



## Torkwase Dyson, Whose Work Grapples with Black Spatial Politics, Wins Studio Museum's 2019 Wein Artist Prize

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Prize to **Torkwase Dyson** at its [annual gala](#) this evening in New York City. The \$50,000 prize is awarded annually to an African American artist recognizing exceptional “innovation, promise, and creativity.”

Dyson’s interdisciplinary practice is centered around black spatial politics. She considers herself a painter primarily and [describes](#) her abstract compositions as grappling “with ways space is perceived and negotiated particularly by black and brown bodies. Explorations of how the body unifies, balances, and arranges itself to move through natural and built environments become both expressive and discursive structures within the work.”

This month in New York City, Dyson is participating Pace Live. Part of Performa 19, she is presenting “I Can Drink the Distance: Plantationocene in 2 Acts.” a multimedia performative installation on Nov. 19 and 22 at Pace Gallery.

Her current solo show at Columbia University’s Arthur Ross Architecture Gallery brings attention to the racial violence that permeated the nation a century ago during Red Summer. “1919: Black Water” presents new paintings, sculpture, and drawings that respond to a specific incident that occurred in the segregated waters off Chicago’s South Side beaches and “offers Dyson a historical framework to think through the relationship between race, climate migration, and the architectural imagination.”

The artist’s connection to the Studio Museum dates to 2015 when she was featured in “A Constellation.” Presenting historical works from the museum’s collection with works by artists showing at the museum for the first time, the exhibition created an intergenerational dialogue around themes such as figuration, abstraction, and materiality. Last year, Dyson’s work entered the collection when two paintings were included in a historic bequest of more than 400 works from the late collector Peggy Cooper Cafritz.

“Torkwase is an artist we’ve been thinking about, that’s been on our radar, and that’s doing really exciting things right now,” Associate Curator Connie H. Choi told Culture Type.

“She’s dealing with a lot of issues that are particularly relevant in this moment, thinking about black spacial politics, thinking about linking the long history of racism, but also the division of space and technology and access from the history of slavery and moving forward. Torkwase is really someone who is investigating the deep, deep historical roots of these issues.”

Choi continued: “Her works are abstract, but also really quite beautiful in terms of the hand within these works that are very geometric and linear. You can see the trace of her hand, this idea that the body is leaving its own mark within these paintings or works on paper or sculptures, I think is a really interesting notion, the juxtaposition between those two ideas. Also, she collaborates and I think that’s something that’s really interesting to think about right now in this moment, too. Someone who expands their own artistic practice to be more inclusive to work with other artists, to work with different types of artists, to have a practice that includes performance and installation.”

*“[Torkwase] dealing with a lot of issues that are particularly relevant in this moment, thinking about black spacial politics, thinking about linking the long history of racism, but also the division of space and technology and access from the history of slavery...” — Curator Connie H. Choi*

CHICAGO-BORN, New Jersey-based Dyson has a BA in sociology/social work from Tougaloo College in Tougaloo, Miss. Concentrating on painting and printmaking, she earned a BFA at Virginia Commonwealth University and an MFA at Yale University.

“In Conditions of Freshwater” is one of the collaborations Choi was referring to. In 2016, Dyson worked with Danielle Purifoy, a lawyer and environmental social scientist, to gather oral histories in Alamance County, N.C., and Lowndes County, Ala., post-bellum black communities where they sought to “understand the traditions and nuances of black environmental, cultural, and economic placemaking.”

Dyson was featured in “Between the Waters” at the Whitney Museum of Art in 2018. The group show considered the fragile state of the environment. She contributed “Water Table,” a series in which she “transforms representations of underground water systems into abstractions of the Earth’s interconnected layers, alluding to both Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism.”

Also in 2018, Dyson had several solo shows at venues including the Drawing Center in New York, Rhona Hoffman Gallery in Chicago, and Suzanne Lemberg Usdan Gallery at Bennington College in Bennington, Vt. “Torkwase Dyson: Nautical Dusk,” her exhibition of new site-specific work at the Colby College Museum of Art (Oct. 4, 2018-Jan. 6, 2019) was concurrent with a visiting artist appointment at the Lunder Institute for American Art at Colby College in Waterville, Maine.

In New York, Dyson was the Spring 2019 Robert Gwathmey Chair in Architecture and Art at The Cooper Union. During her tenure, she presented “Torkwase Dyson: I Can Drink the Distance,” a solo exhibition that explored “how the body unifies, balances, and arranges itself to move through built environments.”

Dyson has received many residencies, grants, fellowships, and awards. She is the 14th winner of the Wein Prize. Established by jazz impresario and philanthropist George Wein, the award is named for his late wife Joyce Alexander (1928–2005), who was a longstanding trustee of the museum.

The prize was first awarded in 2006. The inaugural winner was Lorna Simpson and Trenton Doyle Hancock (2007), Glenn Ligon (2009), Jennie C. Jones (2012), Gary Simmons (2013), Njideka Akunyili Crosby (2015), Derrick Adams (2016), Simone Leigh (2016), and Diedrick Brackens (2018), are among the artists who have subsequently been selected for the honor.

In a statement about receiving the prize, Dyson said: “I want to thank George Wein and Joyce Alexander Wein for this special prize. And as I go about the world trying to make art work for us, this strengthens my commitment to black spatial justice. I’m so excited for this new sense of belonging.” **CT**

**UPDATE (11/17/19):** Information about Performa 2019 added

*IMAGE: Torkwase-Dyson. I Photo by Gabe Souza, Courtesy Studio Museum in Harlem*