

Chicago Art Magazine

Theaster Gates Speculates Darkly

By Chicago Art Magazine
March 20, 2010

Chicago performance artist and potter Theaster Gates Jr. is going up the road to the Milwaukee Art Museum to create a spectacular installation elaborating on a relationship with Dave Drake, an enslaved African-American potter and poet from antebellum South Carolina. While the whole concept for the exhibit began with a massive Dave Drake pot inscribed with one of the potter's couplets, it has grown into a critical conversation on the role of craft, labor and race in America.

The artist will transform the Milwaukee Art Museum's Decorative Arts Gallery into a built environment comprised, among other things, of a glass lantern slide tunnel, ceramic speakers, video, and vessels created by Theaster Gates Jr. "Race, craft and labor are at the center of my work on Dave the Potter," says the artist. Recently selected to participate in the 2010 Whitney Biennial, Gates has earned national acclaim for his intelligent commentaries on race, the city, and the museum. "As the show was starting in Wisconsin, I wanted Dave's story to engage both craftsmen and the African-American community of Milwaukee.

To do this, I worked closely with the Kohler Manufacturing Company and several African-American churches—with Greater New Birth Church being our most amazing collaborator. The ambition of *To Speculate Darkly* is twofold: to amplify the life and work of Dave the Potter and to ask new questions about the 'function' of craft objects in contemporary art practice."

The artist plans on filling the museum's atrium with Dave's words on April 16th, opening night. A two hundred-person choir composed of both local Milwaukeeans and Chicagoans will perform Dave's couplets as arranged to music by the artist. This exhibition provides an opportunity to not only engage in an important conversation, but also bring diverse groups of people together to share in a common cultural experience.