

DAMN°

How Does Your Garden Grow?

NATALIA TORIJA/DAMN°85 SUMMER 2023



Installation image, '*... things come to thrive... in the shedding... in the molting...*' Photo: The New York Botanical Garden.

It was a dry, smoky spring in New York City this year. The perennial blooms began peering out of fenced gardens, making their way through the dirt and the weeds. Thriving, flowering, beautiful as they are, these flowers are deemed undesirable to garden keepers. Mulch gets laid down to prevent such 'others' from invading the peonies, the hydrangeas, and the roses. Because the urban garden, as it has come to be known, is meant to be ornamental.

Nowhere is a garden more selectively manicured than in the institutions that care for and study plant science. Greenhouses and conservatories have been kept for centuries for the purpose of examining and propagating species from all corners of the world. The plant's label usually contains its origin, kingdom and scientific name. But what can we find out about the ground in which it was originally rooted? And what about the land and the people who worked that land? Or even the people who care for and water the plants today? Rarely do we focus on the roots because we are mesmerized by the quixotic beauty of the garden.

That's not the case at the New York Botanical Garden (NYBG) this season, however, where a new way of looking (not seeing) has been introduced. One that has as much to do with wonder as it does with anguish. Enter Ebony G. Patterson's world. Her exhibition '*...things come to thrive... in the shedding... in the molting...*', situated in this 250-acre garden in the Bronx, is very much intended to lure the viewer from beauty into disruption. "Gardens are fundamentally about man taming what is wild," says the Kingston, Jamaica-born, Chicago-based artist. "I'm interested in how that assertion of

control over plants also relates to human bodies, and what happens when we look underneath the embellishments on the land."



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Patterson, who identifies as a painter, works in a diversity of media to depict garden-like environments using silk flowers, photo collages

and tapestries, and ornaments like beads. These installations play tricks on the eye. You are beguiled into a space that's covered floor to ceiling in tile-patterned wallpaper before you discover queasy snakes, spiders, flies, and human limbs.

The work of a fellow-Jamaican, author Olive Senior, who Patterson often references, speaks to much of what Patterson's gardens evoke. In Senior's collection of poems, *Gardening in the Tropics* (1994), she, much like the artist, uses the garden and the act of caring for the garden, burying and unearthing, as a metaphor for the Caribbean's colonialist past and the continuous aggression shown towards people of colour and marginalised communities. In Senior's poignant poem 'Brief Lives', she speaks Patterson's language:

***Gardening in the Tropics, you never know
what you'll turn up. Quite often, bones.***

As you approach the lawn outside the Enid A. Haupt Conservatory, you notice big black glittery vultures in front of you, and then realise they are everywhere. They're lurking and picking at the garden which has turned the colour of a fresh wound, with foliage in shades of burgundy, dark purple, and bright red. The stems of foxgloves, which are often considered an invasive weed, pop up throughout the garden. Bloodleaf, fleshy coleus, and red petunias are scavenged by wakes of vultures that, as Patterson remarks, are known to maintain life-long family bonds and feed on carrion together in what she describes as an act of care for the ecosystem.

Following a one-year intermittent artist's residence at the NYBG, and working with horticulturists, Patterson reveals her personal meditations on gardens, displaying these in the open for visitors to uncover. "Working in a living garden is the culmination of my thinking about cultivated land as a metaphor for post-colonial space," she says.

A particular memory of a moulting peacock in Kingston had been sitting with her for a number of years. A usually majestic male bird, it is in its most vulnerable state when

walking in a garden. "She has been interested in this idea of moulting and the renewal that follows destruction or the dissolving-away of the illusion of beauty," informs Joanna Groarke, Vice President for Exhibitions and Programming at the NYBG. "Ebony found herself thinking about what comes next, and what are the lessons that we learned from that loss? What does it mean to learn from ghosts? To learn from that which is no longer with us?"



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Inside the conservatory, perched atop a dark pool of water, is a cast-glass-and-hydrostone peacock being held together as if about to break. Sloughing its feathers, the tail metaphorically extends through the greenhouses as more foliage and flowers, including hypoestes or "baby's tears" and touch-me-nots (for if you touch them, the packed seed-pod snaps open), guide the way. As part of Patterson's residence, she studied extinct species of weeds and brought them in as extremely brittle, framework glass sculptures. Their spirits lurk throughout the grounds, and once you notice them, you will see them everywhere; you cannot look away. Besides, the vultures are around to remind you of them.

It is not only plants, though. A human spine and pairs of bare feet cast in glass surface among the orange Mexican sunflowers and begonias, while a recording of Patterson's recitations — almost incantations — plays on a loop. These solemn souls have come to reclaim their place and their truth.

At the end of the path in the Palms of the World gallery, a wall of silver inch-plants and a type of amaranth, aptly called love-lies-bleeding — presumably the bottom of the peacock's tail, rises from a blood-red pool to reveal the bottom part of a clothed body cast in glass.

So much of Patterson's work has to do with violence exerted on bodies that remain anonymous. For some of them we know certain statistics, but rarely their names. Her work of 72 Project (2012) was the memorialisation of a massacre that occurred in Tivoli Gardens, an impoverished neighbourhood in Kingston, after the United States demanded the extradition of a drug lord.

Some, if not most of the plants used by Patterson, are deemed undesirable either for their toxicity when ingested or their unsolicited ability to proliferate, the latter an analogy for people in underserved communities. In the gallery of the LuEsther T. Mertz Library is studies for a vocabulary of loss (2022), a selection of collages reminiscent of funerary wreaths, covered in flies, framed and displayed similarly to butterfly taxidermy.



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Out in the sunlit yet grim rotunda is ...fester... (2023) a mesmerizing group of textured photo tapestries bulked up and bunched together, with gilded skeleton parts emerging among glass leaves. On the reverse side of this 'wall', a mass of more than 1000 red lace gloves sprouts black metal prickly thistles and other plants, a sight evocative of the

Earth being peeled back to expose its wounded roots. The vultures look down from a Renaissance Revival-style dome. It's uncanny. It's hypnotizing. It stings.

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The exhibition '*...things come to thrive...in the shedding...in the molting...*' is at the New York Botanical Garden until 22 October 2023 / nybg.org