

Torkwase Dyson: *Unkeeping*

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On View

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“When he told me that I was made for his use, made to obey his command in every thing [...] whose will must and should surrender to his, never before had my puny arm felt half so strong,” wrote Harriet Jacobs on her body as slave-owner’s property, as if she were perfectly manufactured for the man who owned it.¹ Inspired in part by Jacobs, Torkwase Dyson revisits the history of human beings as commodified property for others’ selfish economic interests. Her solo exhibition, *Unkeeping*, kindles a provocative dialogue concerning America’s racially rooted narrative of commodifying nature—human bodies, water, salt—for capitalist gains, among much more.



Torkwase Dyson, *Strange Fruit (Blue Note)*, 2015. Acrylic on board. 48 x 48 inches. Courtesy the artist. Photo: Christine Butler.

A reaction to “the unimaginable terrorism against black people since the Civil War,”² the show’s thirty-five works are sampled from the “Auction Blocks,” “Garrett Between,” and “Strange Fruit” series. However, associations with industrialization, economic development, and racial politics are veiled by Dyson’s canonical Minimalism, yet unveiled only through her descriptive titles and articulate elucidations. In short, *Unkeeping’s*

supplementary materials are worthy of merit that rivals the force of the artworks themselves.

Dyson notes that the works are “both emotive and analytic, and suggest the tension between the individual’s experience and impersonal statistics.”³ *Strange Fruit (Blue Note)* (2015), just one of over ten works in the “Strange Fruit” series, echoes architectural blueprints or geometric maps, yet the unequal white circles painted over the background’s varying blues, grays, and whites commemorate lynching sites and the individuals submitted to such torture. In imagining each circle as an individual—their faces, bodies, families—the remote statistic stating that 4,000 black individuals were lynched between 1882 – 1968 is at last cloaked by human empathy.



Installation View: *Unkeeping*. Industry City Gallery, March 10 – April 11, 2016. "Auction Block" series. Courtesy the artist. Photo: Christine Butler.

The artist’s conceptual and architectural blueprint-like motifs are more than investigations on racial terrorism and mercenary notions. The “Garrett Between” series, namely, was inspired by the fact that Jacobs hid in the nook of a roof for seven years to escape her owner, which Dyson chronicles as Jacobs’s inventive use of “architecture for liberation.”⁴ The minimal black voids of this series manipulate the senses in a way that mimics the chilling somatic effects of torture, neglect, and other inhumane treatment. Dyson adopts the term “black spatial matters,” which perhaps evokes the way individuals, like Jacobs, astutely navigated threatening environments as a means of survival.

Depicting a rectangular, matte-black painted surface, *Garret (Dark Light, Dark Eyes) #1*, for example, mutes some of the body's sensory mechanisms, like the visual, and heightens others, like the tactile. The absence of light and color in the work dulls our visual perception, propelling us to depend on the tactile and illusions of tactility on its surface. Here, "the low light and shallow perspective," the artist explains, "is intended to speak to Jacobs's sensory conditions."⁵ The series honors the individuals who suffered by preserving their humanity and dignity, duly urging us to think beyond callous statistics and instead harbor the effects of dehumanization on the body.

Capitalist, industrialist, and agriculturist America as we know it was built by the hands of individuals who were bought and sold as property, and this is the meat of the "Auction Block" series: the artist explained that "people were turned into commodities on these [auction] blocks; these drawings seek to uncover the humanist narrative in them instead."⁶ The works range from smaller graphite or ink sketches to laser-cut Plexiglas and wood works of assorted sizes. One exception to these media, simply called *Auction Block*, characterizes Dyson's research and intentions with its three irregular geometric shapes rendered in black and white acrylic on board. Its surface roughly conjures the pedestals that slaves stood upon when they were presented as commodity items—bodies and body language exposed—at auction blocks. Each pedestal-like board of *Auction Block* pictures marked areas of white, which seemingly allude to the placements where a slave would stand at auction. The work is hung high on the wall, forcing us to lift our gaze, thus magnifying our arbitrary role as both mourners of the exploited and consumers at morality's expense.



Installation View: *Unkeeping*. Industry City Gallery, March 10 – April 11, 2016. "Strange Fruit" and "Auction Block" series. Courtesy the artist. Photo: Christine Butler.

Dyson's work explores the dicey junction between capitalism, industrialization, commodity, and the preservation of humanity. However, it becomes far more complex when we remember that these artworks hang in a gallery for sale, where they operate as commodified goods *and* representations of the inhumane and environmental abuse that has persisted throughout the history of American democracy, as a result of commodifying nature.⁷ While art auction houses explicitly brand art as property for investment and

status gains, what exactly delineates auction houses from galleries? What effects does commodifying art have on the social economy? Should our opinions differ in these regards for artists who engage in art for social-political activism versus those who do not?

Unkeeping ultimately encapsulates the contours of social-activist art, fundamentally a result of Dyson's formal use of shrouding materials like mirrored and matte surfaces, map-like compositions, and mathematical, geometric shapes, which is cemented through contextual information that furnishes the explicative groundwork. The artist's thoughtful motives behind each series press us to reckon with realities such as the dehumanization behind statistics that distance us from scope, commodities of natural elements (which are restricted to those who are monetarily disadvantaged), and the role that industry and architectural development—art and art institutions included—has on our environment, socioeconomics, and our people. We are encouraged to meditate on tenacious corruption, restore the humanity behind those abused by the system, and work to rectify the individual's role in capitalist, industrious America.