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In Ebony G. Patterson's 'Garden,' Hidden Dangers and Delights

By [Sarah Hotchkiss](#)  Jun 18

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Ebony G. Patterson, 'when the land is in plumage...a peacock is in molting,' 2020, at the ICA in San Jose. (Courtesy the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago; Impart Photography)

For some of us, the past year and a half has been an extended period of decay—good habits lost, new vices found, a cruel winnowing of both social skills and sanity. We gaze with genuine astonishment at those who experienced it as a time of personal metamorphosis, as an opportunity to reinvent oneself in private.

It's perhaps even more impressive to see this type of change at an institutional level, where existing systems are tied to financial exigencies, grant applications and, in the case of nonprofits, boards. And yet the Institute of Contemporary Art San José has emerged from its long period of closure with a new facade exhibition space, refreshed galleries and, fittingly for this overarching metaphor, filled with butterflies.

Ebony G. Patterson's solo exhibition *...when the cuts erupt...the garden rings...and the warning is a wailing* takes full advantage of the ICA's newly enlarged gallery. (A wall that previously divided the space into three smaller areas is gone.) The artist, who was born in Kingston, Jamaica and is now based in Chicago, morphs the traditional white cube into a night garden, with dramatic spotlighting on her three-dimensional mixed media works and walls covered in dark purple paint or similarly moody photographic wallpaper.



Installation view of Ebony G. Patterson's '*...when the cuts erupt...the garden rings...and the warning is a wailing...*' at the ICA San José. (Courtesy the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago; Impart Photography)

The show comes to San Jose from the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, and was organized here by ICA curator Christine Koppes, who borrowed additional pieces from West Coast collections. Touring me through the installation, Koppes explained how the show's origins came out of a question posed by the ICA's new executive director Alison Gass, who stepped into the role in July 2020: "What's your dream show?"

With that as a prompt, it's hard not to see *...when the cuts erupt* as a triumphant reinvention. The centerpiece of the show is its largest; *...and the dew cracks the earth, in five acts of lamentation...between the cuts...beneath the leaves...below the soil...* is framed in five parts and hangs on a purple-hued wallpaper that spreads the artwork 700 inches across an entire ICA wall. Each collaged section, made up of cut-and-torn digital prints, colored paper, fake butterflies and sneakily placed plastic

cockroaches, overflows with abundance. Images of flowers, leaves, birds, reptiles, the smiling faces of Black children and silhouettes of hands and feet layer into a cacophony of colors, shapes and patterns.

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Central images resolve only by alternating one's view between a broader vantage point and close-up inspection. Embarrassingly slowly, I isolated the trio of female figures who appear in different poses throughout the pentptych; they're nearly obscured by the flora and fauna that surrounds them. In an approach that's repeated elsewhere in the show, Patterson erases their necks and heads from the photographic image, rendering each figure anonymous, a mix of visible and invisible. It's an eerie effect, compounded by the ragged-edge holes that punctuate the center of each composition. For Patterson, the garden is home to great beauty, but also great violence.





Ebony G. Patterson, '...they wondered what to do...for those who bear/bare witness,' 2018. (Courtesy the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago; Impart Photography)

Where *...and the dew cracks the earth* stops just shy of spilling out of its deep frames, Patterson gives in to gravity in two assemblages that incorporate jacquard-woven photo tapestries, embellished statues of birds (roosters and a peacock) and all manner of dazzling things (glitter, beads, gold leaf, tassels—the list goes on).

In *when the land is in plumage...a peacock is in molting*, a sculpture of a peacock covered in delicate white flowers stands on a pile of gold conch shells from which two hands extend, palms up. Instead of paying attention to what could be a pleading gesture, the peacock looks back at its own finery: a trail of pearl-like beads that spreads across the floor and up onto the wall behind, connecting to the jacquard tapestry. The peacock's "train" is covered in glitter and jewelry, images of vines and dangling arms, and simply drips with a sense of opulence.

The materials of this piece (and its rooster-populated companion, *...they wondered what to do...for those who bear/bare witness*) can overwhelm the senses. As with *...and the dew cracks the earth...*, the tapestry installations benefit from close-up scanning, as if hunting objects in an *I Spy* book. A woven hand emerges here, a bejeweled spider brooch there. Patterson's work teems with life. The light glinting off sparkly surfaces imbues these pieces with a kind of vibrating movement.



Ebony G. Patterson, 'i dug him up II,' 2014. (Courtesy the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago)

The most melancholy and still work in the show is also its most candy-colored. In *i dug him up II*, a mixed media photo collage from 2014, Patterson again erases the photographed figure at its center, leaving only the suggestion of a prone body, one shoe off, the fingers of a gloved hand clasping a golden flower. In many of her works, she restages media images of scenes of violent deaths, scenes in which both victims and bystanders—both often young Black men—are degraded, their dignity scrubbed away

by a camera's intrusion. Something terrible has happened in *i dug him up II*, and the juxtaposition between the decorative imagery and the horizontal body is deeply uncomfortable. The figure's floral-patterned clothes blend nearly completely into the floral-patterned background, a nod perhaps to the flower-filled memorials that spontaneously appear at the sites of someone's death.

Humans, even when their bodies are fragmented, or only suggested by the shape of brightly patterned clothing, are central to all the work in *...when the cuts erupt*. If this garden is overgrown, Patterson's work asks, who once tended it? And why are they no longer present? Surrounding her figures with creatures that morph, molt and shed their skins, Patterson enmeshes humanity in the natural world, where we might learn how to transform.

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'...when the cuts erupt...the garden rings...and the warning is a wailing' is on view at the Institute of Contemporary Art San José through Sept. 5, 2021. [Details here.](#)

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