

What Does Innocence Look Like?

BY LUCY MCKEON

APRIL 11, 2016



"... when they grow up ...," 2016.

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND MONIQUE MELOCHE GALLERY

The artist Ebony G. Patterson's installation "*... when they grow up ...*," now at the Studio Museum in Harlem, looks like a cross between a child's playroom and a shrine. Plush hot-pink carpeting lines the floors and pink-and-white polka-dot wallpaper covers the walls, where Patterson's handmade, mixed-media portraits of black children and teen-agers are displayed. "Strong installation often changes the feel of a space," Patterson told me, and, standing there, you do feel transported into a slightly garish and magical world.

The large photographic works, some showing boys or girls alone, others in pairs or groups, are hung at a child's eye level, embellished with plastic pearls and jewels, fabric butterflies, paper flowers, and metallic beaded garlands. Above them, fabric-covered balloons and small stuffed animals hang from the ceiling, and an assortment of toys—dolls, plush bears, a fireman's hat, a truck, a rotary phone, a doll house, crayons and soldiers, balls and alphabet blocks—are scattered on the floor below in calculated disarray. The photographs look slightly colorized, as if the children's cheeks and lips have been made a touch rosier, the purples and blues of their sweaters a fraction brighter; they have the hazy, dreamy quality of old photographs. The subjects wear various childlike expressions: sweet, silly, shy. A girl in a group portrait giggles behind her hands. Two smiling boys play together, sharing a plastic toy.

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“... they were just hanging out you know ... talking about ... (... when they grow up ...),” 2016.
PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY THE ARTIST AND MONIQUE MELOCHE GALLERY

Yet the portraits in Patterson’s works also hint at a kind of violence; the children’s forms have clearly been cut and pasted from their original sources, and the colorful clutter around them is reminiscent of a roadside memorial. Plastic letters spell “WORTHY” across one boy’s chest, like a protective amulet. Patterson, whose previous work has confronted issues of gender, race, and class (her project “Dead Treez,” which was recently on display at the Museum of Arts and Design, includes a complex meditation on Jamaican dance-hall culture), told me that the work was inspired by a recent increase in child murders in her home town of Kingston, Jamaica. Many of the victims were girls, some of whom had been sexually abused by adults and blamed for attracting the male attention. The work alludes as well to recent police killings in the United States. In both cases, Patterson said, she was reacting against the perception of black children in underserved communities as culpable or dangerous, and the systemic racism that has denied boys like Trayvon Martin and Tamir Rice the luxury of youthful innocence. By surrounding her subjects with the exaggerated ornamentations of childhood, Patterson hopes to challenge viewers to question their own perceptions of race and age, guilt and innocence.

Upon closer look, one can see that what the two smiling boys are playing with is actually a plastic crossbow. Below them, realistic-looking toy guns are wrapped in floral fabrics, bedazzled with buttons and gems. Patterson said that her goal was to show the troubling “allure, the shine” of such objects in marginalized communities and beyond. “What does it mean for us to be giving this information so early to *all* children?” she said. But “... when they grow up ...” is about how a toy in young hands of the wrong color can morph a child at play into a perceived menace. Amid the beautiful clutter surrounding the pair of boys hover butterflies, flowers, an iron-on fabric police car, and a bright-red bag of Skittles.

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"... they were just boys (... when they grow up ...)," 2016.

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