

TimeOut



Photograph: Courtesy of New York Botanical Garden

NYBG's new thought-provoking exhibit combines sculpture and horticulture

Four-hundred glittering vulture sculptures have descended upon the gardens.

Written by

[Rossilynne Skena Culgan](#), Wednesday May 24 2023

Gardens tend to attract the most attention when they're in full bloom, fragrant and colorful. They don't garner much adoration when they're dormant or decaying. But all of these cycles are an important part of life, as artist Ebony G. Patterson explores in a powerful new exhibition at New York Botanical Garden.

Iridescent vulture sculptures, glass re-creations of extinct plants and collages inspired by gardening books are now on view as part of her exhibit titled "[... things come to thrive ... in the shedding ... in the molting ...](#)" It's on view from Saturday, May 27 through Sunday, September 17. Here's what to expect at this thought-provoking show.

Through her work, Patterson explores the concepts of molting, shedding and decay as revelatory processes that can give way to healing, regeneration and beauty. At first stunning for their artistry and beauty, the sculptures then invite viewers to think about

the complex tensions of the natural world and how they reflect entanglements of race, gender and colonialism. Ornamental gardens have long been sites to display the spoils of exploration and exploitation, the exhibition posits, making gardens burial grounds for history.



Photograph: By Rossilynne Skena Culgan / Time Out | Artist Ebony G. Patterson at New York Botanical Garden

Patterson's works at New York Botanical Garden span both inside and outside of the Haupt Conservatory as well as three floors of the Mertz Library Building.

Outside of the conservatory, hundreds of vulture sculptures greet visitors. Though they're made of high-density foam, the birds look truly lifelike. Some stick their beaks into the ground, while others seem to be engaged in deep conversations. A few of the sculptures leer at passersby and others just enjoy the flowers around them. But take a closer look at those flowers. The zinnias, sunflowers and cosmos are all rendered in blood-red hues, wound-like ruptures tended to by the crew of birds.

Vultures, which remove dead and decaying animals from the environment, may not have the most glamorous jobs but their work is important. Patterson refers to their essential ecosystem service as an "act of care."



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As she researched vultures, she learned about their work and social behaviors. They're exceptionally social birds, forming long-term monogamous mating relationships and maintaining life-long family bonds. Patterson said she started to think about how this relates to "largely working-class Black and Brown people, thinking about that within the social demarcations of a postcolonial space."

"How a lot of these sense of attributes are similar in terms of the way we think about working-class people," Patterson said. "The nature of a vulture and what it does, it's a tough job, but it's incredibly necessary. It makes life possible, both metaphorically and literally. That's one of the things that made me really fall in love with the vulture."

The vultures—there are 400 of them in total—continue inside the conservatory where they're presented alongside glass sculptures of human feet sticking out of the ground. Further into the conservatory, glass sculptures re-create extinct plants, along with text explaining how humans' impact on the landscape has caused extinction rates to skyrocket. The glass sculptures stand as a haunting reminder indicating what's lost—and what we still stand to lose.



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“Even in the ugliness, beauty is possible.”

A life-size peacock roosts overhead, peering back on its trailing tail. The artist was inspired by catching a glimpse of a white peacock, which was molting. Seeing the typically beautiful bird in this atypical state, she started to think about witnessing ugliness and how “even in the ugliness, beauty is possible.”

As the first visual artist to have a residency with New York Botanical Garden, Patterson spent years engaging with the botanical garden's collections and researching these pieces. So, it's quite fitting that some of her works are housed within the garden's historic Mertz Library Building.



Photograph: Courtesy of New York Botanical Garden

Inside the library, you'll find a video installation, interactive art activities, mixed media paper collages and a staggering sculpture. The video depicts a primordial tropical forest where two androgynous humans care for an infant. As for the sculpture, which is titled "... fester ...," it transforms a rotunda space into a nighttime garden scene. Richly patterned tapestries serve as the backdrop to a sculpture representing the newly wounded earth represented by 1,000 red lace gloves. Their fingers droop among spiky black sculptures of thistles and monstera leaves.

You have never seen the New York Botanical Garden like this before.

"Ebony G. Patterson's exhibition at NYBG marks a really exciting moment for us as an institution as we're able to provide a platform for one of the most compelling artists of our time to explore the complex symbolism of gardens and our complex relationship with nature," the garden's CEO Jennifer Bernstein said at a preview of the exhibition. "You have never seen the New York Botanical Garden like this before."

Ebony G. Patterson's "[... things come to thrive ... in the shedding ... in the molting ...](#)" is on view from Saturday, May 27 through Sunday, September 17 at New York Botanical Garden. Tickets (\$35/adult) can be purchased [here](#).