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Artist Ebony G. Patterson Asks Viewers to "Go Between the Layers" of Her PAMM Exhibit

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Ebony G. Patterson . . . *wata marassa-beyond the bladez . . .*, 2014
Courtesy of the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago

When looking at Ebony G. Patterson's work, it might be best to think of an optical illusion, like the classic **young girl/old woman illustration**. In the same way that figure transforms from an attractive woman to an old hag by simply staring at it long enough, the lush layers of Patterson's tapestries and works on paper slowly reveal the stories they're trying to tell.

At first glance, bursts of color and light from various fabric patterns and glittering strike the eye. Then gradually, like pigment bleeding through a page, outlines emerge. A hand, the swell of a hip or chest, the folds of clothing. From swaths of floral orgies come forms — a group of people standing, upturned faces — and the image transforms. Your feelings transform, too, from transcendence to uneasiness or from delight to distaste. Are those arms outstretched in ecstasy, or pain? Are those figures floating peacefully, or lifelessly?

"The work is on some level like a Trojan horse," says Patterson. "It is pretty and it is big, and while you have to contend with that, you also have to contend with the fact that there are some glaring bits of ugliness."

What's obvious in "*Ebony G. Patterson... while the dew is still on the roses...*," her exhibition at PAMM, is that her work often holds difficult contradictions. On the surface, visual discord bubbles up with expressions of masculinity, blackness, and violence. Men wearing bandanas over their faces or holding bottles of Hennessy are embellished with roses and lace doilies; multiple works depict ghostly white faces over brown and black bodies, an allusion to skin bleaching and Patterson's exploration of the practice as a kind of "erasure into presence." Drawn into the honey trap of the busy, beautiful landscapes, you may find yourself closer than expected to issues of race, privilege, and access.

"Some of the things I'm attempting to address also relate to a kind of systemic distance that we've all kind of accepted," explains Patterson. "What kind of history has become normalized in the way that we function and relate to each other?"

An understanding of postcolonial theory and the cultural markers of communities of color could be useful for viewing this show. Patterson's work is certainly rich with references to Carnival dress, indigenous beading, and more. But much of her process comes directly from meditations on the space of the garden. Historically,

ornamental gardens (as opposed to functional gardens that grow food) were status symbols. Think of the sprawling gardens at the Palace of Versailles, or even Vizcaya. Since then, gardening has been largely a middle- to upper-class practice.

"We are all legacies of this," Patterson says of the long history of beauty and adornment's relationship with class and racial privilege. "We've all inherited this legacy and we're all participating in it."

Think of Kim Kardashian's selfie book or even Beyoncé's Instagram — how do these people access what makes them stunning, worth witnessing, and worth celebrating? While it's easy to get enmeshed in many of the narratives that inform Patterson's images, you don't need them to engage with her work. She identifies the selfie age as "[saying] so much about our inability to dig deep," and Patterson hopes her work undercuts that without being too didactic.

"It's very sensory... to a fault. But done purposely. Don't just stay within the surface, go between the layers," Patterson insists. "Where do you choose to sit within that? Trust yourself and go beyond yourself."

Of course, where we choose to sit within that is directly influenced by our own social positions and access to beauty. Whose lives do we see as valuable? Where does the discord in Patterson's images affect us most?

"What happens when working-class people choose to find ways to capture beauty in one way or another in their everyday life?" Patterson asks. She sees her subjects "creating a sense of presence for themselves," saying, "I am here and you cannot deny me."

"Ebony G. Patterson... while the dew is still on the roses..." 10 a.m. Friday, November 9, through May 5, 2019, at the Pérez Art Museum Miami, 1103 Biscayne Blvd., Miami; 305-375-3000; pamm.org. Admission costs \$16.