

Studio

The Studio Museum in Harlem Magazine Summer/Fall 2013



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Studio

Museum

What's Up: Exhibition Schedule Summer/Fall 2013	5
What's New: Recent Acquisition Stanley Whitney	6
What's New: Recent Acquisition Beauford Delaney	8
Harlem Postcards Spring 2013	10
Catching Up with the Artists in Residence	12
Body Language	20
Expanding the Walls: Percitopia	22
Fall 2013: The Shadows Took Shape	24
Fall 2013: Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art	28

Beyond

In Memoriam: Merton D. Simpson	35
Elsewhere	36
If You Like . . .	42
Book Picks	46
Studio Visit: Torkwase Dyson	48
Jayne Cortez "Ballroom Audobon" (In Memoriam)	50

Features

Artist x Artist: Odili Donald Odita on Ayé A. Aton	52
Artists and the Curatorial Impulse	56
Octavia Butler "Positive Obsession"	60
Fellow to Fellow: Jamillah James and Monique Long	64

Studio Jr.

Exploring Art Together	68
DIY: Body Language Watercolor Resist Project	70
Five for the Family!	72
Coloring Page	74
Talking with Teachers	76

Friends

Happy Birthday, Sam Gilliam!	79
Gala 2012	80
Spring Luncheon 2013	83
Members	87
Supporters	91
Membership Info and Form	94
Visitor Info	96

Studio Visit

Torkwase Dyson

by **Monique Long**,
Curatorial Fellow

Torkwase Dyson is a Brooklyn-based artist who earned her undergraduate degree in painting and printmaking from Virginia Commonwealth University in 2001 and an MFA in the same discipline from Yale University in 2003. She also works with video, photography, site-specific installation and performance. She has taught at several institutions, including Spelman College in Atlanta. Recently she took a break from teaching to turn her full attention toward developing a new approach.

Those familiar with Dyson's work will be surprised to learn that she has returned to painting, a medium she has not worked with since graduate school. For the last several years, she has been known for creating large-scale, sculptural installations constructed of found materials. She has always been interested in nature and ecology, but the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and the oil spill off the coast of Louisiana, where she has familial roots, provided the impetus for incorporating issues about the environment vis-à-vis blackness in her work. She brings to her practice the conviction that those events exposed the vulnerability of people of color to the effects of climate change.

The basis for her new paintings is notes and sketches she made during a trip to Elmina Castle in Ghana in 2002. The experience of visiting the castle, where Africans were held to be enslaved in the Americas from 1637 to 1814, stayed with her for over a decade before it began to manifest in her work this year.

In this project, Dyson conflates the visual language of landscape architecture with the practices of assem-

blage and abstract, minimal painting to render Elmina and other sites of historical significance, namely major slave ports around the world. This geopolitical approach can be traced back to the lyrical prose of Frederick Douglass's first narrative. So faithful was he in describing the landscape of the Maryland plantation where he was enslaved, that archaeologists have used his first book as a map to excavate the site. From a bird's-eye view (the perspective of the omniscient narrator), Dyson establishes place, vegetation, water and all ambient surroundings. Off-center but prominent, an internal staircase in the castle is a focal point. She then departs from documenting the structure and takes poetic license to reimagine the site to pay homage to the women who passed through the "door of no return," juxtaposing the visual data with the castle's troubled history. The drawings are abstracted and painted white, with subtle blue undertones. The canvases uncannily resemble what distant memory looks like in the mind's eye. Dyson calls the paintings a "love letter" to her ancestors.

These love letters are whispered across the ocean and then echoed back to the viewer. That is not to say the paintings are at all sentimental. The compositions are not peopled with tormented bodies. Nor are they explicit attempts to show the brutality of slavery. Instead, they are decidedly about dematerializing her practice. Dyson hopes the viewer will have a more visceral, intimate response to her work by reading the minimal landscapes with the understanding of all that is implied.

Top Image:
Climbing Stairs, 2013
Courtesy the artist

Bottom Image:
Fifteen Steps and Fifty Trees, 2013
Courtesy the artist

