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Conceptual Artist Theaster Gates’s Favorite Things Celebrate the Artists He Admires

A pair of branding irons, a Kerry James Marshall drawing, and a stencil-cutting machine are among his prized possessions

By Theaster Gates

0 COMMENTS

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“The white porcelain vessel on the left is a Taizo Kuroda creation. He’s one of my favorite Japanese potters, hands down. The clay guy in me loves these delicate and masterfully made forms. The colorful drawing to the right was a gift from the artist Tony Lewis, a sort of salute to our friendship. I keep it in my bedroom.

“To the right is a pair of branding irons. I have a complex relationship with them. The form is so beautiful—the hand-forged metal parts and the hand-carved wood parts appeal to the craftsman in me. But I also understand that these brands are such loaded objects, especially when considering certain histories of slavery and fraternal orders.

“The wooden pouring vessel to the right could have been a beer-making vessel, but I think it was probably just a container for water. Again, I was captured by the craftsmanship, the time necessary to make an elegant utensil. The stoneware teapot above, on the dresser, is by Koichi Ohara. He’s a masterful potter, and he taught me when I was in Tokoname, Japan, in the late ’90s. He’s a friend, a peer and a mentor, one of the guys I look up to in the ceramics field.

“I got the mask to the left at the estate sale for the historian and journalist Lerone Bennett Jr. My team acquired maybe 3,000 objects. That’s a diagraph in the center—it’s basically a stencil maker. They were probably used between the 1910s and 1960s. I have a collection of about 20. I love it because it’s this beautiful object, but it also produces this piece of language.

“Kerry James Marshall did the drawing in the back. I was really impressed with his show at the Met Breuer a couple of years ago, so when I later found myself in London I visited his gallery and asked if there were works available for purchase. Artists sometimes trade, but in this case I didn’t want to trade. I wanted to honor our friendship by purchasing the work. It’s a study for one of his paintings, and it feels like every backyard I know.

“My friend David Schutter painted the large work on the left, an abstraction of a French landscape. The work is both super humble and super ambitious. I ask both Kerry and David hard questions about their practice, when I’m really just fishing for answers to questions I have about my own. They’re my partners in crime. In some way, they keep me going.”

Gates is the 2018 recipient of the Nasher Prize for Sculpture.

—As told to Thomas Gebremedhin