

Ebony G. Patterson

...when the cuts erupt... the garden rings...and the warning is a wailing



Ebony G. Patterson: ...when the cuts erupt...the garden rings...and the warning is a wailing...
installation view, Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, September 11, 2020–February 21, 2021.
Photo: Dusty Kessler.

There is no denying the opulence of Ebony G. Patterson's surfaces. The artist uses materials associated with beauty or wealth, including tapestry, jewelry, glitter, beading, and crochet to encourage viewers to look closer, to be drawn in by shimmering textures and bright colors. Employing these luscious, verdant, rococo facades as tools or ways to "trap" the viewer physically, psychologically, and emotionally in the seductive composition the artist creates

immersive installations that suggest a feeling of an all-encompassing attraction.



Audio Tour

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Ebony G. Patterson: *...when the cuts erupt...the garden rings...and the warning is a wailing....*, installation view, Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, September 11, 2020–February 21, 2021. Photo: Dusty Kessler.

With a deeper look, beneath the vegetation Patterson has planted discarded shoes and clothing, fragmented body parts, and used children's toys—evoking loss of life and past violence. By combining her luxurious surfaces with these grotesque unearthed objects, Patterson conflates layers of beauty and layers of trauma. She states, “Because it’s so alluring, there’s so much muchness, it almost becomes a kind of fly-trap, where you get sucked in a little further, and then you have to contend with the violence.” In making such large works, the artist places us in the center of the images, urging us to consider where we are in relation to them—bearing witness to the beauty and the violence.

The Garden as Metaphor

Patterson has long been fascinated by the garden and its metaphorical possibilities. The garden is a “postcolonial” symbol in her work, where the invisible remnants of violent histories interrupt visible space. The garden, a natural but cultivated setting, has historically been a space demarcated by class and wealth. The flower garden is decorative, frivolous, and a luxury for those who have time to cultivate it for pure beauty. Decorative gardens have stood as symbols of leisure around the world since colonial times and that association continues today, as having access to space to grow plants remains limited for those with less access to resources.

Patterson also explores the garden as a metaphor for the extension of the body. What does it mean for people who live in places with untended gardens to press forward? The garden represents those who are invisible or forgotten, yet it is here that Patterson’s lively works are filled with a sense of hope and survival: life will always grow.

The garden is also a symbol for the feminine, as suggested in the final phrase of the exhibition title,

...and the warning is a wailing...: through the body of a woman we enter the world, and through the wailing and warning of women’s voices we exit. The artist reminds us that women serve as public figures of mourning, with the garden as a space for lamentation. Patterson creates a visual pageantry akin to funeral rites, which include the accessories of bling culture—a fashion gesture that demands visibility by those unseen.



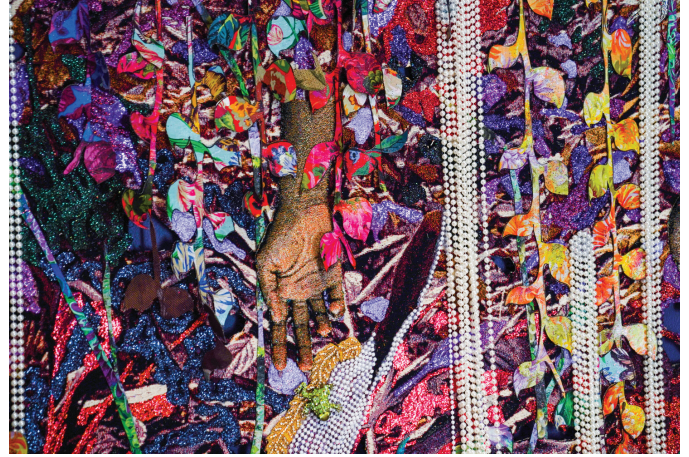
Ebony G. Patterson: *...when the cuts erupt...the garden rings...and the warning is a wailing....*, installation view (detail), Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, September 11, 2020–February 21, 2021. Photo: Dusty Kessler.

Regeneration

Within her lush gardenscapes, Patterson includes memento mori, or, symbols of transformation and regeneration—items that evolve and bear witness to the cycle of life and death: butterflies, peacocks, snakes, blossoms. In *when the land is in plumage...a peacock is in molting*, the bird shedding its feathers is the animal dissolving, a crucial step toward its renewal—just as snakes shed their skin to allow further growth and remove old attachments. Patterson cultivates the cyclical idea that we come from the earth, we exist on the earth, and we return to the earth. As such, the garden is a site of life, death, and mourning.

Memorialization

Patterson has long been engaged in a language of memorialization. By shrouding figures almost completely in her works—there is the presence of bodies no longer there, raising discomforting questions about those who are not visible. People become memorials in Patterson’s gardens—each piece is a marker for bodies overlooked. The artist often works with digitally sourced imagery of murdered, anonymous, and often young Black men, resisting the impulse to reproduce those images directly in the final installations. Instead she works with models to restage the found photos in her studio. This element of translation and reenactment is significant for Patterson because it avoids duplicating and aestheticizing violence against Black bodies. Recently her works have shifted away from including representations of entire bodies in favor of a more subtle fragmentation and inference of the body. Patterson’s works compel us to bear witness, to look, to remember. These notions are reflected in the poeticism of the artworks’ titles, whose ellipses reference piecing together fragments, or of words left missing, unwritten, or unsaid.



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Ebony G. Patterson (b. 1981 in Kingston, Jamaica; lives and works in Kingston and Chicago, IL) received the prestigious Stone & DeGuire Contemporary Art Award from her alma mater, Washington University in St. Louis, in 2018. At the time, Patterson said she planned to use the \$25,000 prize “to challenge my process in terms of scale and materiality” toward immersive garden tableaux. Patterson’s solo exhibitions and projects have been shown at many U.S. institutions including the Baltimore Museum of Art (2019), and The Studio Museum in Harlem, Atlanta Center for Contemporary Art, and SCAD Museum of Art, Savannah, GA, in 2016. Her touring exhibition *...while the dew is still on the roses...* premiered at Pérez Art Museum Miami (2018–19); traveled to Speed Art Museum, Louisville, KY (2019); and Nasher Museum of Art, Duke University, Durham, NC, 2020. Upcoming exhibitions include biennials in Liverpool and Athens, and her first solo European exhibition at Kunsthall Aarhus in Denmark, all in 2020. Patterson’s work is included in a number of public collections, including The Studio Museum in Harlem; Pérez Art Museum Miami; Museum of Arts and Design, NY; Nasher Museum of Art; Speed Art Museum; Brooklyn Museum; Virginia Museum of Fine Art, Richmond, VA; Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts; Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto; and the National Gallery of Jamaica. Patterson received a United States Artists Fellowship in 2018, and is the resident artist at the Joan Mitchell Center in New Orleans in the fall of 2020. Prior to receiving her MFA at the Sam Fox School of Design and Visual Arts, Washington University in St. Louis (2006), Patterson attended the Edna Manley College, in Kingston, Jamaica, receiving a BFA in painting (2004).

Ebony G. Patterson: ...when the cuts erupt...the garden rings...and the warning is a wailing... is organized for the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis by Wassan Al-Khudhairi, Chief Curator.

The exhibition is generously supported by Clayco, Beth Rudin DeWoody, Christy and Bill Gautreaux, Arthur Lewis and Hau Nguyen, *december*, and Carol and Michael Staenberg. Special thanks to Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago.

Related Programs

RE: Botanical Spirits

Thursday, October 15, 6:30 pm

Artist Talk: Ebony G. Patterson

Thursday, November 12, 6:30 pm

Artist’s Suggested Reading List

Hawthorne, Nathaniel. “Rappacini’s Daughter.” *The United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, 1844.

Mda, Zakes. *Ways of Dying*. South Africa: Picador, 1995.

Miller, Kei. *The Last Warner Woman*. Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2010.

Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987.

Pollan, Michael. *The Botany of Desire: A Plant’s-Eye View of the World*. New York: Penguin Random House, 2001.

Senior, Olive. *Gardening in the Tropics*. North Shields, UK: Idiomatic, 2009.

Sontag, Susan. *Regarding the Pain of Others*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003.



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