

Ebony G. Patterson: ...to dig between the cuts, beneath the leaves, below the soil?

By Amber Officer-Narvasa

In 1899, the British colonial administration in Jamaica passed a set of legislation known as the Public Gardens Regulation Act. Designed to systematize the maintenance of public spaces throughout the island, the act established a framework of policing and punishment on “any land maintained at public expense.” The act proclaimed that officers could seize stray animals found in the gardens, and allowed officials to deputize garden employees as “Special Constables” who could take offenders into custody. At the same time as the colonial garden was part of an elaborate performance of property and order, gardens of another kind abounded throughout the island. As the novelist Olive Senior notes in her exhibition essay, provision grounds, kitchen gardens, and yards all served as domestic spaces for poor and rural families to cultivate their own crops. Various a surveilled public resource, a private space of nourishment, a site of portraiture and aspiration, the Jamaican garden has long been a contested terrain. In an exhibit now at Hales Gallery, artist Ebony G. Patterson explores the legacy of the garden as it echoes throughout the postcolony.

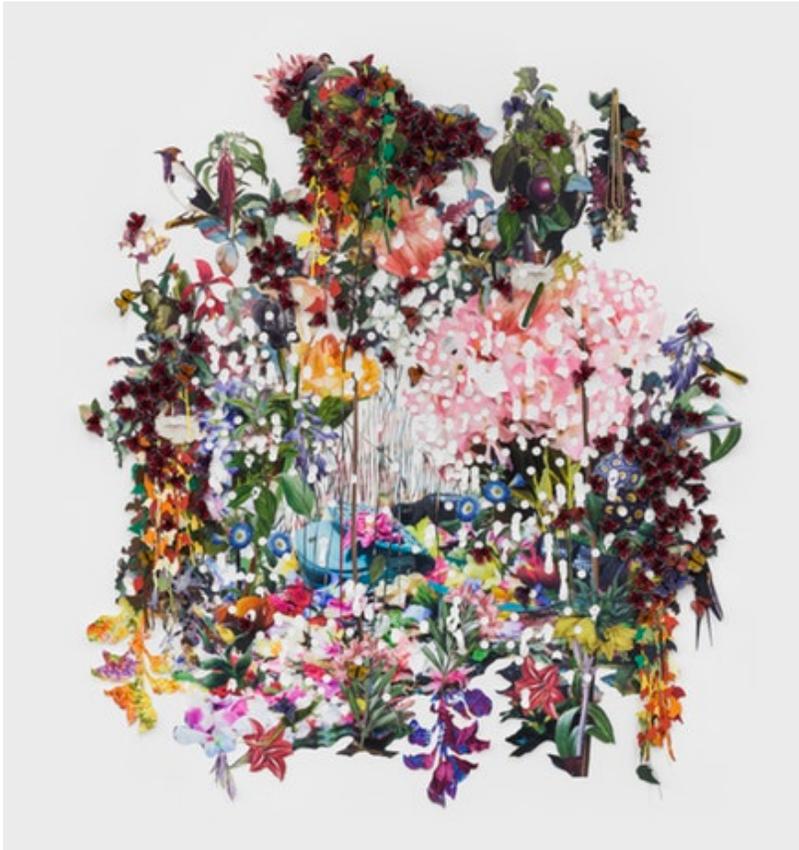


Ebony G. Patterson, *...a nest above, checkered shoes, beyond a green felt that candles no longer lit in garden in bloom*, 2019. Digital print on archival paper, 112 x 136 x 7 inches. Courtesy the artist and Hales Gallery. © Ebony Patterson. Photo: Stan Narten.

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Like the Jamaican garden itself, and like the laboring bodies which brought it into being, Patterson's collages are marked, multiple, undone by the layers of history and meaning that they must carry. The pieces are weighted with paper hanging down in thin shreds, butterflies and birds stretching into a third dimension, jewelry and ornaments gleaming amidst the ruckus as if they were on a street vendor's table in Kingston, or in Flatbush. The landscapes and flowers are dotted with small ruptures, circular cutouts which expose the gallery wall behind. In some areas, fragments of faces are visible: an upside down forehead and eye, a lip, trailing off into strings and vaguely organ-like shapes. The longer I stare, the more I find. A purse is visible, and now a snake. A pair of leopard print shoes slowly makes itself known. A gold costume necklace glints above the plants. The effect is distressing, exhilarating, a calculated confusion of beauty and dismemberment. While the gardens so carefully maintained by colonial administrations may have been meant as a kind of analgesic for the horrors of plantation slavery, Patterson's gardens don't lie to us about mortality. They never quite occlude the death and loss which brought them into being.



Ebony G. Patterson, *...below the crows, a blue purse sits between the blades, shoes among the petals, a cockerel come to witness...*, 2019. Digital print on archival paper, 110 x 98 x 6 inches. Photo: Stan Narten.

From the disembodied faces and limbs to the wounding and puncturing which echoes throughout the pieces, Patterson's gardens are not places of leisure, but of haunting. Elsewhere, the artist has

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spoken of drawing from newspaper crime scene photographs in her earlier “Dead Treez” series, placing these symbols of public spectacle and voyeurism within unruly garden landscapes. In the pieces shown at Hales Gallery, there is still no intact body, only fragments, continual whisperings. At the same time, Patterson draws on the ornate visual language of Black femme self-adornment and dollar store ritual that have become signatures of her work, reminding us that for some, prettiness exists in constant negotiation with violence.

In 2006, the Jamaican House of Representatives voted to amend the Public Gardens Act of 1899, increasing the maximum fines for vending and other “unauthorized acts.” The Minister of Agriculture and Lands reminded his constituents that police in gardens and zoos could arrest anyone deemed to be acting improperly, without the need for a warrant. Our public spaces were not actually meant to belong to us: the lesson is familiar, timeworn, no surprise to anyone existing in empire’s persistent afterlives. Meanwhile, Patterson offers a vision of the other gardens that have always been—the insurgent ground, the space overflowing with grief and fleshly rememberings, the riot of beauty beneath the leaves.