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VOGUE

Ebony G. Patterson Confronts Race and Childhood at the Studio Museum in Harlem

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Ebony G. Patterson: "... when they grow up . . ."
Photo: Adam Reich / Courtesy of The Studio Museum in Harlem

I was recently emailing with the Jamaican artist Ebony G. Patterson to set up an interview, and her iPhone sign-off caught my attention. "The future is only seconds away!" her signature warns. "Claim it! It's yours!!"

When Patterson chatted with me by Skype from her home in Kingston, I asked her about the sentiment. "When you're young," the artist explained in her lilting Caribbean accent, "everything just seems to have this expanse of time. Then you hit 30 and go, maybe I don't have enough time to do that anymore? The last several years my work has become increasingly political. I've been thinking about how making art can become more contributory. When I leave this plane, what will the things I make tell us about the times we lived in?"

Patterson is only 34 years old and in little danger of letting the future slip through her fingers. This year her work has appeared on the Fox drama *Empire*—hanging alongside pieces by Mickalene Thomas in Jamal Lyon's apartment—and she's had major solo exhibitions at two New York City museums: "Dead Treez" opened in November at the Museum of Arts and Design, and "... when

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they grow up . . . ," a site-specific, mixed-media installation, opened a couple weeks ago at the Studio Museum in Harlem.

It's the Harlem installation that we're Skyping to discuss. Patterson has transformed the museum's subterranean Project Space into a Pepto-Bismol-color child's room, and filled it with a smorgasbord of stuff worthy of *Pee-wee's Playhouse*. The floor is laid with radioactively pink plush carpet, and from the ceiling hangs a forest of fabric-covered papier-mâché balloons, looming ominously overhead, compressing the space. Toys for kids of all ages dot the room's perimeter: a teddy bear, a rubber ducky, a doll house, a pair of cricket bats, and a collection of toy guns bedazzled with beads, sequins, and buttons. A structural column in the center of the room emerges, treelike, from inside an orange-and-white rugby-striped teepee, filled with fake flowers and foliage. On top sits a forlorn pair of Mary Janes.



Artist Ebony G. Patterson
Photo: Scott Rudd

But the photographic works, hanging on walls covered in pink-and-white polka-dotted wallpaper, command the most attention. Some are large-scale collages, in which multiple kids, all dark-skinned, interact amid a whimsical sea of pattern and texture. In one, two boys sit side by side on a bench, captivated by a plastic toy bow and arrow. On the opposite wall hang four individual portraits of black adolescents of ascending ages—12, 14, 17, and 18—who stare innocently out at the room, as if posing for a school portrait. The surfaces of the photographs are covered with glitzy doodads, stickers, refrigerator magnets, and Mardi Gras beads, a mess of sparkle and shine that draws you in. Look closely and you'll see a more nefarious modification: These images are riddled with bullet-like holes, another layer of polka dots that allows the pink of the background to peep through.

The kids in Patterson's photographs are not, themselves, the victims of violence: They're models. But they evoke images we've become accustomed to seeing in news reports about the violent deaths of black children, often at the hands of the police. Though she generally keeps her allusions vague—"I wanted the audience to think not about the names we are already aware of, but to think about children of color in general"—Patterson specifically references

one news event in an installation of lettered foam blocks: The blocks with letters that have been punched out could be rearranged to read "Tamir Rice," the name of the 12-year-old Cleveland boy tragically killed in 2014 by police officers who interpreted his toy gun to be real.

It's a subtle, stirring moment in a room full of them. "We somehow seem to deny these children the same sense of innocence that any other child would be afforded, as if somehow they're different," the artist explained. "Because of their blackness, they're not allowed the possibility of humanity."

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Patterson and I discussed at length her artistic process, and how “. . . when they grow up . . . ” attempts to reclaim childhood for young people of color.

These are not pictures of children who have been killed: They're photographs you've staged to remind us of the photographs we see of children who have been killed. Tell me a little about your thought process.

I thought, well, do I want to use images of actual children who were killed, who were violated? What would it mean for me to use images of children whose bodies have been degraded, who have not been given the kind of humanity that should have been given to them?

Last year there was this Louisiana artist who did a project in a gallery outside of Chicago. She attempted to replicate the crime scene of Mike Brown's death. It was quite a social media storm, for multiple reasons. This artist was saying she was talking about white privilege, and her privilege as a white artist to talk about these issues of race. It's not that as a white person you can't talk about issues of race; the problem was the lack of sensitivity in the way it was handled. With this particular project, I felt sensitivity was needed.

Were you referencing stories in the American news, or also in Jamaica?

I was pulling not just from these stories in American media. I've been on leave from teaching [at the University of Kentucky at Lexington] for almost two academic years. I've been spending a significant portion of that time at home in Jamaica. And I've been aware of certain news reports that just seem to be repeated over and over again: children who were murdered. A significant number of the girls were killed by men who were molesting them, and, like, half of them were pregnant. I was thinking about the way that the community responded to these young girls who were murdered. There was dismissiveness; the greater sense of empathy was demonstrated for the man. It was, “Oh, you know how these young girls are.” “I never knew him as this kind of person.” There's this idea that adults somehow are not to be held accountable for what they do to children.

I think the shared experience in both societies has a lot to do with our post-colonial experience, where at the bottom of the social ladder sit the darker people. What does it mean for the people at the bottom to always be deemed not valuable? Yet, these are the very same people who give us a cultural or national significance, because I always say America's greatest export is its popular culture, and it's the same here.

How did you cast the children in these photographs? Were you looking for something particular in their faces?

I really wanted a particular age group, between preteen and 18. Adolescence is such a tricky moment. It's the moment where you begin to enter adulthood, but you're still a baby. There are all these conflicting experiences.

I was thinking about those cases of the girls who were molested, thinking about the changes that happen with your body so rapidly. It pushes you into adult form, yet you're still a baby. What would that mean to put a childlike that next to a child who is 16 and wearing a weave and very aware of her body? I was interested in these kinds of juxtapositions. Because when we think about stories like Trayvon Martin or Mike Brown, they were literally at that cusp of moving into adulthood. They were always talked about as if they were adults. But when we talk about Dylann Storm Roof, who was 21, we talk about him like he was a kid. And he's not a kid.

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I was interested in having kids in the mix who would challenge the audience in the way they were reading these children. And also, too, what would it mean to juxtapose a 10-year-old girl next to an 18-year-old boy? Does that boy then seem more adult? Or does that boy now seem more like a kid?

Even in the images with two boys [and the bow], for example: One of those kids actually turned 18 on the day of the shoot. He introduced me to his friend who was already 18. I deliberately made that work in an effort to force the audience into seeing these boys are no different [than other kids]. They have the same sense of curiosity around toys like any other kid would. They're 18, and look at their fascination with a toy that neither of them had seen before, that I had on set?



Ebony G. Patterson: "... when they grow up ..."
Photo: Adam Reich / Courtesy of The Studio Museum in Harlem

So the toys that you use are for much younger kids, but these kids, even though they may look like adults to certain people, are still young enough to be drawn to toys like this?

Yeah, but so are adults, too. Right? Because here we have grown-ass 30-year-old men who still want to play video games. But, of course, there's a particular sense of curiosity and adventure that happens when you're young, especially if it's a toy that you've never had before.

In postproduction, we did a lot with the light on the kids' faces, a lot of rouging and illumination. I was also using these stereotypes that one would associate with cherubs that one would see historically in painting, but always on the white body. It's another way of hinting at their child-ness.

Why did you make this room pink? Is it supposed to be a girl's room?

Well, I was interested in that conflation. There's always been this gender current that's run through all of my work. But pink was originally a boy's color before it became a girl's color. So then there's

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that back-and-forth between what is and what isn't, what it was once, and how we see it in contemporary society.

It's not a girl's room at all. The pink feels very warm. It was also a decision about temperature, shifting the way our bodies would feel in that space. It's not womb-like: That pink is not a natural pink, but there's something quite internal and very warm and welcoming about it.

This interview has been condensed and edited.