PRESERVING A LEGACY:
THE DOX THRASH HOUSE PROJECT

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ABSTRACT

This thesis seeks to highlight the legacy of artist Dox Thrash as singular and crucial to Philadelphia's historical narrative. This legacy includes not only his artwork, but the impact he made on the community around him, as well as the physical structure of his home on Cecil B. Moore Avenue. By examining the great oeuvre of Thrash's artwork, this thesis argues that it is in need of recognition beyond what it has already received: not only because of the merit of the work, but because of the rarity of his perspective. Thrash depicted African American life in America with dignity and intimacy as a Black man at a time when the only mainstream representations currently circulating were in the form of caricatures and other insensitive portrayals by white artists. His work acts as a keystone to contextualize the Black experience in Philadelphia during the Jazz Era, even though the connection to that time has been seemingly under attack in this city.

Sharswood, the neighborhood where Dox Thrash lived, was once a center of Black life, but has been dismantled and degraded by the effects of redlining. The state of his derelict home is emblematic of this, as it currently is marked with a historical placard from the city but did not have any preservation done to the structure. That is until the Dox Thrash House Project, a group of passionate volunteers, began to fundraise and raise awareness to save Thrash's home. The work being done by the Dox Thrash House Project inspired this thesis as they have fought to bring Thrash's home back to life through preservation. This thesis tackles the contextualization of the treatment of Thrash's legacy within the current landscape of both art history and preservation in Philadelphia.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The history of the arts in Philadelphia is a long storied tale that includes greats that have been memorialized deeply in the heart of the city, throughout the country, and internationally, but has left many well deserving creatives in the margins of the city's past. The artists who are well remembered like Thomas Eakins, Charles Willson Peale, Mary Cassatt, the Calder family, and the Wyeth family, are represented throughout archives in depth, permanent exhibitions, historical landmarks, have had organizations and foundations created in their honor, and insurmountable quantities of research done about them and their work. On the other hand, artists like North Philadelphia native Dox Thrash have work represented in the archives, but their work is mainly found in special collections and only brought out on special requests or in temporary exhibitions.

This treatment of Dox Thrash's work is embodied in the current condition of his home in the Sharswood neighborhood of Philadelphia, situated in the northwest central section of the city. Standing complete with a roof and all four walls in 2013 with desperate repairs necessary to continue to stand, the Dox Thrash house was accepted into the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places and was duly given one of the city's famous blue placards detailing the historic relevance of the building. This placard was erected in front of the building which decayed during the next five years, because no action was granted to preserve the building when it was given historic recognition. Today, only three walls remain by the grace of braces put up in 2018 after the collapse of part of the roof and southern wall of the house.

The unfortunate disrepair status that the building has been allowed to fall into is a common occurrence in the neighborhood. The Philadelphia Housing Authority (PHA) has been ripping through Sharswood with bulldozers at an alarmingly accelerated rate within the past five years, leaving in its wake scars on the landscape. Where a bustling

corridor of art and culture in the Black community stood during the mid-twentieth century, including being the home to artists like Dox Thrash and John Coltrane as well as important cultural hubs like the Pearl Theater and the Pyramid Club, is now close to barren. This ecosystem of abandoned buildings, freshly torn up and well grown over empty lots, multigenerational families fighting with the PHA to stay in their homes over "tangled titles," churches in need of repair that instead feed their neighbors with their tithe, and plaques outside of dilapidated historic "preservation" sites, are all too familiar sites throughout the city.[1]

Combating this wave of destruction are groups dedicated to turning the tide, like the Dox Thrash House Project which will be examined in this specific study. This small group of volunteers led by Maya Thomas has raised awareness, interest, and funds to bring this space back from the brink of ruin. By working through artistic community engagement, public presentations for investors, and educating, they are folding Thrash back into the consciousness of Sharswood, giving a regained anchor of identity back to the neighborhood. Along with the development company Beech Community Enterprises, they are breathing life back into the house, the neighborhood, and the legacy of Dox Thrash. Thrash is the only artist who portrayed Black subjects with emotion like he did during his time, and the first to work with the carborundum mezzotint, with many other firsts on his list of accomplishments, yet his name is largely unknown to history. This thesis seeks to rectify the absence of Thrash from the overall art historical narrative by linking the importance of his oeuvre to the current preservation of his home by the Dox Thrash House Project. This analysis will not encompass the totality of the preservation work as it is yet to be completed, it will instead focus on the importance of Thrash's art and home in the greater conversation of historical preservation in Philadelphia.

[1] "Tangled titles" refers to a common issue dealt with in Philadelphia by surviving families of homeowners who never legally deeded their homes to their family before passing, essentially making the people living in their family homes squatters in the eyes of the city.

CHAPTER 2

THRASH: THE MAN AND THE ART

Born on March 22, 1893, to Gus and Ophelia Thrash, in Griffin, Georgia, Dox Thrash was a seemingly typical child.[2] Thrash wound up dropping out of school after fourth grade and spent most of his time off galavanting alone in his hometown until he left when he was fifteen. He would spend his days drawing, strolling through the woods, flying kites, reading, and swimming, according to his own account. Georgia at the turn of the century saw school attendance rates below national averages for both Black and white students, so it is unsurprising to hear of a youngster not finishing grammar school. While Thrash did not officially finish his schooling, his thirst for knowledge kept him reading and diligently working towards his goal of becoming an artist.

Ever since he was a child, Thrash had ambitions of becoming a well known artist. That drive is what ultimately made him leave the South before the "Great Migration," of African Americans heading to the North during World War I. According to James D. Anderson's *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935*, "almost half of Georgia's black males from fifteen to thirty-four years of age left the state during the 1920s."[3] After a few years of what he describes as "hobo-ing," Thrash settled in Chicago and began taking formal art classes at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1917 after independently studying with individual tutors and mentors in the years between leaving Georgia and attending university. Scenes from his early childhood rural experience and his youth spent on the road exploring the American landscape are seen repeatedly throughout his body of work. This time period captured his imagination and continued to hold it. His studies and youth were put on hold, however, after he enlisted in the army in September

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[2] This is debatable due to the different listings of his birth year, with Social Security and an unpublished autobiographical piece recording 1892, whereas for his application for the Art Institute of Chicago and important exhibitions he used 1893. See: John Ittman.

[3] James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988.

just after beginning school, and spent the next eighteen months serving the country in France in the 92nd Division.[4]

The company that Dox Thrash served with was one of the all-Black battalions that were active in World War I, known as the Buffalo Soldiers. The title came from the Native Amerians nickname for the Black soldiers who fought during Western expansion in the 1870s. During his time in France, Thrash sustained injuries within the last twenty-eight hours of the war from being gassed. He suffered from shellshock and spent most of the time celebrating the victory in Europe in the hospital. While he was convalescing, he became interested in the vaudeville scene and even performed for his fellow troops in tours around area hospitals before heading back to the United States.[5] This time in his life, unlike his childhood, is not depicted directly in any of his work, but instead the remnants of his time spent at war is seen in the heroization of the worker in his work later in his life.

When he returned home he spent about a year on the South's Plantation circuit performing vaudeville like he did while he was in France. During this time he visited his family members and began informal art lessons, much like the time before starting at the Art Institute of Chicago. After he had his fill of the performing arts, Thrash returned to Chicago and his studies, enrolling full-time, including summer terms, for the next three years. While finishing his education, he took classes in both fine arts and commercial arts, where he was specifically interested in mural arts. After graduating in 1923, Thrash returned to his nomadic lifestyle, taking on small jobs here and there while spending his

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[4] John Ittman, *Dox Thrash: An African American Master Printmaker Rediscovered*, Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2001.
[5] Samuel Fliesher Scrapbooks, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., microfilm reel 3581.v

free time "observing, drawing, and painting the people of America, especially the 'Negro.'"[6]

While not much of his work from his days spent on the road are known, many exist from the early 1930s that depict the time that he spent settling into Philadelphia after spending a few years between Massachusetts, Connecticut, and New York.[7] Works like *Fanaticism (Prayer Meeting)* [1933], and *Untitled (Landscape with Farm Buildings)* [1937], both from the early 1930s, show an appreciation for community traditions and space. (see Figures 1 and 2) *Prayer Meeting* is supposed to be of the likeness of one of the two drawings that Thrash had on display at his first exhibition in Philadelphia at the YWCA on Christian Street in South Philadelphia, in December 1932.[8] In the etching, Thrash evokes the ecstasy of religious passion by depicting the drama of the scene with a contrast-rich spotlight effect over the center of the image. The scene is set-up in a very deliberate Renaissance-esque triangular composition to heighten the connectivity of the action and tease out the emotional aspect of connecting to a higher power in community with other believers. Within the frame there are four individuals on the floor in worship in front of the preacher, who is set in the exact center of the image, flanked by a pianist to the right and risers full of zealous churchgoers to the left. The whole scene is only visible in half of the composition,with the other half fully cloaked in the shadow from the spotlight, creating a dynamic balance between the values that keep the viewer's eye trapped in the triangle of illuminated space. This kind of arrangement of emotions within a composition and deep contrast can be seen throughout Thrash's work regardless of the process he is working with, and is an emblem of his artistic expression. The contrast will be emphasized by the process he creates later in his experiments in

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[6] Dox Thrash, "History of My Life," Unpublished manuscript.
[7] Ittman, *Dox Thrash: An African American Master Printmaker Rediscovered*.
[8] *Online: Dox Thrash, Black Life, and the Carborundum Mezzotint*, Online exhibition, The Hyde Collection, Glen Falls, NY.

printmaking, and the emotions are heightened along with the richness of the black tonal ranges of the carborundum mezzotint.

The *Landscape with Farm Buildings* acts almost as a panoramic view of the macro-image of *Prayer Meeting*, that if one were to zoom out of the latter they would see the former. A striking difference between this earlier work depicting the rural United States, one could only believe them to be callbacks of the Southern landscape of his youth, and his later works in landscape is the horizon line, and the depth that it allows the image to have. This aquatint shows the audience a sweeping view over a grand valley vista, beginning somewhere from within the valley looking up and out towards the horizon line of the mountains. More than two thirds of the canvas is dedicated to detailing the rolling hills of the farmland, peppered with small buildings with bright roofs that act as visual breaks in the dark values of the trees that surround them. In the foreground there is a leading white picket fence that is interrupted by a female figure with her back turned towards the artist as she pays sole attention to the landscape ahead of her. Compared to his landscapes he made later in his life, which would be better called cityscapes, that have a much more condensed space between the viewer and the horizon line like *City Street Corner* made in the 1950s. Sometimes the horizon line is not included in the frame at all, and Thrash opts to zoom in on the architectural features of buildings throughout the city, like in *View of Philadelphia with City Hall* made in the 1940s or 1950s. (see Figure 3) These scenes feel less inhabitable and inviting than his earlier bucolic representations of the South.

After almost three years on the road, Thrash settled in Philadelphia on his way to the West Coast. There, in 1930, he began taking formal classes at the Graphic Sketch Club, now known as the Samuel S. Fleisher Art Memorial after its founder, to hone his printmaking skills. There he learned from Earl Horter, who was a successful commercial and fine artist who enjoyed participating in seasonal exhibitions and commercial work

throughout Philadelphia and design work in New York City. Horter was not only an artist and etching instructor, but he was also a collector who had interests that matched Albert C. Barnes in displaying his collection; modern paintings hung next to a sculpture from the African diaspora. Thrash quickly became enamored with his instructor, and worked tirelessly to meet the expectations that both he and Horter had for him. In the first half of the 1930s, Thrash was given commissions from local businesses and events while also experiencing his first ever solo exhibitions at the Southwest Branch of the YWCA and the Graphic Sketch Club and group exhibitions like at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts (PAFA) *Thirty-first Annual Philadelphia Water Color Exhibit*.[9]

During the early 1930s, Dox Thrash dabbled in multiple mediums and subject matters while supporting his personal artwork with work as a janitor and freelance graphic designer. He worked in graphite, charcoal, watercolor, ink wash and tempora, and with many techniques including drypoint, aquatints, block prints and etchings, covering landscapes and genre scenes as previously mentioned, but was also becoming well known for his portraits of African Americans. Thrash was lauded by critics in newspapers during the time of having an innate sensibility to capture the tenderness in quiet moments of Black life during the Great Depression.[10] His portrait work, no matter the medium, brings a tenor of delicacy and emotional nature forth from the subjects, which was unusual in the representation of Black people, specifically Black women.

Scholar W.E.B. Du Bois criticized the depiction of African Americans during this time, specifically noting the issues of caricatures that were the most popular, and usually the only, representation of Black people in media. On the matter, he wrote that Black people were subjected to "thought chains and inchoate soul-shrinkings," by seeing their

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[9] Ittman, *Dox Thrash: An African American Master Printmaker Rediscovered*.
[10] Kymberly N. Pinder, ""Racial Idiom" in the Work of Dox Thrash," In *Dox Thrash: An African American Master Printmaker Rediscovered* by John Ittman, 65-84, Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2001.

own likeness misrepresented so thoroughly by the caricatures. He also stressed the need to "train ourselves to see beauty in black," which Thrash's work seems to embody, through delivering the dignity and individuality of his sitters.[11] While Thrash often resisted titling the works with the individual's full identification, leaving a level of anonymity, he let their unique qualities shine through. Sometimes it was through their clothing, but it was always in their gaze, which carried the representation of the character of the sitter in an interaction, or lack thereof, with the viewer of the portrait. Personalities were detailed in the ways in which Thrash depicted the sitter's action, whether preoccupied with something just out of frame attributing to a sense of wonder like in *Alice* [1933], or striking confidence portrayed through directly returning the viewer's gaze in *Miss X* [1933].[12] (see Figures 4 and 5) Thrash made these types of portraits in every medium that he worked in, but he is most well known for the portraits he did in the carborundum process like these two examples. Those have a quality brought to them by the texture and contrast of the process that reached beyond sharing the likeness of his sitter, and instead focused on their emotion. It is almost as if Thrash saw beyond the skin of his models, and drew their essence instead. This is heightened by the lack of certain grounding details usually included in portraits, like the eyes of the sitter, which are in other portraits of his depending on the media. This absence of eyes would usually be off putting, but with Thrash's carborundum portraits it has an effect of disarming the sitter, which allows their emotion to shine through.

Outside of Thrash's personal art career, he was friends with many other artists and influential African Americans in Philadelphia. One of those friends was Samuel

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[11] Michael J. C. Echeruo, "Edward W. Blyden, W. E. B. Du Bois, and the 'Color Complex,'" *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 30, no. 4 (1992): 669–84. http://www.jstor.org/stable/161270

[12] Howard University has *Alice* listed as an aquatint or carborundum, but other institutions like the Free Library of Philadelphia have it only listed as carborundum prints, of which I am more inclined to believe.

Brown, the first African American to be awarded a position with the Public Works Art Project in 1933.[13] The Public Works Art Project (PWAP) was a part of the New Deal, the federally funded aid package that was set in motion by Franklin D. Roosevelt as a response to the Great Depression. The PWAP was the branch that offered support to artists to ensure that they had an effective means to survive, and it lasted until the summer of 1934.[14] Further aid would be extended to artists through the Federal Art Project that began the next summer, although Dox Thrash would not become involved until three years later.

The mid-1930s for Dox Thrash could be described through one word: hustle. He began a sign making business that worked out of the Reynolds Funeral home a few blocks away from his home while he was also still dedicating time to his personal art. He was given another solo exhibition in 1934, this time at the Graphic Sketch Club, and had work at the Germantown YWCA show for African American artists; both shows were met with notoriety in the *Philadelphia Tribune*. Away from the art, he suffered the loss of his mother Ophelia, but also met his future wife, Edna McAllister, through Sam Brown in 1936. Following that year Thrash became a member of the new Pyramid Club and signed on to work with the Federal Art Project (FAP). He was the first Black artist assigned to the Fine Print Workshop when the studio was established.

While some individuals complained about the working environment at the Print Workshop, Thrash was happy to work alongside other Black artists such as Raymond Steth, Franklin Syres, and Donald Peterson. The director, Mary Curran, was under criticism due to her treatment of the Artist Union, but Thrash worked enthusiastically

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[13] John Ittman, "Dox Thrash: Revealed, a companion site to the Philadelphia Museum of Art exhibit: *Dox Thrash: An African American Master Printmaker Rediscovered,"* Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2001.
[14] Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopedia, "Public Works of Art Project," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, September 27, 2016.

under her management.[15] In July of the same year he started with FAP, he took it upon himself to write a letter to Ellen Woodward, an administrator at the Washington, D.C. headquarters to inform her: "As a negro artist I would like to commend the entire staff for their impartial and fair treatment to all those employed…Feeling that words of commendation are as necessary as words of condemnation I do not hesitate to write this."[16] This letter shows the importance of diversity not only in hiring, but in inclusion at the Philadelphia branch of the FAP, at least according to Dox Thrash's point of view, which was still ahead of the Civil Rights Act by three decades. Thrash clearly felt supported and valued in this work space, which perhaps directly correlated with his experimentation with new mediums.

In the beginning of his time in the studio Thrash kept mainly to himself, but the "discovery," in his words, of the carborundum print process brought him into closer collaboration with his peers. The process is a subtractive method that is created by smearing carborundum, a dark, gritty substance, across an etching plate and working away the carborundum, which scratches the image into the plate. This is then printed as a relief and can be further worked into until the artist is satisfied. The artists called the process the carbograph, even though Thrash wanted to call it the Opheliagraph, after his late mother. Working alongside his studiomate Hubert Mesibov and his supervisor Michael Gallagher, the carborundum mezzotint was finetuned and perfected between the three of their contributions to the process. It is unknown exactly who should be credited with what in the creation of the carbograph, but it certainly marks the beginning of a successful collaboration between the artists. This was a win in the FAP's book, and when

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[15] Curran had been asking artists to sign a statement that rejected the union, and created an environment that suited her needs rather than the needs of the artists she managed. Cindy Medley-Buckner, "The Fine Print Workshop of the Philadelphia Federal Art Project," in *Dox Thrash: An African American Master Printmaker Rediscovered*, by John Ittman, Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2001. 43-51.

[16] John Ittman, "Dox Thrash: Revealed, a companion site to the Philadelphia Museum of Art exhibit: *Dox Thrash: An African American Master Printmaker Rediscovered."*

Gallagher brought his example of the process to administration, they acknowledged it as such. Although it did not receive as much attention in the press as would have been expected at the start, the first exhibited carborundum prints were displayed at the most comprehensive FAP exhibition in the state at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 1938. The show included Dox Thrash's exceptional self-portrait titled *Mr. X* [1930], alongside Gallagher's enthralling *Anthracite* and Mesibov's *Smoker*, as well as twenty-two other prints, amongst the total one hundred sixty-three pieces of art from the Pennsylvania FAP.[17] (see Figure 6) This print is an excellent early example of what would come from the process for Thrash's artistic output. The texture that is present from the process allows for a level of tactility that accentuates realness and emotion of Thrash's sitter, which is something that is seen in every carborundum print that he created. Further, the contrast is not as honed in and bold as it became as he continued to work in the process, but the use of it in *Mr. X* still highlights the depth and volume of his model.

When the show was on, there were only a couple mentions of Thrash and the new process in the local papers, which was a surprise to the once-ecstatic administrators who were ready to take credit for their employees' creations. The Philadelphia Art News ran an article titled "New Print Process Developed," written by the FAP field supervisor Richard Hood that was meant to stir conversations about the carborundum prints for the gain of his office. This effectively worked, even though the press did not immediately alight with a passion for this new process. It was rarely associated with the individual artists that created it, with the credit instead going to the studio they created the process within. This reversed in the following year when Thrash and Gallagher received a full review from Dorothy Grafly after an exhibition of their prints at the A.C.A Gallery that showered the artists with praise. Grafly lauded the realism present in Thrash's oeuvre

[17] Ittman. *Dox Thrash: An African American Master Printmaker Rediscovered*, 17.

that focused on the everyday life of the African American. Gallagher and Mesibov would go on to demonstrate the process at the Art Alliance in the elite Rittenhouse section of the city later that year without Thrash, but all three artists enjoyed an uptick in their exhibitions.[18]

Thrash and Sam Brown were both included in the Baltimore Museum of Art's 1939 *Contemporary Negro Art*, which was a trailblazing exhibit for a large institution in that region of the country. The show did remarkably well, earning praise from the assistant director of the museum Charles R. Rogers and reportedly bringing in 12,000 people during its two weeks of being open. That same season he was involved in two other shows, both in Philadelphia, and attained the compliments of Alain Locke, the first African American Rhodes Scholar, a well known author and philosopher, who stated that Thrash was "one of our most skillful technicians." The success Thrash had found in 1939 spilled over and multiplied in 1940, grew into full credit in the Black Philadelphia community for the discovery of carbographics, the enhancement of the carborundum process, an engagement and marriage to Edna McAllister, the growth of his social club into a superb new space, the publication of his images in Locke's newest book, and numerous exhibitions all over the country met with press that finally attributed his successes to him.[19]

The change of pace continued for Thrash, with more exhibitions, more press, and the acquisition of his work by important institutions. In 1941 the Baltimore Museum of Art was given a watercolor from the same year, *Griffin Hills* [1937], which was purchased by the Art Committee of the Women's Cooperative Civil League of Baltimore for the African American community of the city. (see Figure 7) This watercolor is indicative of

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[18] Ittman. *Dox Thrash: An African American Master Printmaker Rediscovered*, 17.
[19] John Ittman, "Dox Thrash: Revealed, a companion site to the Philadelphia Museum of Art exhibit: *Dox Thrash: An African American Master Printmaker Rediscovered.*"

Thrash's other work in the medium, and provides an example of similar content being depicted uniquely in a different medium when compared to his black and white printwork landscapes. While the view is the same view of his childhood home in both *Griffin Hills* and *Landscape with Farm Buildings*, the feelings evoked from the pieces are incredibly different. In the former, the bold, warm colors fill the paper over splashes of bright, satisfying green grass, seemingly inviting the audience into the frame. These colors breathe life into the scene, as do the people who are present in the foreground of the image that feels like a teased out memory from his boyhood spent enjoying his time outdoors. In the latter, the boldness comes from the contrast between the black and white of an aquatint that allows for a kind of subtlety and nuance of quietness that is not present in *Griffin Hills*. The scene in *Landscape with Farm Building*, while still more inviting than his later landscapes, is cold in comparison to *Griffin Hills*. This shows Thrash's mastery of his chosen mediums, specifically that he chose what to use according to how he could manipulate it to express himself through it; this trend continued throughout his entire body of work.

A turning point in his work occured when he focused his attention more on the "worker" and the female nude while still giving much of his time to scenes of his rural past. This started at the beginning of the United States involvement in World War II in 1942, coinciding with the end of the Federal Arts Project. Many of Thrash's cohort from the FAP went to work in the defense field, he did not, although not for lack of trying. When he attempted to apply for a position for painting airplanes, he was met with racism when he was refused a blank application form due to his skin color. He decided to follow his first letter to Washington, D.C. of commendation for the Philadelphia FAP with a letter of condemnation about the Philadelphia Navy Yard. Instead of dismissing the situation and moving on, Thrash wrote a letter informing them that he had somehow obtained a blank application and was going to be applying stating: "I am vitally

interested in the outcome of this war and am not concerned in racial prejudices."[20] When the issue was unresolvable, Thrash decided to work at a shipyard just outside of the city where he spent his time making signs.

The shift in his work followed a social realism thread, focused on the minute worker in larger industrial settings. He specifically depicted the shipyards in a few prints, including *Launching* [1942], which pulls at the stupendous and proud nature of the hulking pile of metal that had been finely crafted into a ship, an example of the might of the laborer. (see Figure 8) Some of the focus on the heroization of the defense laborer was made in the Print Studio during the final days of the FAP, as it was the first office asked for support of the war, as early as February 1941. The artists nicknamed the project headquarters "Artesanal for Defense" after the request came through from the capitol to help advertise the importance of the homefront war effort.[21] This thread of making the laborer the hero of the scene like in *Defense Worker* [1941] was balanced with the miniaturization of the workers against industrial backdrops that seem to involve the viewer by taking up the entire page and refusing to give the audience a visual restspot in the composition, putting them in the position of a worker. (see Figure 9) *Demolition* [c. 1940] serves as a prime example where the individuals are oblivious to the scene being captured because they are so engrossed by what they are doing in order to give life to the machines they command and spaces they build. (see Figure 10) The lack of awareness from the people in these images is in stark contrast to the treatment he gives to sitters for his portraits, who are individualized and given a sense of autonomy, even if they are posed nude. This is not always the case as some workers, while dwarfed in scale and

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[20] Philadelphia Navy Yard, RG 228, Records of Committee on Fair Employment, Regional Case Records--Region III. Closed Cases Aug 1941-Mar1946, N-Z, box 24, HM 9-92, entry 70, folder (T-V) quoted in Ittman. *Dox Thrash: An African American Master Printmaker Rediscovered,* Note 144, 155.

[21] Norman Abbot, "Artesenal for Defense," Philadelphia Record, April, 4 1941, section 2 p.21 quoted in Ittman. *Dox Thrash: An African American Master Printmaker Rediscovered,* Note 36, 154.

therefore hierarchical importance, are actively engaging with the viewer like in *Shipfitters* [1941]. (see Figure 11) The four figures are presented in the foreground, occupying about an eighth of the print, which is more than in either of the aforementioned examples of the defense based work, and three of the four are engaging the viewer by returning the gaze, one is even waving. The individual closest to the center of the composition, however, leans exhaustively on a tool, staring out of frame, refusing to interact with the action of being depicted, although knowingly allowing it. All of these works were created in direct response to the experience Dox Thrash was having as a disabled veteran during the war crisis on the homefront, and shows the intersectional responses he was having to his world at that time as a proud American veteran, racialized Black man, and successful artist.

Thrash approached the art historical genre of female nudes throughout his lengthy career and revamped it with Black models in lieu of the Eurocentric white versions that litter the halls of museums across the globe. He had been making a few in the years previous to working at the Works Progress Administration, but they seemed to have taken a more prominent position in his work once he had gained a more stable position in the city. His work with the female Black nude was unparalleled, the sheer amount of work that he created with live models gives significance to the collection, but the attention he paid to the humanity of his sitters is what stands out today. While white artists were using Black people as tropes in their art, Thrash was shedding artistic light on a genre little touched before him.

The nudes Thrash created range in scale, medium, as well as content. His most well known nudes are carborundum prints, much like most of his popular oeuvre. The richness of the black tones in the prints lend a depth to the dark skin tones he depicted, and effortlessly added texture to the shadows that Thrash heavily relied on to bring emotion to his work. The process of beginning from a full black field and then working

the print to bring the highlight in seems to give the figures volume, and make them feel tangible, as if the viewer could feel the warmth on her skin if they touched her. Thrash brings the viewer close enough in some frames to make that interaction possible, but in others denies access to the sitter by creating dreamlike scenes, like in *Nude on a Horse*, from the 1940s or 1950s. (see Figure 12) The reclined woman's figure poetically floats in front of the horse's form, at times echoing the musculature of the horse, with her outline becoming an extension of the outline of the horse. The texture of the horse's spotted coat contrasts with the smooth, flowing definition of the woman's skin, which helps define where the horse ends and the woman begins. While the texture is palpable, the fantastical nature of the placement of the figures in the composition make it impossible for the viewer to engage the subjects beyond viewership.

The mid-1940s into the 1950s were steeped in success for Thrash. He was given solo exhibitions, was included in group shows in his social clubs where he was also appointed to leadership positions like the Pyramid Club, given recognition in publications for his contributions to the printmaking community, was hired by the Philadelphia Housing Authority to paint homes, and bought a home of his own at 2340 West Columbia Avenue (later renamed Cecil B. Moore Avenue) in 1944. This home became his residence, while his previous apartment approximately a block away would be used as a shared studio with his colleague and friend Sam Brown.[22] During this time, his work included more cityscapes, genre scenes of everyday Black life, female nudes, as well as modernist abstractions. The contrast in his prints during these years became deeper, and the details seem less realized. It was during this time when his education

[22] Ittman, 137.

was expanded by attending lectures and curator talks at all of the galleries, museums, and clubs that he could attend.[23]

Thrash continued to play a role in the Philadelphia art community throughout the rest of his life. His work continued to become less detailed, with heavier handed abstractions into the 1950s, although it still packed powerful emotional overtones. Earlier in that decade he had traveled to Europe, and it can be certain that his exposure to more examples of abstract art there influenced his work. Thrash retired from the Philadelphia Housing Authority in 1958, and a year later he sold his home and moved his wife and himself into an apartment on Broad Street, around the corner from the Pyramid Club.[24] He continued to share a studio with Sam Brown, although no longer on Columbia Avenue, the studio was still in Sharswood, on Ridge Avenue. While he did foray into different art mediums like watercolors and etchings during his career, Thrash worked in lots of woodcuts, lino cuts, block prints, and carborundum prints towards the end of his life. The most recent of his work, however, is often only pencil on paper, in what curator Ron Rumford of Dolan/Maxwell Galleries believes were preliminary sketches for work that he had planned to create into plates, but ultimately did not have the time to complete.[25]

Thrash carved out a place for himself in the artistic scene of Jazz era Philadelphia. By being a member of Black social clubs and professional organizations, he was able to interact with important figures in the community who were struck by his talent and work ethic. This is proven by his long list of inclusions in exclusive and juried exhibitions, but also by the paper trail of his friends and acquaintances. Peppered

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[23] David R. Brigham, "Dox Thrash and the Pyramid Club." in *Dox Thrash: An African American Master Printmaker Rediscovered*, by John Ittman, Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2001, 53-63.
[24] Ittman, 138.
[25] Dolan/Maxwell Galleries is a local collector of Thrash, and Rumford is a personal champion of his work. Ron Rumford, interviewed by the author, Philadelphia, April, 26, 2021.

through the archives of the Philadelphia Museum of Art are letters that note Thrash's artistic output, like Earl Horter's correspondence with Mary Curran sometime around 1934, which states he is a "…very worthy artist…" that has "…real talent in his works."[26] Along with historic materials, there are also written synopsis of interviews contemporary to Thrash's 2001 retrospective that detail the fondness the community had for him, outlined in quotes from family members of Thrash's friends and business associates that comment on how his work could be found throughout the homes and businesses of North Philadelphia, simply because people liked him and cared for his art.[27] He imparted wisdom on the next generation with his lasting impression on younger artists like Tyler School of Art graduate Paul Keene, who said "what he did was establish a work ethic, which we tried to follow as best we could."[28]

While Dox Thrash was held as an influential figure by his contemporaries, he has drifted away from the spotlight and out of the historical narrative in more recent years. Despite being widely collected in high caliber art institutions like the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Philadelphia Museum of Art, and Smithsonian American Art Museum, his works are perpetually "not on view," and only taken out of storage for temporary exhibitions. Many of his inclusions in archives across the country are only his work tied to the Works Progress Administration, so while he is collected widely, the depth of the collections are shallow at best. This once well known artist, beloved by his community, lived only blocks from Temple University's main campus and worked with individuals from our institution, and yet he had never been discussed in any of my classes nor was he known by any of my cohort when I spoke about him. This was in spite of the fact that there was an emphasis placed in our classes on utilizing local art institutions and their

[26] Earl Horter writing on behalf of Dox Thrash, circa 1934, Federal Art Project and earlier relief programs Correspondence, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Library and Archives.
[27] Quote from Clarence Wood, Dox Thrash, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Library and Archives.
[28] Quote from Paul Keene, Dox Thrash, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Library and Archives.

archives with many field trips, of which many that we visited included Thrash in their holdings, yet never highlighted him. Even the Charles Blockson Collection at Temple University houses numerous materials that includes Thrash and his involvement in the Pyramid Club.

While his work did not arise in my lectures at Tyler School of Art, his name was evoked in classrooms across the city in the University of Pennsylvania's architectural department. Students were doing exercises centered on the preservation of sites throughout the city, and the home that Dox Thrash lived in was one of the project sites because of its unique challenges.[29] For Maya Thomas, University of Pennsylvania graduate and project manager for Mural Arts Philadelphia, this class exercise became the Dox Thrash House Project, which is the reason I learned about Thrash. The group has raised awareness of the influence that Thrash had in the culture of the neighborhood, and yet they faced years of battles to find the support that they needed to preserve the home. The struggles that the Dox Thrash House Project went through and Thrash's work echo each other, both were at the center of innovation and are now covered in dust waiting for a revival. Now with the group bringing Thrash's name into the fold through the preservation of his home, it is time that his work experienced the same renaissance.

[29] Interview with Alli Davis of the Dox Thrash House Project, March 26, 2021.

CHAPTER 3

THE QUESTIONS OF PRESERVATION

The glory of Dox Thrash's artistic output during his lifetime and the demise of that legacy thereafter are echoed in the story of the battle to preserve his home. While his work has not been destroyed due to the lack of historical recognition it has received, Thrash's home has. For example, the reaction to place a Historical Preservation marker in front of the home that stood in near-ruin by the Philadelphia Historic Commission, feels similar to the temporary exhibitions that Thrash's work is sometimes included in by art institutions that keep his work locked away in their archives. Those decisions are made while there could be time and resources dedicated to improving the building or including his work in exhibitions that are more than temporary explorations into Black life or the Federal Arts Project. The injustices suffered by Thrash's legacy have cut deep, yet the work of the Dox Thrash House Project and dedicated individuals peppered throughout art institutions are working towards lessening the impact and improving upon the past.

The Dox Thrash House Project is singular in many ways. People may try to compare the space to other local historical places like the Betsy Ross House, which is another home in Philadelphia that was preserved as a cultural institution. Even though these both started as preservation projects, the Betsy Ross House was never left to rot like the Dox Thrash House had been until the last three years of activism changed that circumstance. This comparison is one that can be made repeatedly in Philadelphia: a white historic space is preserved, while a Black historic space is demolished to accommodate an unrelated redevelopment project.

This is a symptom of the racist system that built the city and continues to be upheld by board-run committees like the Philadelphia Historic Commission (PHC). At present, the entirety of the bodies that make up the Committee on Historic Designations,

Architectural Committee, and Committee on Financial Hardship within the PHC are white, while the two women of color on the board of seven PHC members are set apart by titular differences. It is clear that while there is minimized inclusion of Black voices on the commission, they are being designated to an exterior voice rather than the voice of the commission with the inclusion of "Representative of Community…" in their titles.[30] This kind of structure has lent itself to systems that uphold historic and cultural jewels in the city that are close to the PHC and their personal vision of the image of the city, something inextricably linked to their implicit bias.[31]

The decisions this body makes directly affects what buildings of historical and cultural significance continue to exist, and which are demolished to make way for something new.[32] The PCH is the same governing body that made the original decision to add a historical marker to Thrash's house in 2013 instead of working to actively preserve the space, in a way, allowing for the building to fall into disrepair while at the same time lauding it as important. Author and director of All The Philly Jazz, Faye Anderson, wrote about the specific case of the Henry Minton house at 204 South 12th Street in her piece on Design Advocacy Group's website "Henry Minton House, Systemic Racism and Historic Preservation." She outlined the importance of understanding the double standards raised by the PHC in reference to the treatment of the restoration of the Betsy Ross House on 3rd Street and Arch Street compared to the treatment of the Minton House. The Betsy Ross House's entire front facade was restored to its condition

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[30] To find this information I searched for each member listed on the Philadelphia Historical Commission website About page and found their website and/or LinkedIn. members.phila.gov/departments/philadelphia-historical-commission/about/ list

[31] "Research on "implicit bias" suggests that people can act on the basis of prejudice and stereotypes without intending to do so." Michael Brownstein and Edward N. Zalta, "Implicit Bias," Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Stanford University, July 31, 2019), https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/implicit-bias/.

[32] This is outlined in their Policy and Purpose section of their Rules and Regulations, that they are charged with whether or not to protect or preserve a space, and if not, what should be allowed to happen to it. The latest revision of the Rules and Regulations was March 12, 2021. https://www.phila.gov/media/20190327101224/Historical-Commission-rules-regulations.pdf

contemporary to Ross, but that took extensive work as it was used as a commercial space and had gone through multiple renovations between the colonial period and the mid-20th century.[33]

This allowance for a slip of the "authentic" was afforded to this particular space within this historic district, but the Minton House was not privileged to this morphability. While the house had indeed been altered, it still echoed the same window placements and shape of the building, much like the Ross House. However, the Commission chose to deny the Minton House, and wiped their hands clean of the demolition papers they had just signed for another example of Black history in Philadelphia. One must wonder how they might contextualize their decision to fund the amount of restoration the Betsy Ross House underwent, with their decision to reject the Minton House. This contextualization is important because it would allow for recognition of what is holding back equity in preservation, specifically within Philadelphia since both of these contradictory viewpoints were established by the same governing body, although with a couple decades between.

These kinds of decisions, creating double standards for what is allowed to be considered history worth preserving, upholds the racist structure by which this country was founded upon and perpetuates harm on Black generations of today and tomorrow. The consequences of these rejections are permanent losses of tangible connections to important historical touchpoints in our city's history. In some cases, rejected applications are encouraged to be worked on and submitted for reconsideration, but in the cases of the 1513 Christian Street house and Minton House, resubmission was not an option because developers were already taking over the sites the moment their applications were denied. These governing bodies that are meant to protect and preserve

[33] Faye Anderson, "Henry Minton House, Systemic Racism and Historic Preservation," Design Advocacy Group, Oct 18, 2020. https://designadvocacy.org/forum/henry-minton-house-systemic-racism-and-historic-preservation

the history of our city have continuously fed Black historical sites and communities to the backhoes of million dollar redevelopment projects.

This is all clearly compounded by the historic redline-scarred landscape, and is brought up bloody and raw once again in these fights for preservation. The legacy of this scar on the neighborhood is seen in issues with deeding of homes, funding, and lack of overall development interest in sites that are more expensive to repair is common, and were all contributing factors in the problems the Dox Thrash House Project has faced. This is all laid out in maps provided by the Dox Thrash House Project of the Sharswood community. To give context to those geographical surveys, this map from the website of the Office of the City Controller, Rebecca Rhynhart, represents the grades given to each district in Philadelphia by the Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC) in 1937.[34] (see Figures 13, 14, and 15)

An arm of the Federal Housing Administration, the HOLC graded each city's neighborhoods, the assessment reflected the sale prices on real estate in the area, rent rates, quality of the homes, as well as the heavily defining factor of racial or ethnic make-up of the community who lives there. This means that the whiter a neighborhood was, the higher it was graded, and the further a neighborhood shifted from whiteness the lower their grade sank, leaving Black communities as the lowest valued districts. These grades were used as the deciding factor for whether or not banks would be wise to expend capital by financing loans in the areas deemed "risky," represented in the red areas on the map; this is why this structure is called "redlining."[35] Redlining also affected how much government funding was given to each community, which directly affected education and services like libraries, transportation, park services, among many others.

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[34] "Mapping the Legacy of Structural Racism in Philadelphia," Office of the Controller, January 23, 2020. https://controller.phila.gov/philadelphia-audits/mapping-the-legacy-of-structural-racism-in-philadelphia/

[35] "Mapping the Legacy of Structural Racism in Philadelphia."

When the juxtaposition of certain graded neighborhoods existed, such as a redlined Black district next to a "best" graded white district, oftentimes the city would add barriers poorly disguised as infrastructure like highways or train tracks. This would also give the government the power to take control of ownership in those lowest rated communities under eminent domain, and this was not a secret. Many city officials used plain language to describe how they wanted to "contain" or "get rid of" Black populations.[36]

The Sharswood neighborhood was designated in the lowest category during this initial assessment by the HOLC in the 1930s, and continues to be affected deeply by the transformation that the area underwent at the hand of the government. The once bustling business and arts corridor that was Ridge Avenue has all but disappeared, with only a handful of Jazz era monuments still standing, with many more memorialized in nearby murals. They act as painful reminders of what was lost, and proud reminders of the rich history that the community has. Cultural hubs for Black Philadelphians like the Pearl Theater and the Checker Club were just down the street from Thrash, but is now where the headquarters for the Philadelphia Housing Authority (PHA) resides, as well as empty lots that continue north on Ridge Avenue from where the PHA is situated. The maps below are the figures mentioned earlier, detailing the shifting topography of Sharswood between the 1920s, slightly before Thrash's arrival in 1930, and today.

The effects of the HOLC's redlining were quick to see, at least in spaces where Thrash spent time at. When speaking to Ron Rumford of Dolan/Maxwell, he reflected on the history of this issue in the community surrounding Thrash's house in Sharswood that is represented in the artist's oeuvre. There is an aquatint titled *Blighted Homes* which

[36] Richard Rothstein, "The Racial Achievement Gap, Segregated Schools, and Segregated Neighborhoods – a Constitutional Insult," Economic Policy Institute, November 12, 2014. https://www.epi.org/publication/the-racial-achievement-gap-segregated-schools-and-segregated-neighborhoods-a-constitutional-insult/

was created sometime around 1948, where it was evident that Thrash had found it necessary to document the changes in the neighborhood as the physical effects of the redlining began to really grip Sharswood. (see Figure 16) The print that was available at Swann Auction Galleries is a wonderful example of the deep black tones that Thrash liked to work with, and reads clearly into the shadows that almost conceal the home that has been left to disrepair. One of Thrash's most used motifs, including a small figure for scale, adds another layer of connection and life to the home that they are connected to via the clothesline, allowing the abandonment of the home just on the other side of the clothesline to pack an even more powerful punch. Rumford ruminated on how it must have felt to live in a space that was so clearly set to ruin while thinking about this print, and it seems as though Thrash was concerned with this topic as well. These kinds of scars left on the landscape had only just begun while Thrash lived in Sharswood, ultimately selling his home on 24th and Columbia Avenue (now renamed Cecil B. Moore Avenue) and moving to an apartment elsewhere in Philadelphia in 1959.[37] Those scars started when the white population fell 82% from 70,783 to 13,194 between 1950 and 1960. In the same time, the Black population added half as many people as were already living there, from 94,609 to 142,396.[38] With less resources due to redlining, and more people, the environment would only become more volatile as time wore on. By 1959, it was enough to make Dox Thrash and many of his cohort at the Pyramid Club, leave the neighborhood, which was largely cited as one of the downfalls of the organization.[39]

The house that Thrash lived and worked in while inhabiting Sharswood had a life beyond his occupancy. Thrash sold the house to Abyssinia Hayes, more popularly known

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[37] Ron Rumford, Interview by author, Philadelphia, April 26, 2021
[38] Jeff Gammage, "The Riot That Forever Changed a Neighborhood, and Philadelphia," The Philadelphia Inquirer, The Philadelphia Inquirer, August 24, 2014. https://www.inquirer.com/philly/news/20140824_Fifty_years_ago_in_North_Philadelphia__when_a_rumor_ignited_a_massive_riot.html
[39] David R. Brigham, "Dox Thrash and the Pyramid Club."

as Shayhk Muhammad Ali Hassan, a community leader, who has been called the leader of the National Muslim Improvement Association of America and Black Activist.[40] While living there, Hassan grew his family and his property count, as he is cited to have owned over fifty properties throughout the neighborhood, with ten on the street where his house sat at the corner of 24th Street.[41] The community was lively during these days, despite the effects of redlining that were still being exacerbated by the policing, or the lack thereof in the neighborhoods deemed undesirable, in Philadelphia. There were still commercial corridors down Columbia and Ridge Avenues, although it did not resemble the height of the neighborhood previous to redlining.[42] In 1962, the Free Library branch for North Philadelphia moved from 17th and Montgomery to two doors down from the now Shaykh Muhammad Ali Hassan house, adding a new landmark on the Avenue, and important lasting cultural hub for the community.[43] Despite this new library and many businesses, two years after its opening 19% of the crime in the city was located in North Philadelphia, although only 9% of the city's population lived there. These conditions drew the racialized moniker "the Jungle," from the police force, white Philadelphians, as well as young members of the community.[44]

The tensions in the neighborhood peaked in the summer of 1964, with a multi-day riot breaking out in late August, that left Shaykh Muhammad Ali Hassan arrested as an instigator of the riot. During the riot, multiple establishment civil rights leaders

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[40] "Philadelphia Riot Trial Starts," *The New York Times*, The New York Times, November 10, 1964. https://www.nytimes.com/1964/11/10/archives/philadelphia-riot-trial-starts.html and Fox. *Shayke Muhammad [Shaykh Muhammad Hassan] Taken into Custody*. Photograph. Philadelphia, August 31, 1964. Temple University.
[41] Dana Rice, "Shaykh Muhammad House," Dox Thrash House, April 26, 2018. https://doxthrashhouse.wordpress.com/2018/04/26/shaykh-muhammad-house/
[42] Nicole Maurantonio, "Rhetoric Faculty Publications," UR Scholarship Repository, University of Richmond, 2012. https://scholarship.richmond.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1041&context=rhetoric-faculty-publications
[43] "Cecil B. Moore Library," Free Library of Philadelphia. https://libwww.freelibrary.org/locations/cecil-b-moore-library
[44] Nicole Maurantonio.

attempted to stop the looting and violence, but to no avail. This riot mainly targeted white and Jewish-owned businesses within the neighborhood, causing millions of dollars in damage. Multiple conspiracy theories flourished in the wake of the riot, including that it was premeditated, and ultimately it was this fear that fueled the indictment of Hassan, even though the level of involvement of those arrested was questionable.[45] He was represented by Philadelphia civil rights leader Reverend Cecil B. Moore, the later namesake of Columbia Avenue, in court where he pleaded not guilty.[46] While his counsel was renowned, he was convicted and sentenced to eighteen months to three years in prison, with a monetary fine.[47] The riot fueled an accelerated effect of the redlining, becoming even more extreme than it had been in the previous decade, noticeable in the slow rise of Black-owned businesses compared to the sharp decrease in white and Jewish-owned businesses.[48] While there was a rise in Black-owned businesses, it did not equal to the amount of white and Jewish-owned businesses that left the area, and that could easily be because of the lack of loans that were given in the area due to redlining.

Since the mid-20th century to 2010, there has been a 65% decrease in population of North Philadelphia, easily seen in the maps provided by the Dox Thrash House Project.[49] The landscape across the neighborhood is largely still scarred with vacant lots and abandoned buildings where homes and businesses once stood. Thousands of properties were lost in "tangled titles," where owners of homes did not legally deed their property to another person, leaving the ownership contestable and often gives the person

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[45] Hillary S. Kativa, "What: The Columbia Avenue Riots (1964)," Temple University Libraries, Temple University. http://northerncity.library.temple.edu/exhibits/show/civil-rights-in-a-northern-cit/collections/columbia-avenue-riots/the-columbia-avenue-riots--196
[46] "Philadelphia Riot Trial Starts."
[47] "Muslim Leader Gets Term in Riot; He Also Is Fined in Inciting Philadelphia Violence," *The New York Times*, The New York Times, January 12, 1965. https://www.nytimes.com/1965/01/12/archives/muslim-leader-gets-term-in-riot-he-also-is-fined-in-inciting.html
[48] Kavita.
[49] Jeff Gammage.

assuming the deed the responsibility of any taxes or fees necessary to transfer the title.[50] This was one of the issues that held the Dox Thrash House Project back, as when Shayhk Muhammad Ali Hassan passed away in 2002 he had not deeded the property to any of his descendents. The house sat in disrepair, ultimately awaiting the same fate as every other blighted building in the neighborhood, until Maya Thomas realized what was at stake.

[50] Dana Rice, "'Untangling' Title," Dox Thrash House, May 21, 2018. https://doxthrashhouse.wordpress.com/2018/05/20/title-and-ownership/

CHAPTER 4

LEGACY: THE DOX THRASH HOUSE PROJECT

Beginning in earnest in 2017, the Dox Thrash House Project (DTHP) was made up of a few recent postgraduates from the University of Pennsylvania's preservationist and architecture programs. Maya Thomas, the founder of this project, started it as her MA thesis and included Dana Rice and Chris Mulford as it grew beyond a theoretical assignment into a realistic endeavor. Since then, the efforts have only grown to include other volunteers, but also to further engage the community. In 2017, the Community Futures Lab hosted one of the first workshops with the community titled "Sharswood Thrash," which was attended by folks from positions in community organizations, nearby neighbors, students in universities surrounding the area, and those generally interested in learning more about Dox Thrash.[51] Unfortunately, in the face of this excitement was the threat of a sheriff's sale due to fines the house had accrued due to the state of disrepair that it was left in.[52] The looming sheriff's sale did not deter people from becoming invested in this part of the neighborhood's cultural fabric. After a short presentation on the biography of Thrash, the floor was opened to conversations about the possibilities for the future of the building. In evidence of the interest of the community members, the conversation flowed naturally and needed no formal structure to stay constructive.[53]

The Philadelphia Housing Authority (PHA), ironically the former employer of Dox Thrash, took the property to sheriff's sale in 2018, where a community non-profit developing organization, Beech Community Enterprises, was outbid by a New York City-

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[51] Community Futures Lab is a group whose main mission is to act as a time capsule for the Brewerytown-Sharswood neighborhood in Philadelphia. *About FuturesLab.community*. Community Futures. https://futureslab.community/about

[52] "Briefing Video," Presented by Beech Community Services, Hosted by Beech Community Services, Zoom presentation, December 1, 2021.

[53] Alli Davis, interviewed by author, Zoom, March 26, 2021.

based developer, JAS Group Associates. During this time, a tree in the back of the property fell on the already critically damaged roof which collapsed, taking the back wall with it. That developer attempted to have the building torn down instead of repairing it, but was met with great resistance from the DTHP, who took the company to court and was awarded a stay. After that, the developer reached out to Beech in order to work out a deal, negotiations went on for months as it was slowed by the onset of the novel coronavirus pandemic of 2020. The deal officially closed in fall of 2020 in favor of Beech Community Enterprises, and work immediately began to find a partner to take on the construction and stabilization that so desperately needed to begin.[54]

In February of 2018 Maya Thomas sat down with the Mural Arts program for an interview about her involvement and viewpoints on the DTHP and a few other culturally relevant topics. When asked about the intersections of race and preservation in Philadelphia, Thomas reflected that a large portion of the reason locations are upheld as worthy of preservation is because of their proximity to the elite, referring to those who make active inclusions, and therefore exclusions, in history. This has left marginalized historic people and places largely out of the conversation when it comes time to induct new properties into the Historic Registry or find viable funding for preservation. Thankfully, there was enough community pushback on the development of the Dox Thrash House that the buyer of the house from its sheriff's sale a few months after Thomas gave that interview could do nothing to the existing building except for necessary structural repairs, due to the regulations on building in a historically registered building.[55]

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[54] "Briefing Video."

[55] Laura Kochman, "How to Keep History Alive: Q&A with Preservationist Maya Thomas," Mural Arts Philadelphia, February 5, 2018. https://www.muralarts.org/blog/keep-history-alive-qa-preservationist-maya-thomas/

The goals for the building at the time of the December 2021 briefing meeting according to the Beech Communities project manager Akeem Dixon, included a commercial property being housed in the first floor, and possibly the basement if the space is reconstructable, and affordable residential space on the second and third floors. Dixon stressed that this residential space would be created with Black, low-income artists in mind. At the point the project was at in 2021, Dixon left the question of what will occupy the commercial space up in the air as he explained this project is like "building the plane as you fly it." While the conversation about what business will occupy the commercial space was a question for further along in the project progression, it is an important question to think about now as partners are being reached out to in order to fund this endeavor.[56] While Dixon was unable to answer my questions about the sources of funding that they had applied to or were thinking of reaching out to, we could posit that reaching out to local institutions with Dox Thrash related holdings could be beneficial by both the income and the physical materials that could be allotted to the new location. Thankfully, many of the institutions that fit that bill are also committed to fleshing out their community engagement outside of the four white walls, as stated in many mission statements.

I conducted a digital interview with a Dox Thrash House Project volunteer, Alli Davis, which provided a more indepth look at the structure and current position of the group, on March 26, 2021. Davis is a relatively new member of the project; she began volunteering with the group after finishing a project for her University of Pennsylvania preservation studio in December 2020 regarding the property. In conversation about what drew her to becoming a volunteer, she mentioned feeling held back by the purely theoretical exercise that her project wound up being and felt that it was important to

[56] "Briefing Video."

bring those theories into practice, even if it is not exactly the end results she came to with her project group. This spirit seems to be the driving force behind much of the core membership of the DTHP, who consist of either current University of Pennsylvania students or recent graduates who are also working full-time jobs.

Their passion for the project brings them to find the time to be involved in monthly meetings held between the founding members and Beech that keeps the group abreast on the current development updates. Beyond these meetings, volunteers have been working to reach out to cultural institutions and fundraising platforms to look for partners to help them realize their goals. Over the summer of 2020 the DTHP launched a grassroots crowdfunding campaign to help secure the building and met their $100,000 goal by September.[57] This fundraising allowed for Beech to acquire the property.

Their relationships with cultural institutions have taken less of a monetary route and more of a material one, where knowledge and archived material about Dox Thrash is shared with the members. Most recently they have begun corresponding with the African American Museum in Philadelphia, which will be the site of an exhibition that will be an expansion on the 2002 Philadelphia Museum of Art retrospective of Thrash put on in partnership with Dolan/Maxwell.[58] Ron Rumford from Dolan/Maxwell has been excited to be involved in the DTHP by providing biographical information about Thrash during community engagements.[59] They have also been in contact with representatives of the Philadelphia Museum of Art who indicated that the museum would be happy to work

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[57] Valerie Russ, "Philly's Dox Thrash House Will Get a Second Life with Preservationists Acting as Investor-Partners," *The Philadelphia Inquirer,* December 19, 2020. https://www.inquirer.com/news/dox-thrash-house-sharswood-north-philly-project-beech-community-services-20201216.html

[58] While this conversion took place in 2021, there is still no mention a year later of the Thrash exhibition that Rumford had told me was experiencing some delays due to the coronavirus pandemic.

[59] "The Dox Thrash Legacy: Black Future Campaign," Youtube video, 59:48, Posted by "Manhattan Graphics Center," July 24, 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-76Uvx2xHyg&t=128s

with them once their project was completed, to act as a kind of advertisement for the project and possibly send employees to give lectures at the space. The Free Library of Philadelphia is also keen to be involved in some way, although they did not provide what that kind of relationship would look like. At present, the Cecil B. Moore branch of the library has done events centered on the art of Thrash and printmaking techniques.

All of these partnerships share the commonality of a lack of funding or physical resources being pledged towards the project.[60] There is often a sense of theoretical association hinging on "ifs," and aid offered towards certain projects based on personal relationships between material and resource providers that ultimately may not last beyond a particular scholar's tenure at any given institution, rather than an institution's concerted effort to act by way of their mission statements. This kind of influence on an institution can be seen in the involvement of Dolan/Maxwell with the legacy of Dox Thrash thanks to Ron Rumford's interest in the artist. If Rumford was not interested in Thrash, it would be fair to say that there would be a great deal less research being done on him from that private gallery that holds so much of his known work in their collection.

While Akeem Dixon was unable to tell me much about the current situation they have with their architectural team during our email exchange, there was a digital community meeting held by the Preservation Alliance of Philadelphia that I attended. This meeting gave us a few more tangible updates on the development of the building, including the choice of their architect Sulton Campbell Britt & Associates, P.C.. The choice of the architect came down to not only the price, but the personal connection and expertise of the group. Originally there were around ten applications to Beech Interplex from architects, but the developers wound up reaching out to their final choice to elicit

[60] Alli Davis, interviewed by author, Zoom, March 26, 2021.

an application from them after reviewing the ones they had organically received. They did this because of a personal connection from Stan Britt, a North Philadelphia native whose father had a relationship with Dox Thrash himself, as he was an artist from the same neighborhood. This was clearly the kind of interaction with the project that Beech Interplex was hoping for, and their proposal was chosen.[61]

Other updates included the importance of receiving funding, and the work that has gone into that behind the scenes while still continuing to work on starting the physical development of the site. Akeem Dixon explained to the audience that there were numerous funding opportunities that have been applied for, but there is a considerable lull in the time between applying and hearing back from the organizations. The usual wait has also been extended due to staffing issues everywhere due to the coronavirus pandemic. Unfortunately, that has meant delaying the preservation, although Dixon was confident that there would be positive news as the project rolled into later spring, with more in the summer as they received responses from possible funding sources. Dixon also let us know that there are a few cultural institutions that are in conversation about donating to the project, although most of them are not in final writing yet, so he did not disclose who those partnerships are with.[62] Dixon was correct in his assumptions at the meeting, and two weeks later there was an announcement that the project had been awarded $400,000 from the Pennsylvania Housing Finance Agency, as well as $198,000 from the City of Philadelphia.[63] While throwing money at the city's past mistakes does not absolve them of accountability, it does ease needs that are raised when groups like

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[61] "Dox Thrash House: Block Level Community Investment," Presented by Dox Thrash House Project and Beech Community Services, Hosted by Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia, Zoom presentation, April 6, 2021.
[62] ibid.
[63] Paul Chrystie, "Dox Thrash House to Receive Nearly $600,000 in City, State Funds: Department of Commerce," City of Philadelphia, April 14, 2021. https://www.phila.gov/2021-04-14-dox-thrash-house-to-receive-nearly-600000-in-city-state-funds/

Dox Thrash House Project and Beech Communities take on the responsibility to care for these challenging preservation sites.

In context of the history of the allocation of funds and protections to Black historical sites in Philadelphia, the Dox Thrash House is a perfect synopsis of the pitfalls that are evident to this day in the system and the ability that the city has to rectify the issues that have resulted at the mishandling of the home due to the systemic issues in Philadelphia. The Thrash house survived through decades of redlining to be one of the last semi-standing cultural touchpoints in the Sharswood neighborhood, deeming it all the more important to preserve. Thankfully, the intervention of the DTHP saved the house from the fate suffered by the Minton House at the hands of the Philadelphia Historic Commission, and there was still time to do the necessary work to bring the property back to life.

Along with his home, his artistic legacy had faded from consciousness until recent years. Once a well known, well loved, and critically acclaimed artist, he is now a name associated with the carborundum print in some printmaking history books and is known for little else. While he has been collected widely by institutions all over the country, there is often only one or two examples of his work, and there is mainly a focus on either his Federal Arts Project work in a larger collection surrounding that or examples of the carborundum print process. There was an opportunity to bring more awareness to the Thrash story and oeuvre when conversations around his home emerged, and it had to be seized. Thrash's artwork is unprecedented, masterful, and emblematic of a seldom shared intimate view of life from the perspective of a Black man in the early 20th century. The loss of either his home or his artistic output would be a devastating blow to the history of art, the city of Philadelphia, and Thrash's personal legacy, which is why it is imperative that the preservation of both his home and his legacy continue to be prioritized by both cultural institutions and funding partner.

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