



Theaster Gates Spearheads an Artists “Retreat” in Chicago

ARTSY EDITORIAL

SEP 4TH, 2014 2:10 PM

Now in Chicago, a timely and thought-provoking exhibition conceived and organized by Theaster Gates spills across two adjacent spaces on the John Hancock Center’s 38th floor. Titled “Retreat,” this group exhibition is presented by Valerie Carberry Gallery, Richard Gray Gallery, and the Black Artists Retreat.

The Chicago-based artist, whose own work might be classified along the lines of “social practice installation,” has assembled a group of up-and-coming interdisciplinary artists to engage in a form of collaboration, transforming the space of the exhibition into a generous theoretical testing-ground. Across all forms of media, the works Gates has selected consider the notion of “retreat” in physical, psychological, or aesthetic terms.

This unifying sentiment is expressed visually in a variety of ways, although a tone of constraint and an emphasis on the conceptual are consistent throughout. For example, Tony Lewis’ drawings begin with found quotations describing historic or present-day race relations in the United States. First rendering his works in graphite, Lewis breaks down syntactic and typographic structures across an increasingly smudged and worked-upon surface bearing stray pencil marks to leave behind only the faded remains of a linguistic statement—however rational or irrational it might have been (as in *Ilen doe*, 2014). Bethany Collins’ text-based works follow a similar approach in ink, although the artist’s effacement of printed dictionary definitions ultimately reflects on conventionally accepted linguistic tropes. In *Skin, 1965 I* (2014) only the illustrative example phrase “save one’s skin” is still legible. Collins performatively expands this curt command through the related sculptural piece, *Skin, 1965* (2014), in which piled paper scrap and eraser crumbs are piled atop a plinth. The idea of shedding is central to the art of Wilmer Wilson IV, whose improvised garments—used to both protect and shield personal identity—are discarded through durational performances and appear as documentary remnants in *Shed Skin (1 cent, 2 cent, 5 cents)* (2012), stray sections of a suit fashioned from postage

stamps, and *Shed Skin (Notary)* (2012), the same broken-down attire in un-embossed gold foil seals. While Derrick Adams's staged color photographs explore the construction—rather than removal—of various pop-cultural identities (*Crossroads*, 2012 and *In The House*, 2010), for Valerie Piraino, the act of molting, scattering, or casting-off becomes fruitful in studies of organic regeneration, in drawings like *Southern Fruit (Seedingly Abundantly)* and *Southern Fruit (Three is better than two)* (both 2014).

Stay tuned for the final installment of the exhibition: the “living architecture” of Erika Allen and Mitchell Squire, who Gates commissioned to create a special project booth—conceived by the artists as a unique space for respite—for EXPO Chicago 2014, on view September 18th–21st at Navy Pier.

“Retreat” is on view at the John Hancock Center, 38th floor, Chicago, Aug. 22nd–Oct. 4th, 2014.