

HYPERALLERGIC

Ebony Patterson Searches for the Lives of the Unknown Dead in a Jamaica Massacre

Patterson, a native Jamaican, raises a litany of questions around the unidentified dead in the 2010 Tivoli Incursion in Kingston.

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Of 72 by Ebony Patterson (detail view) (all images by the author for Hyperallergic)

ANN ARBOR, Mich. — With her mixed-media installation, *Of 72*, artist Ebony G. Patterson asks a very straightforward question: “What happens when seventy-two men and one woman dies and no one knows who they are?”

Patterson, a native Jamaican, is raising this question in connection to the 2010 “Tivoli Incursion” in Kingston, Jamaica — an armed conflict between the Shower Posse drug cartel and Jamaica’s military and police that resulted in the killing of at least 73 civilians. In the wall text and video outside the installation at University of Michigan’s Institute for the Humanities Gallery, Patterson adds a litany of other questions that she’s been left with about the victims. They range from the generic type of getting-to-know-you questions that are small-talk fare, to more specific questions of personal preference, lifestyle, and emotions. Most

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specifically, she wonders about the victims' potential connection (or lack thereof) to major drug lord Christopher "Dudus" Coke — the search for whom incited the death of these citizens after the United States requested his extradition from Jamaica.

Who were these men and woman? Did they have children?...How old were they? What did they like to do on the weekends?... Did they like Beenie Man, Bounty Killer, Vybz Kartel, Movado, Beris Hammond, or Bob?...Have they ever lost a loved one? Do they cry when hurt?...Did they have any relationship to Coke?

The installation, comprised of mixed-media work on fabric, with digital imagery, embroidery, rhinestones, trimmings, bandanas, and floral appliqués, does not really answer these questions in a literal sense. One presumes the photographs, digitally printed onto fabric and each mounted onto a rainbow of ornately decorated bandanas, represent the known victims of the Tivoli Incursion (also known as the 2010 Kingston unrest, depending, it seems, on one's perspective on the incident). Each subject's face is half-obsured by another bandana, perhaps alluding to the little we know about them. The available research material I could find on the subject, including this 2016 report by Amnesty International, does not identify the victims by name.

Having done at least basic due diligence to research Patterson's many questions in good faith, I am left with only one that I can begin to answer, and that is the first one: "What happens when seventy-two men and one woman dies and no one knows who they are?"

I start by looking at Patterson's visually arresting installation — a situation I might characterize as a riot of color and texture, no pun intended. The walls are lined with squares, suggesting almost a quilt, or clothes hanging out to dry. On the floor, an elevated platform is bedecked with sequined flowers, Mardi Gras beads, and real-sized pairs of shoes in etched glass with little bursts of fabric laces. Is this a funeral dais? A map of uncertain terrain?

The scene is wildly colorful, achingly detailed, and dare I say, beautiful. When Patterson learned that 72 men and one woman died and no one knew who they were, she made a tribute that sings in their memory. Because *someone* certainly knows who these victims were, and she is reminding us of this in the most aesthetically lively terms imaginable. (Perhaps she will reveal more information at her Penny Stamps Distinguished Speakers lecture, scheduled for February 1, and titled, suggestively, "They Were...")

I wonder these days about "raising the question" — such a popular activity in the art world. I confess to a level a fatigue with respect to artists raising questions to which no one has answers, underscoring problems without presenting solutions. But Patterson's work is a perfect reminder to me about the power of questions, and the quixotic ways artists go about answering them. It also demands that we remember this incident, and learn more about the fallout of US-Jamaica foreign policy, and the real destruction it rained down upon real people, who might like Beenie Man, go to visit family on weekends, and cry when hurt. I wonder how far I must go to learn their names.

Ebony Patterson: Of 72 continues at Institute for the Humanities Gallery at the University of Michigan (500 S. State Street, Ann Arbor, Mich.) through February 9.