

Art in America

TORKWASE DYSON'S NEW SHOW IS AN ABSTRACT MEDITATION ON THE RACIAL VIOLENCE OF THE 1919 RED SUMMER

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Torkwase Dyson: *Plantationocene*, 2019, acrylic, graphite, brass, wood, and ink on canvas, 98 inch diameter; at Arthur Ross Architecture Gallery.

Torkwase Dyson's work often uses abstract forms to address legacies of trans-Atlantic slavery and the African diaspora. Her exhibition "1919: Black Water," at Columbia University's Arthur Ross Architecture Gallery, brings together sculptures, drawings, and mixed-medium paintings that reflect on the murder of a black teenager named Eugene Williams in Chicago on July 27, 1919. While playing on a homemade raft in Lake Michigan, Williams and his friends unknowingly crossed the border between the black and white sections of the beach. A white man assaulted them with rocks, killing

Williams. The incident sparked five days of black protest and white terrorism throughout the city, part of a wave of racial violence spreading across the United States at that time, known as the Red Summer.

For this body of work, Dyson took as a departure point the form of the raft, an emblem of what she calls “black compositional thought”: the way black subjects navigate—and in doing so, alter—spaces shaped by white society. For Dyson, the raft functions as a site of self-liberation, representing the boys’ ability to create forms of mobility and play even amid the hazards of segregation and pollution from industrial runoff in the lake.



Installation view of **Torkwase Dyson's** exhibition “1919: Black Water,” 2019, at Arthur Ross Architecture Gallery.



Torkwase Dyson: *Pilot*, 2019, acrylic, graphite, string, wood, and ink on canvas, 96 by 72 inches; at Arthur Ross Architecture Gallery.

At the center of the gallery, three black plexiglass sculptures in the shape of trapezoidal prisms are installed like a chain of islands (*Black Shoreline*, 2019). The structures are hollow—geometric tubes whose dark interiors render space palpable through qualities of opacity, occlusion, and distance. On the surrounding walls hang large paintings in which atmospheric applications of acrylic suggest dark waters. Additions such as sail-like triangles and angled white lines appear as tools to navigate the murk. Dyson alludes to the horizon throughout the paintings. In *Pilot* (2019), for instance, a horizontal bar of graphite cuts across a canvas awash in marine blues. Hanging from the bar, a mass of thick black string matted with glossy black paint evokes, at once, dreadlocks and polluted water running over a spillway.

The painting *Plantationocene* (2019) similarly conveys a powerful sense of racialized space. Up close, the black central shapes suggest a raft seen at an angle from above, while the bright white streaks around it evoke glinting water. From a distance, however, the central form becomes a looming ship’s bow seen from the front; and the white marks, the beams of searchlights. The painting is titled after a term for our geological epoch that some scholars, such as Donna Haraway, prefer to the more broadly used “Anthropocene,” since it highlights the role of forced labor in the extraction economies that significantly influence global ecologies.



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