

Art in America

Ebony G. Patterson

at Monique Meloche

by Kyle MacMillan, December 17, 2015



Ebony G. Patterson: *found among the reeds—dead treez*, 2015, mixed-medium jacquard weave tapestry with handmade shoes, knitted leaves and vintage jewelry, 6½ by 11¼ feet; at Monique Meloche.

After exploring taboos surrounding the female body and delving into the contradictory projections of masculinity in the working-class dance halls of her native Jamaica, Ebony G. Patterson has turned to a darker, more sinister subject: murder. Six mixed-medium tapestries and works on paper from the series "Dead Treez" (2015-), plus two performance-related pieces, were displayed in her third solo exhibition at Monique Meloche Gallery.

The show, titled "unearthing treez," was an extension of a body of work on view in a larger survey at the Museum of Arts and Design in New York through Apr. 3, 2016. That solo show and another scheduled to open in March at the Studio Museum of Harlem are the latest evidence of Patterson's lightning

rise in the art world since earning her master of fine arts degree in 2006.

There is nothing direct or obvious about Patterson's collaged and appliquéd tapestries here and, indeed, it is possible to entirely miss what they are about at first. That's because what immediately grabs, even accosts, the viewer are the artist's electric pinks, blues and greens and her assertive contrasts of floral-driven patterns, not to mention the attached glitter and shiny gewgaws.

She gets you to look, and very quickly you begin to see that amid the glorious excess are bodies or, more accurately, the suggestion of bodies, kind of ghostly presences. What we notice among the visual barrage are forms that seem to be covered by patterned garments, evoking something hollow that carries the shape of a prostrate body. The lack of specificity gives these works an uneasy universality—the implication that senseless killing, especially of those in the underclass, is hardly unique to Jamaica.

Patterson, who splits her time between Kingston, Jamaica, and Louisville, where she teaches at the University of Kentucky, begins these tapestries by staging photo shoots roughly based on images of murder victims from social media. She places elaborately costumed models in dizzyingly wallpapered and decorated studio environments. She then digitally manipulates the photo files and has intricate, machine-made jacquard-weave tapestries created from the adjusted images.

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The artist cuts and embellishes those tapestries, sewing and gluing bits of commonplace floral- and leaf-patterned fabrics as well as costume jewelry onto the surfaces, transforming them into multilayered, irregularly shaped compositions of color and bling as large as 6½ by 11¼ feet. With several, such as found among the reeds—dead treez (2015), she includes a pair of custom-cobbled shoes and knitted leaves spread on the floor beneath, creating a mini installation. The two slightly smaller works on watercolor paper in the show were made in a similar collage fashion but have a flatter, more orderly look.

Rounding out the selection were a photograph and a video excerpt pertaining to a 2014 performance work, titled Invisible Presence—Bling Memories, that took place during Carnival in Kingston. The video showed a marching band and 50 exuberantly decorated coffins on poles held by costumed, singing participants; the performance drew on funeral practices among lower-income Jamaican communities.

The "Dead Treez" series references high art and low, social and economic inequalities and overlooked lost lives, with Patterson relying on jarring juxtapositions of death and decoration to potently drive home her message.