

ARTSLANT

NEW YORK

Ebony G. Patterson's Un-visible Bodies

by Zachary Cahill, 03/02/2016

Ebony G. Patterson's first NY solo exhibition, *Dead Treez* at the Museum of Arts and Design teems with light and shadow, evocations of death and new life, the sacred and the quotidian. *The exhibition teems.* There are flowers everywhere, carrying with them all the myriad cultural and ritual associations. Overgrown and opulent, *Dead Treez* connects with viewers through its palpable much-ness. With a surfeit of finely wrought materials the artist creates an affective atmosphere we often associate with loss, mourning, and recovery. An air of reverence for communities of the African Diaspora, which have endured violence both physical and psychical, permeates the galleries.



Installation View of Ebony G. Patterson: Dead Treez at the Museum of Arts and Design. Photo: Butcher Walsh © Museum of Arts and Design

Upon entering the exhibition one encounters *Swag Swag Krew* (from *The Out and Bad Series*, 2011–14). The grouping of ten mannequins on a raised plinth calls to mind the monumental gravitas of Rodin's *Burghers of Callais* imbued with a trippy and otherworldly aesthetic that echoes at once the costumes by the artist group Forcefield and the dazzling baroque backgrounds of Kehinde Wiley's paintings. Influenced by and invested in Jamaican Dance Hall culture, the sculpture is both celebratory and foreboding. As with the aforementioned *Burghers*, these figures seem poised on the cusp of a decision that is at once pedestrian (there are children playing) and monumental (life and death). There is something unsettling about the way in which the figures turn into grounds, and the way in which ornament overwhelms the mannequins. Faces get covered over with floral patterns in an abstract masquerade. The figures flicker, embodying a kind of exuberant camouflage; they both stand out from and disappear into the background.

The background makes its own presence felt by forcing itself out into real space with hanging faux-flowers. In *Swag Swag Crew* the artist disturbs categories of figuration and abstraction thereby complicating our notion of "representation." The work seems to ask: do we ever really know what we see? Are representations ever not, in some very real sense, abstract? Which is to say do, sometimes we think we have a clear picture of what (or whom?) we are looking at, but at other times (often simultaneously) we know that human being are so complex that the only clear representation is necessarily partial, abstracted from a larger ecology/world.

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The blurring of figure and ground in Patterson's work hones in on one of the confounding conditions of Blackness which is how it is at once constitutive of and invisible to the North American art and popular imaginary. It is impossible to think of America without the contributions of Black Culture, yet in 2016, in a so-called "post-racial" world, we live in a culture dominated by representations of Whiteness—as evidenced most recently by the all-white list of Oscar nominees. Borrowing the term from Ralph Ellison's introduction to the 1981 edition of *Invisible Man*, art historian Krista Thompson refers to this aspect of Patterson's work as the "Un-Visible." Describing how the un-visible functions in Patterson's work in *Shine: The Visual Economy of Light in African Diasporic Aesthetic Practice*, Thompson writes:

Patterson's work further calls attention to the ambivalent ways dance hall is seen and un-visible in the black public sphere through her use of embellishment. Her work foregrounds, I suggest, how dance hall subjects are always at risk of disappearance through the very technology they use to bring themselves into visibility. The ornate pieces produce an aesthetic overload, with figures sometimes getting visually lost in the backdrops of the photographic setting.^[1]

A key artwork in the show that utilizes a strategy of "aesthetic overload" to sublime effect is *The Passing (Dead Daadi)* 2010-13. The elegiac wall-mounted tapestry (depicting what appears to be deceased body lying horizontally) shines so intensely with un-visibility that it is literally hard to see. One gets a sense of the devotional from the meticulously worked appliqué surface that reflects light to such an extent that it gives the impression of being almost entirely composed of light. With this flood of luminescence, Patterson's work borders on the religious, evoking transfiguration: that moment in the New Testament where Jesus Christ dissolves completely into light, representing the nexus between the divine and the earthly. While it is probably wholly inappropriate to apply this mytho-religious schema over Patterson's work, somehow one can't help but see an effort by the artist to suture together the mundane and the divine, that out of the death, suffering, and invisibility there is something like transfiguration. Iconic and aniconic, *The Passing* shows us we can see what cannot be seen—or we can see that which cannot be looked at.

If the first two galleries teem with the light of transfiguration then Patterson's installation ... *buried again to carry on growing ...*, is lush with (fake) plants and shadows. Set in the Tiffany Jewelry Gallery her installation borrows objects from the Museum's permanent collection. The room has something of a hushed, downbeat cast over it where the vitrines are suggestive of a long lost mysterious vivarium. Mixed in with what is reminiscent of underbrush one finds dismembered mannequin limbs that are covered in fabric, similar to the *Swag Swag Crew*. Sprinkled throughout the display cases are hidden Easter eggs of sorts; Patterson has chosen fascinating jewelry pieces. The items run from the playful, such as the *Untitled (Necklace)* by Ivy Ross and Robert W. Ebendorf; to the pointed commentary in the Police Badge shaped pendant that reads "Police State" by William Clark; to the actually pointed such as Wendy Renshaw's Ring Stand that



Ebony G. Patterson, *The Passing (Dead Daadi)*, 2010–13, Mixed media, 90 x 68 in. Courtesy of Hirshberg Collection, LA.

Photo: John Michael Kohler Arts Center and Monique Meloche Gallery

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have the look of very lethal bullets. For all its brooding menace, ... *buried again to carry on growing ...* (as the title of the installation suggests) holds out the possibility that something may grow—thrive even—in the space between what is visible and unseen.

See this profound exhibition before it closes.

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