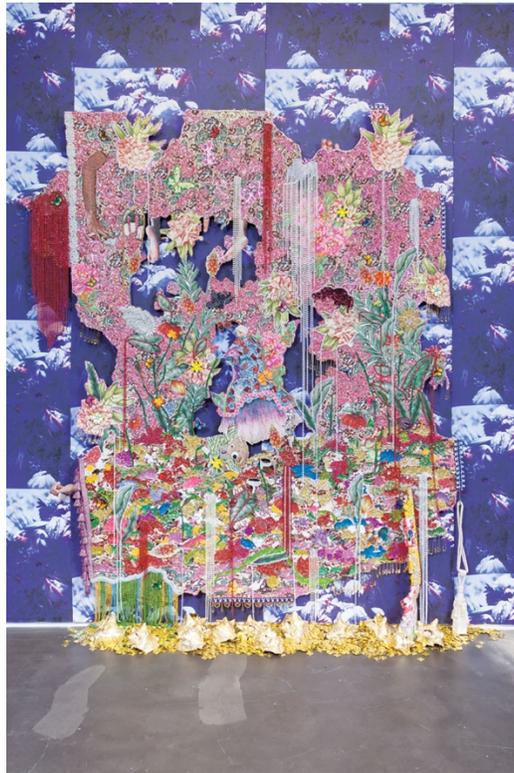


# ARTFORUM

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## Ebony G. Patterson

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Ebony G. Patterson, . . . *she saw things she shouldn't have* . . . , 2018, jacquard-woven tapestry and mixed media on artist-designed fabric wallpaper, 111 × 94".

All was not as it seemed in the garden of silk flowers, bejeweled resin roosters, glittering jacquard tapestries, and shimmering bug brooches that comprised Ebony G. Patterson's ". . . for those who bear/bare witness. . . ." Concurrent with her major museum exhibitions in Baltimore and Miami, Patterson's fourth solo exhibition at Monique Meloche included ten of her most recent installations (all 2018), whose lush representations of flora and fauna transformed the gallery into a tropical landscape "gone awry," as the artist described it.

Eschewing white walls, Patterson covered the gallery in wallpaper featuring the repeated image of a bouquet, or a cluster of plants, tinted midnight blue. Though the pattern seemed regular, it was in fact more organic, with slight inconsistencies—for this wallpaper was not paper at all but

printed cloth Patterson designed and attached to the walls with staples, imbuing the space with a tactile quality characteristic of what the art historian Krista Thompson has described as the “haptic visuality” of Patterson’s broader practice.

Within this setting, the ten works in the show unfolded as a series of gravid pauses, akin to the trailing ellipses that bracketed each of her titles or the plastic gold coins that spilled onto the gallery floor. The body, once a central political motif in Patterson’s practice, appeared to recede in these new installations. Gone were the costumed Jamaican dance-hall mannequins. Instead, we saw enticingly opulent assemblages of vegetal and animal inhabitants. But the garden is also an unmistakably political subject that belongs to a similar context: During the colonial period in Patterson’s native Jamaica, and throughout the Atlantic, botanical enclosures were active sites of power. By cultivating Caribbean biota for botanical study both in the Caribbean and in Europe, white Europeans rendered these foreign plants—and, by extension, the colonies from whence they came—comprehensible. At the same time, indigenous Caribbean plants and those secreted away by the enslaved during the Middle Passage were folded into existing European taxonomical systems for study, and slave plots were designated within the bounds of plantations alongside expansive ornamental yards and cash-crop fields. After emancipation, these sites remained important as repositories for creolized forms of cuisine and medicine; they were some of the few spaces within colonial systems where parallel forms of African diasporic knowledge could flourish.

So while the human form was not at the fore of this exhibition, Patterson’s political investment in the aesthetic as a means of redressing social injustice remained palpable. These blossoming assemblages simultaneously illuminated the gendered dimensions of colonialism’s history and the postcolonial present. For example, in . . . *she saw things she shouldn’t have* . . . , the title’s feminine subject likely refers not just to one person but to the concept of “woman,” which was and remains tied to the colonial domination of the landscape; think, for example, of theorist Hortense Spillers’s reproach of the black woman’s ungendering under slavery. Leaning against this installation’s tapestry was a toy gun coated in patterned tape and brooches, resting next to a lustrous conglomeration of plastic gold doubloons and hand-gilded conch shells. The gun is a common symbol in Patterson’s practice for violence in postcolonial Jamaica. But here, the weapon’s proximity to the conch—which was used to sound slave rebellions across the region during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—evoked the more explicit context of revolution in the Caribbean.

Once attuned to the subtleties of Patterson’s visual metaphors and citations, one began to locate other references, other possibilities; the works rewarded close looking. Though the ostensibly disappeared body never fully surfaced, disembodied limbs bloomed in several of the tapestries like their neighboring flowers. Moreover, intimated figures hid among the foliage, discreetly suggested by intricately brocaded clothes that appeared to be filled. In one minor vignette in . . . *fraught* . . . , the faces of two children emerged, fragmented and inverted, on printed cloth cut in the shape of two leafy vines that crept down from the upper-right corner of the installation. Glimpsed amid butterfly patches and glitter, they are part of the garden and, perhaps, the garden is equally part of them. They grow and cultivate a space where one can *bear witness* to the colonial past and thereby sow testimony to the lasting impact of colonialism.

— C.C. McKee