



THE ARTISTS

A Deceptively Beautiful Tapestry About Mourning

The artist Ebony G. Patterson shares an intricately embellished work that asks what it means to grieve.

Interview by Lovia Gyarkye

May 21, 2021

In each installment of The Artists, T highlights a recent or little-seen work by a Black artist, along with a few words from that artist putting the work in context. This week, we're looking at a tapestry by Ebony G. Patterson, whose solo exhibition "...when the cuts erupt... the garden rings...and the warning is a wailing..." is on view at the Institute of Contemporary Art San José. She also has work in "Staying Power," a group show curated by Monument Lab in Philadelphia.

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Name: Ebony G. Patterson

Age: 40

Based in: Chicago and Kingston, Jamaica

Originally from: Kingston, Jamaica

Where and when did you make this work? The images were shot in the summer of 2019 in Kingston, and I assembled the piece in my studio in Chicago throughout 2020. After I take and edit the photos, I send them to a commercial weaver who works them into the tapestry. When it comes back to me, I stiffen the fabric by coating the back with glue and gel. Then, I start décollaging, cutting parts of the tapestry out and determining the initial form. After that, I collage — adding fabrics, embellishments, trims and glitter.

Can you describe what is going on in the work? The woman is larger than life. We're not seeing the final gesture, we're happening upon a moment within a series of gestures. She is in a posture of contemplation or at a point of engagement. We see at the top of the neck that there is life sprouting, so I'm thinking about notions of regeneration, and the garden as a site of restoration, rebirth, burial and violence.

Right next to the figure is a wreath covered with a black ribbon that says "beloved," and below that is a black snake. Here, I'm thinking about the symbolism of snakes within a garden. They are important to the ecosystem, but metaphorically, if you think of biblical stories, the snake is also the one that deceives and misleads. Then we see a figure kneeling. When I was making this work, I wasn't thinking of Colin Kaepernick, but it's interesting how it falls into the piece.

With this work, I wanted to create something that seems so beautiful that the beauty becomes cloying. I incorporated images of butterflies because we don't think about them in the same way we do other insects, which people tend to be repulsed by. And it's interesting to think about monarchs, in particular. They feed on milkweed, which is a poisonous plant, and based on a butterfly's size and how much they consume, they should die, but they have evolved to thrive on it. I was trying to use the butterflies to hint at the volatility of life, and suggest that maybe things are a little more menacing than they might seem. The garden in this work is a larger metaphor for postcolonial states: All this beauty conceals trauma and violence. The hands are a reminder that something is not quite right, and that the past is never far behind the surface of what we see. I'm always trying to find new ways of making the audience feel a little uncomfortable.

What inspired you to make it? I was preparing for a show that I did with the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis last fall, for which I collected images of people mourning at sites of violence, and I became really aware of the women. When violent incidents happen, it is the women we hear from. At the time, I was still on social media, and I also noticed that there were a number of videos popping up of groups of women mourners in West Africa. I started thinking about the labor of mourning, and the history of paid mourning. What does it mean for Black bodies to do that kind of mourning? I was also thinking about funerary ceremonies: We mourn not because of loss but because of love, but what does it mean to think of all of that in terms of labor?

What's the work of art in any medium that changed your life? To say that any one work of art changed my life wouldn't be true, but there have been things I have seen over the years that have remained with me. In 2002, during my second year as an undergraduate student in Jamaica, I won a prestigious travel scholarship for artists and visited the U.K. for the first time. It was there that I first saw Yinka Shonibare's work — I think it was "Double Dutch" (1994) — and Jenny Saville's massive paintings. That trip, coupled with a class in installation and collage that I took with the artist Petrona Morrison the next year, was really critical for me. It was seeing the work of a number of artists, both abroad and at home in Jamaica, that helped me understand what was possible. It made me realize that all materials were available to me as a practitioner, and that it was just a matter of thinking through the language.

This interview has been edited and condensed.