

# THEASTER GATES' 'THE BLACK IMAGE CORPORATION'

*Sculptor, painter, urban planner, archivist, musician, potter, filmmaker, activist – Theaster Gates' synthesis of diverse and ambitiously wide-ranging media is driven by his single-minded agenda of celebrating black history and enriching communities with platforms for collective participation. From urban regeneration projects, reclaiming condemned buildings in his native South Side of Chicago, to tar paintings charged with the social history of manual labour, performing Gospel music worldwide with his Black Monks of Mississippi or collating immense archives of black Americana, Gates' work is grounded in a mission to preserve, transform and re-examine what has been side-lined or forgotten.*



*Photo by Isaac Sutton, 1969*

For his most recent exhibition, *The Black Image Corporation*, at Fondazione Prada in Milan, Gates focuses on the nuanced aesthetic of African American identity as shaped by the Johnson Publishing Corporation (JPC). Gates acquired JPC’s entire archive of *Ebony* and *Jet* magazine (published since 1945 and 1951 respectively), and for this exhibition selects images of black women by two of their most important photographers, Moneta Sleet Jr. and Isaac Sutton. Celebrating power and beauty, these images challenge stereotypical representation and reinstate cultural legacy. The gallery features a large wooden structure, designed by Gates, that allows visitors to pull out framed images and display them in the space, thereby underscoring the participatory dimension to Gates’ practice.

The exhibition is reflective of Gates’ imaginative use of material culture as an incubator of collective memory and potential agent for change. He exposes the life of an object, forensically uncovers its history, emotions and value in a way that urgently questions how we ascribe meaning to our lives.

**FINN BLYTHE** What initially drew you to the JPC archives?

**THEASTER GATES** I’ve been working with Linda Johnson Rice [chairman and CEO] for about two-and-a-half, three years now, trying to help her make decisions or being a repository for some of the things from JPC. The company had sold its building and so it felt like rather than talking generically about the archives I would have a more ambitious, direct engagement by getting inside the archive and in a way, re-inventing Johnson Publishing into a new image corporation that allowed me to talk about these old photos in a new way. It was a chance to both pay homage to this amazing company legacy but also within my own artistic practice, start to demonstrate how and what archives could do.

**FINN** It’s not the first time you’ve worked with the *Ebony* archive. It previously appeared in your Bregenz show but as part of your tar paintings. I was curious as to how that altered your reading of the images?

**THEASTER** Yes, so in past projects, especially with *Black Archives* in Bregenz, I was acknowledging the fact that this collection existed. It was usually the front cover of a page or one page in the book, but in this case it’s the first chance to actually show images of black people and especially black women. It celebrates them as the core subject of the work

and then for me, also starts to demonstrate a technical prowess around looking at photographs, making silk screens, and making decisions about how screens are made, so that we could amplify these images in news ways.

**FINN** You share a multifaceted relationship with archives, because in one sense there is an inherent value to their material culture, but on the other you give them a new agency.

**THEASTER** Yes, I mean, if we would’ve imagined it as a purely conceptual practice, the fact that it’s about these images would be interesting in itself. Another part has to do with an artist’s ability to conjure power by reflecting on these images. But the conceptual work is: is there any value in an image from 1956 being seen today in Milan? What is the value of a black woman being present in an exhibition in a museum in Basel, Switzerland? And to make those images feel at home as much on the South Side of Chicago as they would be in Switzerland, that felt like the task: how do I do the translation work that helps new audiences see these images and see black women for the first time in ways that they’ve never seen them before, you know? Wearing Italian dresses, wearing French dresses. Normally when you look at black women from the 1960s, you’re looking at them in a civil rights march or you’re looking at them struggling, you never hear the story that there were extremely successful black men and women doing their thing in the 1960s. So I wanted to pivot some of the narrative within the black American canon – you think about the 20s, you think about slavery, you think about civil rights, you think about affirmative action, you think about Jim Crow or you think about James Brown, but there are all these other moments that are valuable and everyday.

**FINN** And of course the archive differs significantly from the archive of racially insensitive black iconography you bought from life-long Chicago resident and former banker Ed Williams, but again, if you’re talking about the everyday then you have to include what you referred to as the ‘negrobilia’, which *was* an everyday for many people.

**THEASTER** That’s right. In some ways we could say the work of John Johnson [founder, Johnson Publishing Company] begins when negrobilia ends. He tried to say these are not the only images of black people that we should be looking at and it doesn’t stop with mammies and sambos and watermelon. I always regard Ed Williams and John Johnson as polar ends of a spectrum.

**THEASTER  
GATES**



*Photo by Moneta Sleet Jr, undated*

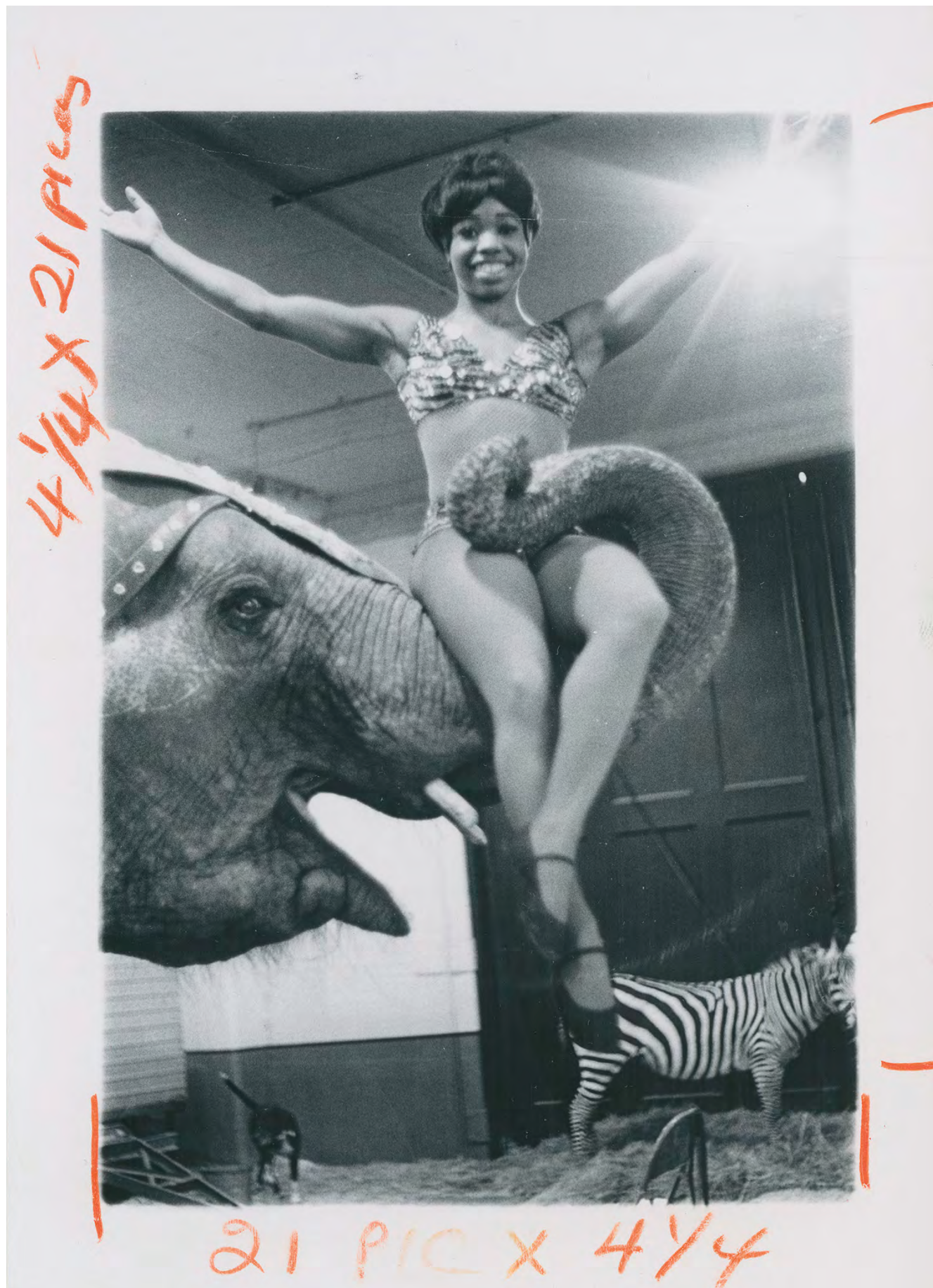


Photo by Isaac Sutton, 1967

## THEASTER GATES

Those two collections next to each other are demonstrating the worst of the American imagination around the black image and in some ways the most optimistic, most ambitious notions of blackness in the United States. It's sweet.

**FINN** It's interesting that Ed Williams was looking to take these objects out of circulation yet you were looking to return them, under a completely different guise of course. But the question of historical censorship, airbrushing history, is one we're increasingly faced with. I know in the States the subject of confederate statues is extremely contentious, and I was just interested to hear your thoughts on that.

**THEASTER** I did an exhibition at White Cube a few years ago called, *My Labor Is My Protest*.

**FINN** I saw it.

**THEASTER** What I realised was that in my life and in my practice, I have very little interest in contesting other peoples' freedom, because I would rather spend that energy demonstrating other options or just making other truths relevant. So as much as a person wants to honour the confederacy, I want to honour black women, and it's not to say I don't care about these colonial monuments, it's only to say that in the battle that I have to fight, I'd rather use my energy fighting battles with my own images, you know what I mean?

**FINN** Yeah, it's easy to be drawn into that debate so I completely respect your decision to apply your energy to something that moves the conversation on.

**THEASTER** And in terms of understanding monumentality and the monument, how much better can it get than the oldest museum in the world having the first black solo exhibition of an artist, being about black women? That feels like the kind of monument I want to make and the kind of statement I want to make and I need my energy to focus on making sure those images are the best images I can find.

**FINN** It's something I was thinking about because of your *Sanctum* piece in Bristol [Gates' first UK installation in Temple Church, Bristol, 2014]. Half the city is built by [George Alfred] Wills, who made his money from the slave and tobacco trade, but his name is still visible throughout Bristol.

**THEASTER** Oh yeah, the floorboards of *Sanctum* were the floorboards from one of his tobacco factories. It's like the truth of commerce and slavery, sometimes it's visible sometimes it's not, but I want to use the very

floorboards of racialised capitalism and slave exploitation to create new sacred spaces for the city of Bristol, and those are the shifts, those are the dreams that I want to commit to. I can't change the racialised past and white people can't change it, but we sure as hell can do things that conceptually move things forward and maybe even in practical ways move things forward.

**FINN** Well since we're here, geographically at least, I thought we could talk a little more about *Sanctum* – 24 days of 24 hour music, sound and performed by the people of Bristol. I attended the performance lecture you gave as part of the project and there was one particular moment where you asked the audience whether anyone knew any hymns. We were all being very English but then sure enough someone from the upper rafters began singing *Amazing Grace* and before you knew what was happening, this secular audience burst into song. It just so beautifully captured your faith in the collective and how important that is to your work.

**THEASTER** Yeah I couldn't have gone in and in minute one say, "Would you guys sing me a song?" Someone has to initiate the energy and I think that's the thing I've learned over time. I wouldn't have been comfortable even arriving at that statement had I not been already sweating and crying and completely open.

**FINN** Well it's the idea of reciprocity, as you say you opened yourself up to us and we felt that and that was our response, that was us giving back, it's an exchange.

**THEASTER** But it's reasonable that people could have refused, but I would have given none the less. And so when you look at the [Stoney Island] Arts Bank or you look at the projects in Chicago, those projects are about what happens when one chooses to give in the absence of a known reciprocity. I think reciprocity makes it easy, like, "OK, I'll give something, you give something", but in the absence of known reciprocity – that's a gift.

**FINN** Alturism.

**THEASTER** Well yeah, it's a choice to give, and in the end, if nobody came to the Arts Bank, I still get to enjoy it, so it does something for me. But man, it also means that our local government, our city government, our national government, our federal government, Barack himself has come to the bank and said, "This is an important place," you know?

**FINN** What drives you in all your ventures?



Photo by Isaac Sutton, 1969



Photo by Isaac Sutton, undated



Photo by Isaac Sutton, 1965

**THEASTER  
GATES**

**THEASTER** I love sculpture. I think that I’m ultimately just making everyday, it doesn’t matter what kind of making it is, but the making that I’m doing is usually just responding to the things that are right up under my nose, you know? And so I don’t really care what it is. I’m just careful about where I put my nose [laughs]. But one part of it is really just like, I don’t have to go to Syria to find challenging conditions in the world. I can go outside my door and have the same level of deep remorse about the conditions of the world at the same time that I want to make sculpture, so the tension is really between: do I serve the world or do I serve my studio? Most of the time I’m trying to figure out, can I do both?

**FINN** And what about Black Monks of Mississippi [Gates’ five-piece band] – tell me a bit about your musical connection because I know that’s also very deep in your heart.

**THEASTER** Like I say, I only have two things that I can do: I can put things together and I can talk about them. There was a moment when I was studying clay and sculpture and I wanted to say things that I couldn’t say through the clay, and I have to give myself permission to say it through other materials like wood and metal and found objects. There are times when I actually don’t want to make a thing, I want to mourn or I want to weep or I want to have a physical encounter with an audience. So what you saw in Bristol, as I explained there, all of these people have given their hearts and their time and their bodies to make this temple work round the clock, why don’t I do a durational project that honours their duration and just sing all night, you know? So I’m so glad that I have performance and voice in my body as another vehicle for articulating these conceptual ideas. I mean, wow, a church that hasn’t been used as a church in fifty years, in a largely agnostic-at-best community, what happens if I bring the history of churchness back to this church?

**FINN** How significant is religion in your life, because churches are a common theme throughout your work.

**THEASTER** I’m not a religious fanatic, but in the same way, church has the same space that race does, they’re both constructs, they’re as imaginary as they are real, and so I studied and I was church, I ate church, I ate it, it grew me, it’s in my blood and in my...

**FINN** And in your voice.

**THEASTER** Yeah. But right now, I just

think because of my close encounter with religion and spirituality, it gives me some distance from it and art actually helps me look at it with all these different valances. So that even when I’m not operating in space or in race, I have the ability to reflect on those things because of my deep embedded experiences with both. Race is not real and race is real, you know? The race project created by Europeans is fascinating, and there are times where I try to not succumb to the project in the same way that I don’t want to succumb to the project of religion, but I don’t throw out the baby with the bath water. Things I don’t understand I like to dig into, and race and religion are things that feel like, no matter how much I dig, I won’t understand it fully. So I love the idea of questioning space and race by actually practicing neighbourhood transformation. I’m not a do-gooder in my neighbourhood, it feels like a Fluxus act or the Situationists. It’s like I’m interrogating space, and people read it like, “Oh he’s a black artist in a black neighbourhood,” and they automatically assume that I grew up in that neighbourhood and I didn’t, it’s a space practice, right? So it’s like, “Oh, we can’t make affordable artist housing?”, That’s bullshit, this is how you do it. “Oh, we can’t teach an ex-offender how to build with excellence?” Bullshit, this is how you do it. “Oh, we can’t create an export product that makes millions of dollars in a poor neighbourhood?” Bullshit, here it is.

**FINN** So I mean you’re really interrogating standardised conceptions of space.

**THEASTER** Oh yeah, in relationship to what people think the capacities of untrained black people might be, or what has the ability to come out of a certain neighbourhood versus another, how much money we’re willing to invest in people. All that shit is like a philosophical question, it’s just worth unpacking and the best way to unpack it for me is not through some kind of grand standing language, fucking do it, do something.

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