

Torkwase Dyson: *1919: Blackwater*

By [Nina Wolpow](#)

ON VIEW

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Torkwase Dyson, *Plantationocene*, 2019. Acrylic, graphite, brass, wood, ink on canvas, 98 inches diameter. Photo: Nicholas Knight. Courtesy Columbia GSAPP.

A new solo show of work by the New-York-based artist Torkwase Dyson grapples with the historically hostile relationship between the Black body and what is known in contemporary architectural theory as “the built environment.” Entitled *1919: Blackwater*, the show takes as its pith a raft constructed a century ago by a group of African American teenagers intent on escaping Lake Michigan’s segregated beaches for its theoretically inclusive—and definitely polluted—deeper regions.

As far as history is concerned, the raft is relevant because 18-year-old Eugene Williams, was swimming beside it when he was murdered by a white man throwing rocks from the shore. The incident incited a series of race riots and that are now known, collectively, as Chicago’s “Red Summer.” As far as Dyson is concerned, the raft speaks to the dialectic of exclusion and inclusion human beings introduced to the universe the minute we began to build, re-envisioning the natural world the way we saw fit.

The bulk of *Black Water* consists of “constructions,” as they have been deemed by pioneering architect and Columbia professor Mario Gooden, who helped bring Dyson’s work to Arthur Ross. The moniker makes both a meta reference to Dyson’s highly spatial practice, and a taxonomic one: by eschewing the art category of “mixed media,” other disciplines, like architecture, ecology, and anthropology can lay claim to Dyson’s oeuvre. And it is an apt descriptor. Marked by topographical applications of silvery graphite, lines of spectral white that gesture towards cartographic significance, and perpendicular intrusions by wood or metal planes, the

works seem to be less interested in achieving aesthetic cohesion—though many of them do—than they are in charting the areas of environmental difference they both highlight and create.

“Sometimes I’d come in here and hear Dyson talking to herself,” recalls exhibition curator Irene Sunwoo, “she’d be saying ‘above and below, above and below.’ That was really a through-line for her: How to understand that navigation.”



Torkwase Dyson, *Pilot*, 2019. Acrylic, graphite, string, wood, ink on canvas, 96 x 72 inches. Photo: Nicholas Knight. Courtesy Columbia GSAPP.

Fittingly, one of Dyson's works is titled *Just Below and Just Above*. However, it is the movingly named *Plantationocene* construction that best addresses the relativity signaled by Sunwoo's anecdote and Dyson's mantra. Situated on a round canvas painted shades of black and blue and green, and intersected with a near-diametral plane of brass-plated wood, the work either encompasses or is marred by a pentagonal region of matte graphite that gives the impression of devastation, as if the surface has been burned or scarred. Ostensibly, there is no true "above" or "below" in *Plantationocene*—the composition is somewhat symmetrical on either side of the plane—but representation is besides the point. Dyson's work is about space. Figuration doesn't matter nearly as much as what goes where, and why.

Both in terms of content and curation, *Black Water* is an impressive and carefully articulated show. Nevertheless, the conceptual heft of work tied so intimately to specific historical events threatens to obscure the formal success—or lack thereof—of the art. In this regard, the substance of *Black Water* is endangered by the amount of instructive material—a booklet containing an excerpt from a history book and discussions between Dyson and a couple of her colleagues plays the role of exhibition catalogue—that accompanies it.

But where informational overkill flattens, a triptych of sculptures called *Black Shoreline I, II, and III* steps in. Made of nearly transparent black Plexiglas, each is a variation on the three-dimensional form of the trapezoidal prism. However, whereas full prisms would be closed, like boxes, Dyson's are open on a pair of opposing sides; looking from one to

the other, the viewer can see either a white wall, or a segment of one of Dyson's other works. Taken in this way, the rest of the show is suddenly chaotic or overstuffed. The complexity, the obsession-making dualism of above-and-below, is put into stunning perspective, and becomes what it is: material, media, a collection of objects, the various instruments by which we build and have built spaces capable both of keeping in and pushing out.

In other words, in visiting *1919: Blackwater*, the important thing to do is keep the raft in the corner, rather than the forefront of the mind. Just that little bit of context is enough: Dyson's work alone will carry you the rest of the way.