

**ARTFORUM**

**EBONY G. PATTERSON**

October 04, 2019 • Ebony G. Patterson on dress and dignity in *...three kings weep...*



Ebony G. Patterson, *...three kings weep...*, 2018, three-channel digital video, color, sound, 8 minutes 34 seconds.

*Ebony G. Patterson's slow and monumental video installation ...three kings weep..., 2018, debuted in her solo exhibition at Pérez Art Museum Miami last year and is on view at the Speed Art Museum in Louisville, Kentucky, until January 5, 2020, before it travels to the Nasher Museum of Art in Durham, North Carolina. For one night only, the work can also be seen in Toronto during "Nuit Blanche," a twelve-hour event on October 5, 2019, where visitors can glimpse nearly ninety artworks set around the city. (Patterson's work will be on view in the Scarborough Civic Centre's rotunda as part of the group show "Queens and Kings of Scarborough.") Additionally, on October 24, 2019, she will open a solo show at Hales Gallery in New York, which runs through December 20, 2019.*

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451 N Paulina Street, Chicago 60622  
312 243 2129 moniquemeloche.com

THIS WORK comes out of my ongoing research and thoughts around dress as a way of performing dignity. It's the second video I've made, and was prompted, in part, by an article I read in 2015 about doctors at the University of Virginia who believed that black people experience little to no pain. I thought that was such a tragedy: to be in the field of care and to have such predetermined ideas about something that all of humanity experiences—no matter the color of skin. I began to wonder what would it mean for someone to force an audience to witness their humanity—to strip away this surface that is somehow not seen so that one was forced to look. I also wondered what it would mean to demand that someone sees that person through a stripping or a removal.

“See me” is a phrase I've used in other projects. I consider it a demand, not a request. As I continued to think through the problems of this piece, I wondered: Why would these bodies surrender to anyone? The work is certainly about the value of their bodies! So instead of showing stripping, as I had originally thought, I decided to present these young men getting dressed, and their gaze never leaves you. You see them weep—not bawl. It's not a moment for pity. It's almost as if their tears are cleansing them. The very last thing they do is literally crown themselves. We think of crowning as something bestowed upon a person, but I wanted to show what it means to not wait for that, and rather to sit in one's sense of dignity: to crown oneself.

I have tried to use my work as a way of confronting the viewer through scale, and that's part of the reason why this video is projected so large. I want the audience to be immersed physically, emotionally, and psychologically within the work so they become aware of their own body. The video is shown in a place that feels like a chapel. There's an expectation of reverence that happens as you're sitting at the feet of these three young men. They become deities.

The viewer hears lines from Claude McKay's poem “If We Must Die,” and the words come forth like needles in utter silence. The poem was written in 1919 and it's extremely relevant today. It's read aloud by a teenage boy, and his voice hadn't quite cracked yet when we recorded. The idea is that a child is leading these men and galvanizing them for their deaths. I wanted to present these bodies in a way that allowed space to demonstrate the full sense of the potential of their vulnerability. I was also thinking about the way the black male

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body is weaponized in public space and seen as highly charged. And for black children, the potential for innocence in public space is in question.

What does it mean for people who have been seen as systematically powerless to employ the tool of dress as a way to perform their value? There's long been a critique of poor people spending too much money on material things, and we've always lived in a world that places value on "things"—and not the person. My work acknowledges that, if I live in a space that says I'm not worthy, what does it mean to use those same tools to throw the question of value right back at you? Like a call-and-response.

I've talked about this a few times before, but it still applies: I once read a blog article written by a woman who describes her mother dressing up to go to a social security office to help an elderly neighbor out. She asked her mother about this and her mom said that she dressed up so that people would just take her seriously. She's negotiating these systems that says body like hers are not allowed dignity, but she uses the signifiers of dress as a way to say I am here and you will take me seriously. But it also goes back to the civil rights movement: MLK talked about the suit as armor.

I would like to think that my audience comes to look, that they don't come to simply see. To look involves analysis, and with looking comes query. It's an active engagement from the start. We take in so much information so quickly all the time. But we've lost a sense of what it means to just stop and look. In that stopping, the viewer might take away something, but that's entirely up to them. All I ask is that they be present.

— *As told to Lauren O'Neill-Butler*