range of arts programming in the complex, which will include a branch of the Chicago Public Library, with a new sculpture by local legend Richard Hunt—the first of six planned art commissions on the campus.



“[We want to create] a CIVIC COMMONS, placing at the heart of it the idea of civil DISCOURSE, of dialogue across difference, and an UNDERSTANDING of how the ARTS can uplift people and inspire them to IMAGINE the CHANGE they can create in their own COMMUNITIES.”

This page: Knit, turtleneck, and skirt, PRADA. Earrings, CARTIER. Opposite page: Jacket, shirt, and pants, POLO RALPH LAUREN. Accessories, his own.

DAWOUD BEY

In the tradition of photographers like Gordon Parks and Roy DeCarava, Bey has captured the lives and landscapes of an oft-underrepresented side of the American story in groundbreaking projects like “Harlem, U.S.A.” (1975–1979) and “Night Coming Tenderly, Black” (2017).



“People in the ART and CULTURE COMMUNITY here seem to understand that we are all part of one ECOSYSTEM and that we all thrive when we ENCOURAGE and SUPPORT each other.”

OPPOSITE PAGE, ARTWORK: DAWOUD BEY, A COUPLE IN PROSPECT PARK, 1990, ARCHIVAL PIGMENT PRINT, 49 1/4 x 40 1/4 x 2 IN FRAME, © DAWOUD BEY, COURTESY SEAN KELLY, NEW YORK

DENISE GARDNER

A longtime member of the Art Institute of Chicago community, Gardner was named chair of the museum's board of trustees in 2021. She and her husband are also active collectors, with a focus on works by artists of the African diaspora.

"I owe deep GRATITUDE to JETTA JONES. She was the museum's FIRST Black female TRUSTEE. Twenty-eight years ago, she INVITED me to VOLUNTEER, which began my JOURNEY."



Jacket, blouse, and trousers, GIORGIO ARMANI. Earring, REPOSSI. Elsa Peretti ring, TIFFANY & CO. Pumps, MANOLO BLAHNIK.

Shirt, MAISON MARGIELA. Jeans, PRADA.
Boots, his own.

HAIR AND MAKEUP: ALISA RADOI; HAIR AND MAKEUP FOR DENISE GARDNER: LIBBY KNAPP; PRODUCTION: TESSA STÉELE. SEE THE DIRECTORY FOR SHOPPING DETAILS.



THIS PAGE, ARTWORK: THEASTER GATES AND A PAINTING OF A BLACK JESUS IN CHICAGO; OPPOSITE PAGE, ARTWORK: KERRY JAMES MARSHALL, AFRICA RESTORED (CHERYL AS CLEOPATRA), 2003, GIFT OF SUSAN AND LEWIS MANILOV, COURTESY ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO