

Metamorphosis 1, 2023  
Aquatint and spitbite aquatint with chine collé  
Paper size: 41" x 44"  
Edition of 12

Torkwase Dyson is one of the most innovative thinkers and artists working today. Her paintings, sculptures, and collaborative performances have been included in group exhibitions at the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art (Washington, D.C), Whitney Museum of American Art (New York), The Museum of Modern Art (New York); in biennial exhibitions including Desert X, (Palm Springs) and Sharjah Biennial, (Sharjah, United Arab Emirates); and in solo exhibitions and installations at Colby College Museum of Art, (Waterville, Maine), Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts (Chicago); and Schuylkill Center for Environmental Education (Philadelphia), among others. In 2019, I was pleased to include Dyson's painting *Raymond (Water Table)* in a show I co-curated with Essence Harden, *Plumb Line: Charles White and the Contemporary* at California African American Museum, Los Angeles. That painting became an anchor in conceptualizing the exhibition as a whole. The arc of Dyson's work more broadly has helped me reconceive the place of abstractionist work in Black life and arts as engaging a long legacy of freedom, possibility, and urgency in the afterlives of slavery.

Dyson's abstractionist practice explores Black spatial relations in our histories, our social structures, and our ecology. Her stunning, contemplative and demanding works ask, what are the geographies, infrastructures and architectures that have structured and delimited Black life? How do we track the awareness, perception and inventiveness with which Black people have moved through these spaces? And how does "Black Compositional Thought"--Dyson's generative framework for naming and studying Black spatial liberation strategies--reveal paths towards Black freedom as well as human and environmental justice?

—Leigh Raiford, PhD



Torkwase Dyson in the PFP studio, 2023



Metamorphosis 2, 2023  
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Dyson corresponded with Leigh Raiford, Professor of African American Studies at UC Berkeley, to reflect on her spring project with Paulson Fontaine and her practice more broadly.

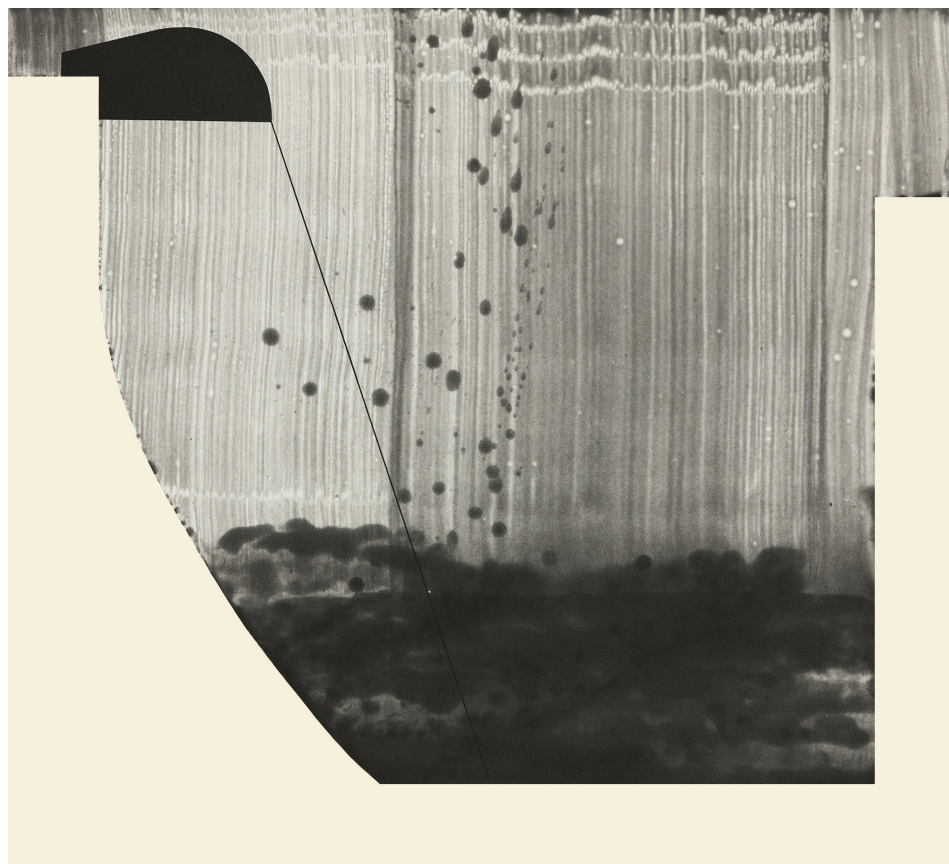
*You describe yourself "as a painter working across multiple mediums to explore the continuity between ecology, infrastructure, and architecture." And those mediums include sculpture, performance and most recently filmmaking. How does printmaking extend, expand or challenge your practice?*

I knew I wanted to explore the physicality of inked plates being pressed into paper. I imagined the experience of absorption and quietly thought about light and color. It was a question of color as object and space. And I'd been thinking about expressive marks making up against a flat plane. I was interested in the flatness of the ink on paper. The rich but flat surface. These are productive contradictions I think about in my practice in general.

*What did you work on during your time at Paulson Fontaine Press? What was the rhythm of making each day? What surprised you most during your stay?*

I couldn't find a rhythm. I had to work my way there. So, we made a few plates, inked them up and printed them. Nothing was working so I started drawing on top of the prints with graphite and pen. I brought shapes into my printmaking process based on some of the colonial architecture I saw in Brazil (where I just left) and created a basic structure that way. From there I opened up into more improvisational drawing on top of those test prints. In the making I warmed up and worked my way to a form. I have this exercise called "tiny desk drawings": small nine by twelve-ish works on paper. So, I made about thirty or so small drawings/prints before I got to a composition that I felt gave me the space to invent. I did discover small, embossed moves that I found helpful. The physicality of the embossed paper moment pushed scale into the conversation in a way that was helpful. Something poetic started to show up and the image/object/haptic/index/state change questions started to show up. I realized I could construct prints. So that was my window.

*"Liquidity," "infrastructure," "freedom," "improvisation," "spatial liberation" are some of the concepts that animate your practice. How do you see them in conversation with your printmaking? (How) did they manifest in your work during your time at Paulson Fontaine?*



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They're in me, in my hands when I work. They are embedded in the practice. So, they come out intuitively through the structure of the artwork/form. Jack Whitten said once "Art is structured feelings". I really believe that. My goal was to practice and arrive at a place in the work where the prints/form had signs of my feelings and questions. And at the end of the given process, hopefully deepen my comprehension and conversation on black liberation space. I was thinking about Castelo de Garcia in Praia do Forte, a small town in Bahia. The horror of this site of colonial history and white supremacy was still in my head, fresh, visceral. I went into the print shop with this castle designed to torture refusers/fugitives/resisters/self-liberators haunting me. Black hauntology. I wanted to speculate about how humans refuse designed/invented spaces like this. I needed the prints and the making process to take me *through* ontology, perception, spatial logic, space construction...Making and writing, making and writing, I got into the headspace to concentrate/meditate on the spaciousness Black people were able to hold in isolation. Trying to describe this, I wrote in my notes "...refusing the ocular *brutality*." When I looked at it, I let it guide the second group of monochromatic prints (forthcoming). Question: what is the ocular work happening inside this architecture of dispossession and how might we attend to the humanity inside these spaces?

*Black imagination, you've offered, is the counter, the antidote to oppressive state systems that abstract Black life and make us vulnerable to premature death. Can you talk about how you work with, through, and against "abstraction" in your practice?*

Often, I use abstraction as a tool for investigation. The practice of abstraction opens up possibilities and new ways of thinking about freedom. It prioritizes meaning that comes from living deeply in sensoria. I've invested so much of my life thinking about consciousness in liberation, whether it's the everyday act of loving the beauty we make, transcendental meditation or something more extreme, abstraction helps me work the ins and outs of it all. Also, the art objects need to bring new sites into ongoing freedoms but also create additional accounts for our history. This through line is important when creating works that evoke questions of being and knowing/perception and awareness of thought. I'm interested in black compositional thought because it can account for our lived experiences in self-determination, improvisation, and perception. What can abstract visual thinking attend to in this context? What can we question, affirm, and invent for our liberation?

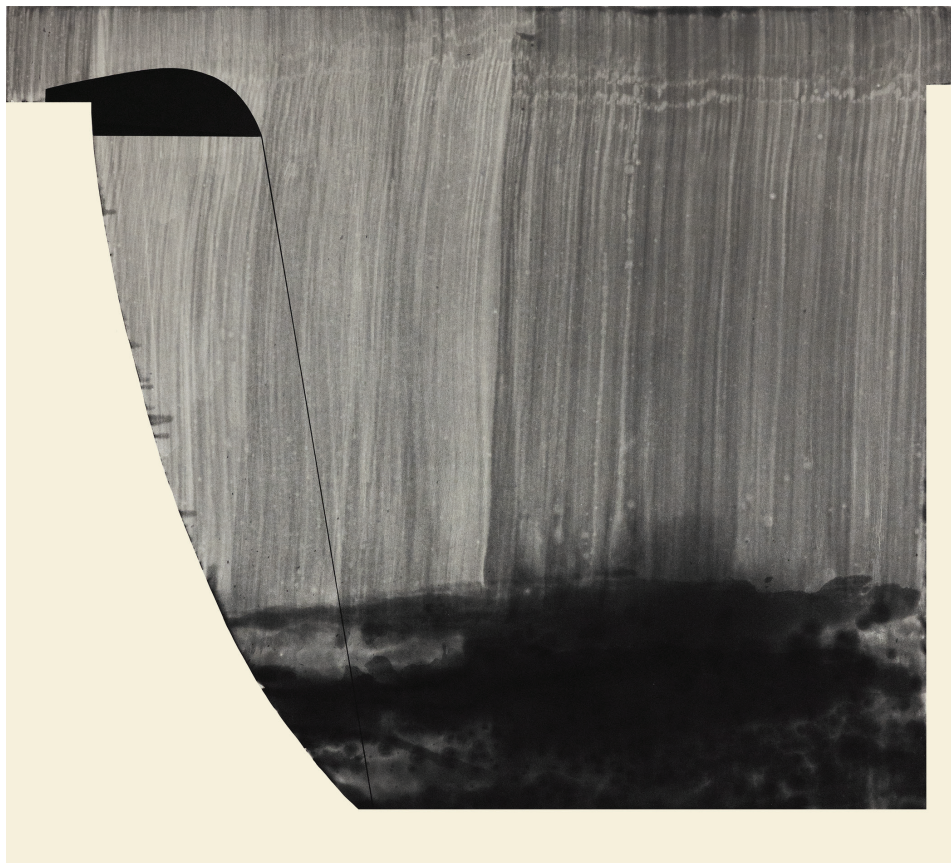


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