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Installation view of *...when they grow up...* at the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, 2016. (Courtesy the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago; photograph Adam Reich).

## Ebony G. Patterson: ...when the cuts erupt...the garden rings... and the warning is a wailing...

by Jess Chen

[Reviews](#) / [Exhibition](#) • 11.08.2021

In 1955 fourteen-year-old Emmett Till was beaten, shot and dumped into a river in Mississippi for allegedly whistling at a white woman. Seen by thousands in a photograph for *Jet* magazine, Till's mutilated face illuminated the disregard for Black life in the United States in abject detail. Images of anti-Black violence have become increasingly common since, raising questions about the effect of circulating and viewing such images.<sup>1</sup> The exhibition *...when the cuts erupt...the garden rings...and the warning is a wailing...*, of work by the Jamaican-born artist Ebony G. Patterson at the Institute of Contemporary Art San José, takes an unconventional approach to the

representation of Black trauma. Patterson's mixed-media works are similarly preoccupied with themes of violence, grief and the aftermath of mourning, but they do not seek to shock through exposure. Her 'garden' is an entropic site where figments of imagination and memory meet, and where she employs multiple strategies to critique the exploitation of Black bodies without becoming complicit in its logic.

Questions about the ethics of representation have long complicated Patterson's practice. For her 2016 exhibition *...when they grow up...* at the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York **FIG. 1**, she showed photographs of Black children alongside items associated with childhood, such as a dollhouse, teddy bears and balloons. Part of the installation included foam blocks arranged to spell out 'TAMIR RICE' – the name of a twelve-year old African American boy shot by a white police officer in Cleveland in 2014. Although this was a clear allusion to lost childhood, Patterson did not use images of Rice or other victims, remarking, 'What would it mean for me to use images of children whose bodies have been degraded, who have not been given the kind of humanity that should have been given to them?'.<sup>2</sup> Her new show furthers these concerns about the visual plundering of Black trauma.

In the five-panel work *...and the dew cracks the earth, in five acts of lamentation...between the cuts...beneath the leaves...below the soil* **FIG. 2**, branching vines, feathered butterflies and paper flowers – some of which represent poisonous specimens – stand out against a white background. More 'living wall' than painting, each panel consists of lush overgrowth that envelops a human presence which slowly becomes apparent: a trio of headless female figures **FIG. 3**; floating body parts; a disembodied head poking out from a bouquet of peonies; an outstretched hand resting on a fern. These limbs do not imply a group of children hiding in the garden – a light-hearted game of hide-and-seek – so much as a single dismembered child. The viewer feels an urge to fit together the chopped limbs into a coherent body, a mental exercise that is as gruesome as it is futile. Compiling incompatible fragments and persuading the viewer to assemble them is emblematic of Patterson's approach to representation; she explodes the puzzle instead of solving it.

Patterson's critical method articulates the impossibility of capturing Black representation in all its complexity, refusing her audience the opportunity to fully know or understand her chosen subject. The viewer is a tertiary witness, removed from the situation by dint of time, place, abstraction and Patterson's artistic intervention. In *...and the dew cracks the earth*, the impasse between viewer and subject is heightened by physical distance, through the artist's use of vitrine-like frames that jut from the wall. In the assemblages *when the land is in plumage...a peacock is in molting* **FIG. 4** and

*...they wondered what to do...for those who bear/bare witness* **FIG. 5** roosters draped with pearls stand alertly, preventing the viewer from drawing any closer to the sequined backdrops containing human forms. Patterson's work eludes the eye's search for wholeness, for mastery over the visual domain. The viewer must step back, gaze a little longer, acknowledge inadequacy. Something is missing, the puzzle cannot be solved; it is this lack that figures negative potentiality.

If not answers, Patterson's puzzles generate new meanings. The exhibition opens with an early work, *Untitled IX from Gangstas for Life* **FIG. 6**, a mixed-media portrait of a man with bleached skin, a practice that is prevalent in Jamaican dancehall culture.<sup>3</sup> Patterson's more recent garden installations eschew such a manner of unambiguous representation in favour of bejewelled excess. Counterintuitively, her tactic of concealment through surplus reveals other capacities. Mechanisms of violence that sever limb and psyche are implied but not seen in Patterson's oeuvre. By resisting the urge toward visual clarity, she avoids adding to an overflowing repository of

violent images and prompts the viewer to consider what might be lurking in the undergrowth. Another of Patterson's counterintuitive strategies is her use of bling – objects that mimic the visual effect of light on precious metals and gems – to disguise.<sup>4</sup> The wall hangings in the show are sparkly, shiny and reflective, the result of Patterson's liberal application of sequins, rhinestones, beads and glitter. Bling provides camouflage for human figures in hyperreflective works such as ... *they wondered what to do...for those who bear/bare witness*. When everything sparkles, there are no shadows. Coruscation becomes obfuscation. Again, Patterson creates distance between viewer and subject. The sparkle is a shield upon which only light reflects.

The sheer grandiosity of Patterson's mixed-media collages and installations is reminiscent of her contemporaries Rina Banerjee and Wangechi Mutu. All three artists demonstrate an affinity with the Baroque period, namely in the sensuous appeal their works achieve through undulating textures, dramatic contrasts and ornate detail. Patterson also references medieval Christian painting in the diptych *Duppy Treez* FIG. 7, in which golden disks, updated with glitter, shimmer behind two figures. However, neither figure in *Duppy Treez* seems removed from the undertow of secular life. The woman on the left turns her back to the viewer and glances over her right shoulder with a wary, contemptful expression, while the man on the right appears downcast, worry furrowing his hollowed face. The pair are nearly swallowed up by pearly appliqué, spangly coral reefs and strips of flowery lace. Like Baroque vanitas paintings, *Duppy Treez's* appeal to the senses is tempered by a critical edge, the figures a reminder that not all that glitters is gold.

Six decades ago, visual exposure seemed to be one path toward civic change against anti-Black brutality. Today, that appears to be a distant prospect, saturated as the media is with photographs and live streams that depict suffering in real time. Patterson complicates this mindless ingestion of Black abjection. Her decadent surfaces and sprawling flora lure the viewer into sitting with challenging, slippery scenes of violence. Representation slides out of our grasp; understanding hovers just out of reach. The continual play of fragments in ...*when the cuts erupt...the garden rings...and the warning is a wailing...* is exemplified in the title itself, the ellipses of which convey all that the viewer cannot know.

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## Exhibition details

[Ebony G. Patterson: ...when the cuts erupt...the garden rings...and the warning is a wailing...](#)

Institute of Contemporary Art San José  
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## About the author

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## Footnotes

- 1 Photographs, videos and live streams of police brutality in the United States, including those of George Floyd and Philando Castile, have catalysed articles about the ethics and political efficacy of sharing these images. For writing on the representation of violence and trauma see S. Sontag: *Regarding the Pain of Others*, London 2003; C. Sharpe: *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, Durham 2016; K. Stiles: *Concerning Consequences: Studies in Art, Trauma, and Destruction*, Chicago 2016; and O. Enwezor, N. Beckwith and M. Gioni, eds: exh. cat. *Grief and Grievance: Art and Mourning in America*, New York (New Museum) 2020.
  - 2 Ebony G. Patterson quoted in J. Felsenthal: 'Ebony G. Patterson confronts race and childhood at the Studio Museum in Harlem', *Vogue* (5th April 2016), available at <https://www.vogue.com/article/ebony-g-patterson-studio-museum-harlem>, accessed 5th August 2021.
  - 3 K. Thompson: *Shine: The Visual Economy of Light in African Diasporic Aesthetic Practice*, Durham NC 2015, p.115.
  - 4 For a discussion of bling and its purposes in contemporary Black visual culture, see Thompson: *op. cit* (note 3).
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