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BROOKLYN RAIL
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

LIFE AND DEATH IN A POISONOUS GARDEN EBONY G. PATTERSON *Dead Treez*

by Michelle Standley, 2/11/2016

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Feeling and seeing everything, you begin to feel and see nothing. What with the neverending cascade of bad news—the Paris attacks, the ongoing Syrian refugee crisis, Donald Trump—my senses had been deadened to such a degree that I had begun to steel myself against feeling in order to survive. But when I walked into *Dead Treez*, Ebony G. Patterson's first solo show at the Museum of Art and Design, something penetrated my armor and pried open my eyes, threatening to upend the equilibrium I had been working so hard to maintain.



Installation View: ... *buried again to carry on growing ...* A POV by Ebony G. Patterson at the Museum of Arts and Design. Photo: Butcher Walsh © Museum of Arts and Design.

As soon as I reached the entrance to the show at the top of the stairs, the sheer visual spectacle—a cluster of male mannequins, set atop a waist-high plinth, striking masculine poses but outfitted

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in an arresting assemblage of lace and dollies, botanical prints and velvet, denim and jacquard—set my heart beating faster. What was I seeing?

This was *Swag Swag Krew* (2011 – 2014), an installation inspired by the young men who inhabit the dance halls of Patterson's hometown, Kingston, Jamaica. The work grew out of her fascination with the gendered aspects of their style as it evolved over the course of the past decade. She was surprised to observe how this traditionally hypermasculine subculture had come to include such seemingly extreme practices as skin bleaching and to incorporate conspicuously feminine, even camp, elements like Victorian embroidery and peek-a-boo lace undergarments that could be seen hanging from underneath their breeches. Though to outsiders such practices might seem lacking in subtlety or refinement, their very outrageousness, Patterson has suggested in interviews, stems from a desire to become visible in a society that would otherwise ignore them.

Historically, the young men of the Jamaican dance-hall culture are in good company. Think of *The Gangs of New York's* white, working-class Bowery Boys with their red shirts and long sideburns roaming the Five Points in the mid-nineteenth century. Or recall *Invisible Man's* African-American Harlem hipsters of the late 1930s and early 1940s, with their cheap felt hats and heavily pomaded hair. In both cases, young men marginalized both socially and economically turned to what many outsiders perceived as outlandish forms of adornment to set themselves apart.

In their dazzling pastiche of the cultures of contemporary American hip-hop (baseball caps and large gold chains with dollar signs) and English colonial society (epaulettes with gold tassels and breeches in jacquard), the young men of the Kingston dance halls appear to be creating codes so refined that not even the courtiers of Louis XIV's Versailles could have devised them. And yet neither Patterson nor the show's curators dwell on how such codes cultivated among disenfranchised men also create their own bonds of exclusion, often directed less against the dominant culture than against other marginal groups they deem inferior: other ethnic groups (the Bowery Boys against Irish Americans, for instance), homosexual men, and, last but not least, women. This is precisely what makes the inclusion of traditionally feminine domestic fripperies in *Swag Swag Krew* so arresting. It suggests the cultivation of a sophisticated code of exclusion based in part on the playful visual subversion, but not toppling, of gendered hierarchies.

Swag Swag Krew is such a showstopper that it threatens to drown out the pieces that constitute the heart of *Dead Treez*, Patterson's mixed-media tapestries. Building on her preoccupation with issues related to visibility and adornment, Patterson drew on photos circulating on social-media sites that showed murders that had taken place in Jamaica's tenement housing. She restaged the images in the studio, and then had them woven as headless figures onto the kinds of richly brocaded rugs that one would see displayed in the homes of colonial (and postcolonial) elites. To these shadowy outlines, she added three-dimensional decorative elements (rhinestones, glitter, crocheted pink roses, and silk flowers) and ordinary objects (plastic toy trucks and guns, a porcelain cup and saucer, a school notebook, miniature soccer balls). The bodies seem to float between the glitter and the sundry objects, as if death had caught them unawares while they were in the middle of playing ball or sipping tea. In their banality and familiarity, these objects create a powerful emotional link with the lives of anonymous others that might otherwise have felt abstract and remote.

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Installation View: ... *buried again to carry on growing* ... A POV by Ebony G. Patterson at the Museum of Arts and Design.
Photo: Butcher Walsh © Museum of Arts and Design.

Patterson accomplishes a similar feat in the third section of *Dead Treez, ...buried again to carry on growing...*, a site-specific installation inspired in part by the "Poison Garden" in Alnwick Castle's sprawling complex of gardens in Northumberland, England. Instead of ordinary objects, here she integrates luxury pieces drawn from the museum's collection into terraria of poisonous flowers and shrubs. Scattered between silk flowers—birds-of-paradise, wisteria, delphiniums—are not only gold chains, diamond rings, and other shiny baubles, but also body parts fashioned from brightly colored botanical fabrics. Headless torsos and dismembered arms lie between the petals and the gold like crime-scene detritus that went undetected. The proximity of the dead to objects that were inaccessible to them in life adds an additional layer of tragedy to the work's evocation of the violence that is endemic among Jamaica's marginalized.

Plagued with high unemployment and political instability, Jamaica remains tethered to the low-wage tourism industry and high-stakes drug trade. But a bare relating of facts cannot convey the desires, hopes, or small pleasures that mark the lives of those who reside on the country's lower socio-economic fringes. Sometimes it takes an alteration of reality to speak to life. In Patterson's deft hands, inanimate objects (from a 99-cent store trinket to a 14K gold-and-diamond choker) become sentient, making visible the aspirations of both the quick and the dead.