

ART

Creating a Spatial History of Slavery through Abstraction

Allison Meier April 4, 2016



Torkwase Dyson, painting from 'Strange Fruit (Series)', on view in 'Unkeeping' at Eyebeam (photo by Christine Butler)



Torkwase Dyson, painting from 'Strange Fruit (Series)' (click to enlarge) (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

Minimalist abstraction of the 20th century often feels placeless. Tony Smith's angular, inky sculptures could have crawled out of a dimension void of organic life; Mark Rothko's repeating black canvases in a [Houston chapel](#) reflected the space's lack of specific religion. But [Torkwase Dyson's](#) dark, geometric paintings evoke this history of abstraction to retrieve places that have been lost, namely the built environments of slavery and racism.

Auction blocks and lynching sites, as well as two years of research into this history, inspired the paintings and sculptures on view in [Unkeeping](#), organized by Eyebeam in the Industry City Gallery in Sunset Park, Brooklyn. The art may seem a little different from Eyebeam's usual focus on new media, but the paintings are at their core a form of data visualization. Dyson is influenced

by resourceful innovators like [Ida B. Wells](#), whose late 19th-century journalism included mapping lynchings and publications like the "[Lynching Record for 1894](#)" naming the invisible victims. Like Wells, Dyson emphasizes how even simple resources like ink and paper can be as radical a data technology as anything.

“Sometimes people wonder why an art organization focused on technology is supporting an abstract painter, and the short version of it is that we’re trying to redefine technologies,” David Borjon of Eyebeam told Hyperallergic. “When we say technology, we don’t just mean the gadgets, apparatus, and Uber-imitations of Silicon Valley, but skills that people have developed to navigate the world. Eyebeam believes that the most inventive technologies in any society aren’t created by the privileged few, but by people who have skin in the game and are discriminated against. That’s why Eyebeam gave Torkwase a studio for two years and \$60,000.”

As Dyson, an Eyebeam Research Resident, [puts it on her site](#), her work questions “under what conditions can un-keeping a place or thing become a means of developing a deeper understanding of our own genealogy.” In a discussion on April 9, Dyson will discuss the ideas behind *Unkeeping* in a “[Black Spatial Matters](#)” panel with writer and scholar Tony Bogues and architect Mario Gooden.



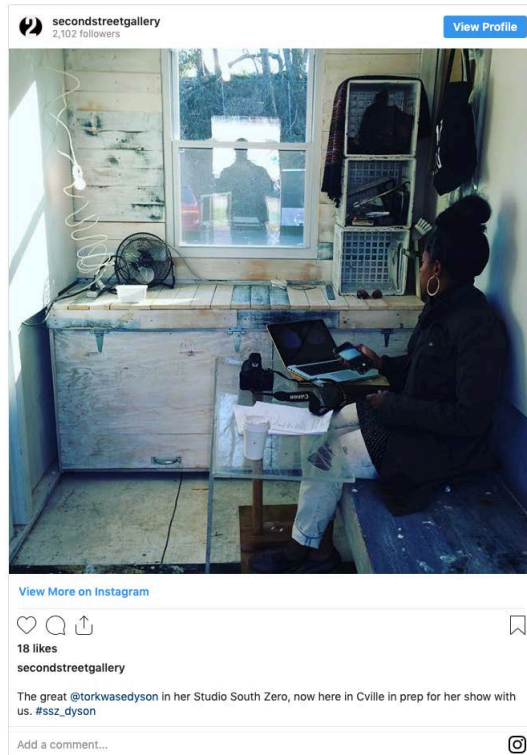
Installation view of 'Torkwase Dyson: Unkeeping' at Eyebeam (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)



Torkwase Dyson, paintings from 'Strange Fruit (Series)' (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

The most interesting art in the show are her paintings and drawings, while the more sculptural work often feels flatter and unmoored. In her *Auction Block (Series)*, dashes of white on the dark paintings suggest architectural drawings for tables, chairs, or even stones where people were sold. By reducing these sites to their basic shapes, the places become sharper, the movement of people through them more explicit and harrowing. Likewise, the *Strange Fruit (Series)*, inspired by landscape architecture plans, uses repeating symbols of trees to blot out the canvases with the memory of thousands of known lynchings took place from 1882 to 1968. And *Garrett Between (Series)* explores “how black women have used architecture for liberation,” the angles on in the monochromatic paintings interpreting [Harriet Jacobs’](#) garret where she hid from a predatory slaver.

Dyson researched many of these sites through her mobile South Studio Zero, a nomadic solar-powered work space from which to consider these spatial issues. It recently arrived in Charlottesville, Virginia, for her upcoming show at Second Street Gallery, as shown below:



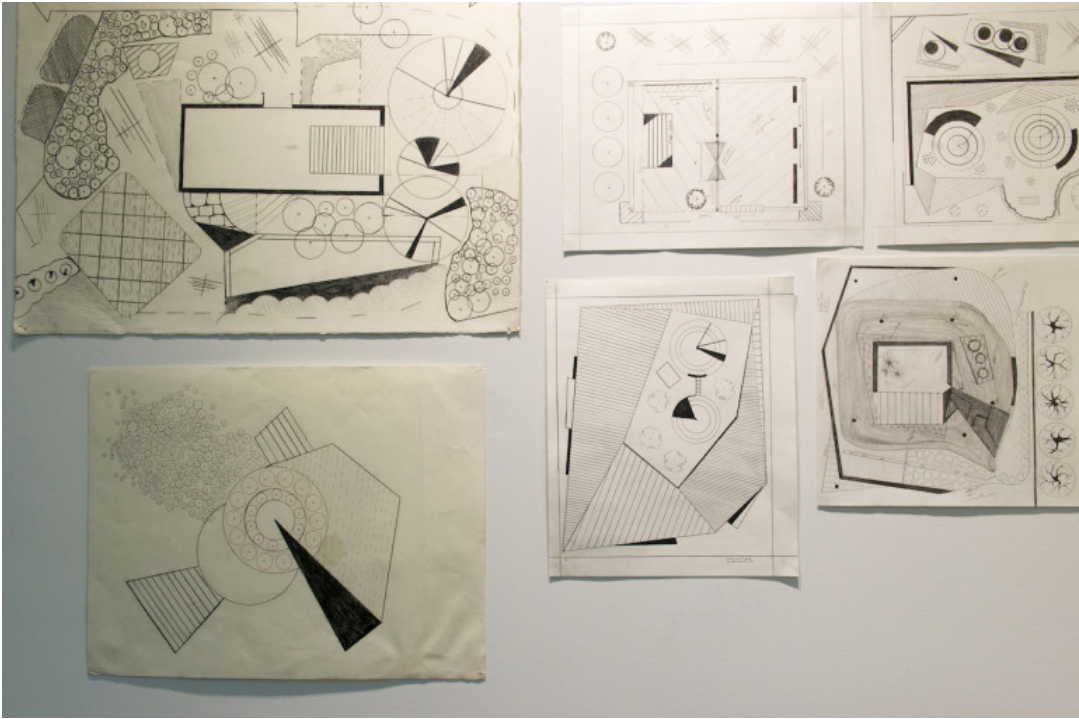
That tangible sense of place also grounded Dyson’s 2015 “Site on Sight: 2 (The Door of No Return),” recently on view at Socrates Sculpture Park, where she reinterpreted the “door of no return” on the Elmina Slave Castle in Ghana, the last departure for people boarding slave ships. Climbing up the incline of the piece, you looked out on the skyline of New York City, a place with an economy shaped in its early days by this human trafficking.

Yet this history often remains invisible. It was only last June that a marker was dedicated to the Wall Street Slave Market that operated in 18th-century Manhattan. Like the paintings and drawings, this abstracted experience brings something human to a history where humanity was lost.

Torkwase Dyson: Unkeeping continues at Eyebeam at the Industry City Gallery (220 36th Street, Sunset Park, Brooklyn) through April 12. The Black Spatial Matters panel discussion will take place on April 9, 4–6pm, at Eyebeam (34 35th Street, 5th Floor, Unit 26, Sunset Park, Brooklyn).



Installation view of 'Torkwase Dyson: Unkeeping' (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)



Torkwase Dyson, drawings from 'Auction Block (Series)' (photo by Christine Butler)



Installation view of 'Torkwase Dyson: Unkeeping' (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)



Torkwase Dyson, sculptures from 'Auction Block (Series)' (photo by Christine Butler)