



Print Article



Theaster Gates directs a chorus at the Milwaukee Art Museum



"To Speculate Darkly: Theaster Gates and Dave the Potter" at the Milwaukee Art Museum



Dave the Potter's stoneware vessel in "To Speculate Darkly: Theaster Gates and Dave the Potter" at the Milwaukee Art Museum



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CHICAGO 2010 by Pedro Vélez

Neither fantastic nor forgettable, 2010 was another complacent year in Chicago art. Here is what caught my attention.

Preach, Mr. Gates!

Everyone loves **Theaster Gates**, who seems destined to become Chicago's newest art export. In his short career he has already won more grants than most artists will in a lifetime (**Artadia**, **Joyce**, **Graham Foundation**, **Harpo**). He has performed, lectured or shown in pretty much all the museums in Chicago, including the **Art Institute of Chicago**, the **Smart Museum** and the **Chicago MCA**, and was included in **Francesco Bonami's Whitney Biennial** in New York. I hear he is being groomed to be in the next **Documenta**.

Gates has connections everywhere and seems to know everyone. Any time I mention his name, people praise his charm, eccentricity and magnetism, and note that he likes to "burst into poetry and song." He has studied urban planning and once worked for the transit authority, managing a budget. Today he is the director of arts development at none other than the **University of Chicago**.

But those same people also admit that Gates' specialty is not so much making art himself as it is the art of collaboration. He's an impresario. Last April, he collaborated with a dead artisan to mount "To Speculate Darkly: Theaster Gates and Dave the Potter," an exhibition curated by **Ethan Lasser** at the **Milwaukee Art Museum** in close association with the **Chipstone Foundation**.

Here, Gates designed a narrative in homage to **Dave Drake** (also known as Dave the Potter), a literate slave from South Carolina who made stoneware pottery that he adorned with poetic couplets. Today Drake's work is highly valued on the decorative arts market.

To enter the exhibition, visitors passed through a kind of tunnel, whose illuminated ceiling featured images of Asian, Greek and Roman ceramics. Anchoring the main hall like an altar was one of Drake's impressive and beautiful 40-gallon glazed vessels. The couplet he inscribed on it read, "When you fill this jar with Pork or Beef / Scot will be there to get a peace." Surrounding it were a series of less stellar vessels made by Gates, painted gold. Like Drake's, these had quotes, one reading "ship to" in stenciled capital letters.

Gates' further contributions to the installation included a large white bas-relief seal for a fictional organization called "The Association of Named Negro American Potters," ink drawings resembling Japanese calligraphy, a video installation and a mural made of drains and ceramic sinks attached to a wall in a grid. Gates produced this work with the aid of a **Kohler Foundation** grant.

The artist also gathered together singers from Chicago and Milwaukee churches to perform music he wrote in reaction to Dave's couplets. In all, the exhibition felt like a **Werner Herzog** documentary in which poetic liberty and dubious facts are intertwined



"Art Work: A National Conversation about Art, Labor and Economics" at the Miller Gallery, Carnegie Mellon University



Elvira Rodriguez-Ochoa's barricade intervention in Chicago's Pilsen neighborhood



Osvaldo Budet, *Vietnow*, 2010, at the Institute of Puerto Rican Art and Culture



The South Bend Museum of Art



in a personal quest that is ultimately about the director himself as much as his subject.

Gates is not a hardcore activist; he is more of a Relational Esthetics type of guy. He transforms social concerns into viable commodities and investments. He can contextualize his own production in terms of work by others. I'm not sure that Dave, who is six feet under, would have blessed the collaboration. But as long as Gates produces something tangible for minorities, I'm sold on the idea.

Art and activism

Although it was presented as an exhibition at **Gallery 400** at the University of Illinois in Chicago, "Art Work: A National Conversation about Art, Labor and Economics" is in fact a free, portable exhibition in the form of a newspaper (it can be downloaded [here](#)). Its focus is the current recession and the way that it affects studio practice, artists' compensation and artistic property.

Published by the collective **Temporary Services**, the undertaking is heavily influenced by the **Art Workers' Coalition** from the 1970s, and features contributions from **Pulitzer Prize**-winner **Holland Cotter** as well as anonymous artists -- not that it matters, since *Art Work* hopes to overcome parochial boundaries and hierarchical models.

Art and gentrification

During a yuppie art walk in Pilsen -- home to a large number of Hispanics and Latinos -- **Elvia Rodriguez-Ochoa** angered many with a public intervention that appeared to protest using the Mexican image of the golden Aztec sun god as a decoration for city manhole covers. Placing half a dozen official-looking street barricades over these manholes, she confronted pedestrians -- myself included -- with warning signs that read "Please Don't Step on my Culture."

Art and wishful thinking

The **Institute of Puerto Rican Arts and Culture**, located in Humboldt Park, surprised many by showing off **Osvaldo Budet's** hyper-realistic, super glossy and hilariously critical paintings that address issues of colonization and social struggle. Budet, who lives in Berlin, portrays himself as brave journalist in paintings resembling film stills, bearing witness to history in the close company of revolutionaries **Hô Chí Minh** and **Leon Trotsky**.

Art in museums

Believe it or not, the **South Bend Museum of Art** across the state line in Indiana has one of the best exhibition halls in all Chicagoland. Ironically, the facility is housed in a gigantic brick and glass Convention Center, a one-time shopping mall designed by **Philip Johnson**. Overlooking a dirty canal -- the St. Joseph River -- and **Mark di Suvero's** *Keepers of the Faith*, the museum can be incredibly strange and decadent.

There **Will Pergi** dared deploy a magnificent sculptural attack with his exhibition "**Trivialities of Deportment**." The central piece in the show was a monumental balancing act -- a scaffolding structure made in braced, warped and twisted wood that reminded me of the skeleton of a rollercoaster ride.

Back downtown, at the **Chicago MCA**, **Carrie Gundersdorf** -- one of the city's best painters -- showed her quiet and intricate pastel-colored works. In these paintings, lines, spatial speed and patterns make reference to modernist abstraction, **Kazimir Malevich** and close-ups of the Universe.

Gallery shows

Will Perlg, *Trivialities of Deportment*, 2010, at the South Bend Museum of Art



Will Perlg at the South Bend Museum of Art



Carrie Gundersdorf at the Chicago MCA



Timothy Bergstrom, *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*, 2010, at HungryMan Gallery



Magalie Guérin at Autumn Space

Timothy Bergstrom impressed many with his sculptural painting of snow cones protruding from a black blanket of melted skulls and mirror at **HungryMan Gallery**.

Also, **Magalie Guérin's** simple and clean Neo-Geo paintings about gymnastics and architecture at **Autumn Space** reminded me of Brazilian master **Tarsila do Amaral**.

Other stand-outs included New York-based **Wendy White** and her domesticated and stylish graffiti at **Andrew Rafacz Gallery**, and **Bernard Williams's** shelving units with abstract figurines and assemblages at **Thomas McCormick Gallery**.

Art by students

Honorable mentions go to **Chris Bradley** and **Matt Nichols**, who stole the show at the **School of the Art Institute's** MFA exhibition. Bradley makes kinetic installations about alcohol and bohemia while Nichols uses text and constructions to convey his neurotic view of life. Over at **UIC** I enjoyed **Tim Nickodemus** high-value paintings of hairy entities that looked like Sasquatch.

Art in mansions

Call it a breakthrough if you will, but young curator **Tang Zehui** convinced a few collectors to do something they're not used to doing in Chicago, and that is to be part of the scene. **Jay Dandy** and **Melissa Weber** accepted Tang's challenge and invited **Madeleine Bailey** to make something in their three-story Hyde Park mansion.

On the third floor, near the bedroom, Bailey installed two blindfolds, grounded to the floor with wire extensions, which visitors would wear in pairs, facing each other. The outcome was a tumbling dance of grabs, a bit of impromptu theater for others in the room contemplating the works by Tom Wesselman and Andy Warhol hanging on the walls. Kind of sexy if you ask me.

Art and Critics

Other cities might complain endlessly about their critics, but in Chicago artist are pampered, receiving as many as three or four reviews for every show they have. You couldn't ask less from a place that boasts teachers like author and theorist **James Elkins**, and **Kathryn Hixson**, the beloved editor of the *New Art Examiner*, who passed away last November.

A few of my favorites are editor **Abraham Ritchie**, who oversees the local edition of the global **Artslant** website, and **Jason Foumberg**, the art coverage in the *New City* weekly newspaper. These two are thoughtful and incisive covering the important news and scandals never touched by the *Chicago Tribune*. As a matter of fact, these are the two journalists Chicago trusts to direct the cultural discussion.

Academic art writing -- criticism, theory and opinion -- is well served in the city. **Whitney Stoepel** and **Ania Szremski** collaborate with **F News Magazine**, the School of Art Institute's in-house publication. Noteworthy Chicago blogs include **Eric Wenzel's Art or Idiocy?** and **Steve Ruiz's Chicago Art Review**. Last but not least is **Kathryn Born**, the mind behind multi-platform **Chicago Art Magazine**, whose current posts include *Art and Food Roundup* and *Get These Mother-fucking Ants Off My Mother-fucking Cross*.

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Wendy White with one of her works at Andrew Rafacz Gallery



Bernard Williams at Thomas McCormick Gallery



Christopher Bradley's kinetic sculpture at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago's MFA exhibition



Matt Nichols, *The Worriers*, 2010, at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago's MFA exhibition



Wearable sculpture by Madeleine Bailey
at Jay Dandy and Melissa Weber's
mansion



Art critics at the Exchequer Pub in
Chicago -- Eric Wenzel, Abraham
Ritchie, Jason Fournberg, Whitney
Stoepel, Ania Szremski and Steve Ruiz



Chicago art critic and teacher Kathryn
Hixson, 1955-2010