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Ebony G. Patterson's paper garden of delights and traumas comes to ICA San Jose

Tony Bravo | April 2, 2021 Updated: April 6, 2021, 1:08 pm





Ebony G. Patterson's new exhibition, "...when the cuts erupt...the garden rings...and the warning is a wailing...", at the San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art.

Photo: ICA San Jose

For the past decade, Ebony G. Patterson has thematically toiled in the garden. It's a motif that can remind viewers of nature's serenity, but also its unforgiving excess and brutality.

Upon entering the artist's new exhibition at the San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art, the viewer is immersed in an installation of all those multitudes. The purple walls and wallpaper transport you to a paper Eden of crafted flowers and

leaves, where manifestations of destruction lurk under every blossom. The exhibition, titled "...when the cuts erupt...the garden rings...and the warning is a wailing...", runs through Sept. 5.

The opening pentptych (five-panel) work is a dramatic initiation to the show. Although the five sections of the wall that hold the sculptural, collaged flowers and vines are framed in white boxes, some of the materials (including craft store butterflies) escape the borders. It's a beautiful, multidimensional work that can feel delightful and abundant.

But closer inspection exposes an element of horror. Moving closer to the piece reveals recessed collage images of headless Black bodies buried under the garden. Circular holes that dot the work resemble bullet holes.

"In my practice, fundamentally everything for me kind of holds the same baseline," Patterson says from Chicago by phone. "I'm asking myself a question that leads to other questions and then manifests itself in materials."

For Patterson, one of the questions her work evoked was how could she take themes and materials associated with beauty "and think about it in terms of its threads, or the potential for threads."



A section of "...when the cuts erupt...the garden rings...and the warning is a wailing..." a multidimensional work that can feel delightful and abundant.

Photo: ICA San Jose

Patterson's "...when the cuts erupt" is the Jamaican artist's first solo show on the West Coast. She is known for the painterly approach she takes in her sculptural, assemblage and textile works and for using material like glitter and beads. Among her most well-known works is her "Gangstas for Life" painting series, which explores themes of masculinity and gender subversion in the Jamaican dancehall world.

ICA San Jose executive director and chief curator Alison Gass says one of the things she looks for in artists she presents is a sense that they are reinventing art history narratives, as well as how they use their materials in that narrative. But most significantly, she asks of the artists: "Are they seducing us to talk about issues that are deep and crucial to the contemporary moment?" For Gass, Patterson hits all of those notes and many more.





Ebony G. Patterson's "...they wondered what to do...for those who bear/bare witness," featuring hand-cut jacquard woven photo tapestry with glitter, appliqués, pins, brooches, embellishments, fabric, tassels, acrylic, glass pearls, beads and three hand-embellished resin-based roosters on stands, on artist-designed fabric wallpaper.

Photo: ICA San Jose

During the show's installation, ICA removed a central wall to make one large gallery space. It feels necessary given not only the scale of several of Patterson's works but also the distance required to fully take in each installation. The essence of the garden never leaves you, whether you're looking at work that immediately references it or ones that seem to similarly twist nature into a kind of decadent artifice.

The installation features a trio of sculptural roosters encrusted with Mardi Gras souvenir pearls, placed in a wallpapered corner hung with a glittering tapestry. It's a work that's both stunning in its execution and conceptually unnerving.

Making a similar impact is the crocheted peacock that holds court in the center of the gallery, its white knit body transitioning into strands of faux pearls that trail up to a wall-mounted tapestry representing its tail. The tapestry, like other textile work of Patterson's, explores what the artist calls a consciousness of the class associations of materials:

Cheap, shimmering fabrics and paper are patched quilt-style next to dripping scraps of fringe brocade and fabric vines. Appliqued flowers pock corners of the work and, like the pentaptych, eventually reveal disembodied black limbs hiding among the glitz.

While the materials may also carry some gendered, feminine associations with them for their costumey glamour, their seemingly hazardous construction bring a traumatic component to the work.

“I’ve been thinking about what it means to lament, what bodies are allowed to lament and then also thinking about the notion of witnessing and what bodies are allowed to bear witness,” Patterson says. “I was really interested in unpacking the bodies of women in relation to witnessing, and then also thinking about women’s bodies in relation to the labor of lamentation and the act of lamentation.”



Artist Ebony G. Patterson
Photo: Daniel Moody

While creating the work, Patterson says the phrase “Men die, women cry” was a refrain that made her consider what roles women hold during times of communal violence, noting that “it was often the women from the families who would have to come and speak on behalf of their loved ones, to give account for this person.”

As one takes in the femme glitz and abundant flowers of “...when the cuts erupt,” you eventually see the glamour as a haunting way to mask the accumulated pain of women who bear witness.

“...when the cuts erupt...the garden rings...and the warning is a wailing...”: By appointment 10 a.m-5 p.m. Tuesday-Friday; Noon- 5 p.m. Saturday and Sunday. Through Sept. 5. Free. San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art, 560 S. First St., San Jose. 408-283-8155. www.icasanjose.org.



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