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As The Tree Falls

by Elizabeth A. Watson

Work by Ebony G. Patterson on view at Lux Art Institute April 30 - May 30, 2015

During her month-long residency at Lux Art Institute in Solana Beach, CA, Ebony Patterson embellished blankets with her signature materials of fabric, glitter and costume jewelry. The shiny appliqué relief comprises the last step in a multi-phase creative process. During an interview at Lux, Patterson characterized her current approach as “the bee and the flower.” The flower’s color attracts the bee, but the bee does not know what the flower holds. Though as eye-catching as her dancehall and gangster portraits, her new tapestries are more about concealment than adornment.



In Rest - Dead Treez, 2015, Mixed media on jacquard tapestry with handmade shoes and 150 crocheted leaves, 80 x 115." Commissioned by Lux Art Institute.

The Jamaican artist's current compositions are inspired by violent crime scene photos. Patterson considers photographic imagery of violent deaths problematic in terms of their accessibility in Jamaica and relative to social class, since it is mainly the poor that is subject to this type of graphic exposure. She is particularly concerned with how the imagery can become circulating “objects”

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stripped of any reference to the individual victim. She began the series in Jamaica where she recreated limited aspects of crime scenes. Focusing on the outfit and position of a victim, she posed a model with additional objects against a patterned cloth background. A professional photographer then shot the various tableaux.

Next, Patterson edited the photographs. In the works she was creating at Lux, she removed the areas where the models' skin was exposed. As with her work, *Pretty Bwoi Floyd* (2014), the voids will be filled by background imagery leaving only the clothes to suggest the human figures. This reflects Patterson's interest in clothing as dress and performance. Now using male and female subjects, she draws attention to the crisscrossing alignments of sex, gender expressions, body types and clothing in the construction of social identity.

After the photo is edited, the digital image is sent out to a commercial service to generate a blanket. The textile image — composed of threads of red, yellow, blue, green, black and white— has limited fidelity. Patterson prefers the popular service (offered by Walmart) because it aligns with her subject and has a quick turn around. After reinforcing its jacquard weave, she makes color modifications with paint and cuts out sections. She then begins “building up” the tapestry. Taking photos at the end of each day allows on her to reflect on the entire composition.

Patterson combs garment districts for faux jewelry and other materials. Like the paint and fabric, the glitter and “bling” define the composition's color, line, texture and depth. The human figure hides in the resulting exuberance. This “foresting,” as Patterson calls it, acts as a metaphor for mainstream Jamaican society's selective disregard for “the lower class.” She explained that while Kingston's working class neighborhoods have informal names by which they are known, they carry the official moniker “Gardens”. The neighborhoods' “invisibility” and “secrets” are often linked and broken in relation to crime.

Ebony Patterson's work is timely in its concerns of social standing, visibility and violence. Each bejeweled textile appears as a flourishing “garden.” As viewers, winding our way through the foliage, assisted by colors and lines, we eventually discover a set of splayed legs. Despite the shock, what we confront is all too familiar: a felled and faceless body amidst the clamor of cheap media. Patterson makes us question how much of the life we really see and hear.

Elizabeth A. Watson lives in San Diego, CA and writes on art and architecture. She extends her thanks to Ebony G. Patterson and Lux Art Institute.