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In Minor Keys

Postcolonial Baroque, or Airing out the Garden Like a Rug

An interview by Sabine Maria
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Ebony G. Patterson, photo: Robert Chase Heishman,
Courtesy: John D. and
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‘The resplendent assemblages of Ebony G. Patterson comprise a rich inventory of beguiling decorative elements that come together in arrays of overwhelming density, as if to match the tropical forest, full of camouflaged presences. But the materials that Patterson conjugates are also the detritus of everyday consumerism and of the manufacturing excess that is offloaded and circulates in economies of the Global South’, wrote Christopher Cozier, an artist, writer and curator based in Port of Spain, Trinidad, on her recent works on display in Venice.

Patterson was born in Kingston, Jamaica, in 1981 and studied painting at the Edna Manley College of the Visual and Performing Arts in Kingston, graduating in 2004.

She went on to earn an MFA in printmaking and drawing from the Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri, in 2006. Since then, she has been invited to participate in numerous solo and group exhibitions around the world. In 2023, the High Museum of Art in Atlanta awarded Patterson the David C. Driskell Prize in recognition of her contributions to the field of African American art. In 2024, she was named a MacArthur Fellow. Her work remains largely unknown in Germany.

The interview took place during the preview of the biennale on Friday, 9 May. It was held in front of Ebony G. Patterson’s works in the Central Pavilion and in the garden, places which were increasingly filled with the sound of visitors (inside) and security police and helicopters (outside).

SMS It’s so nice to meet you here. Let’s start directly with your exhibited works. You created these pieces in recent years, and they were transported from Chicago to Venice. What was the curatorial approach for selecting them?

EGP The curators decided which recent works would best complement the ideas being explored in the show. They also considered including something new, but the timing was difficult for all of us. They ultimately decided on two [of my] works *...fester...* (2023) and *when the land is in plumage...* (2020). I made this piece during the lockdown in Chicago. My studio then was small, and I was preparing for the Liverpool Biennial and a show at the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis. So, I suggested to them, ‘Hey, could we have *when the land is in plumage...* in the show? That way I could actually see the work.’ That was difficult to do in the space I was working in at the time. Ironically, I wasn’t able to see that show during the pandemic. Having just come out of lockdown in Chicago, I didn’t feel comfortable travelling. The piece actually travelled to another venue afterwards, and I couldn’t be there either. So, it’s really great to see the

work here in Venice for the first time, six years later, and to help with the installation of the piece in person.

SMS From an environmental perspective, the move away from long-haul flights is actually not so bad. Was it difficult to install the piece here?

EGP My previous studio literally had the same length as the pedestal of the piece here. Imagine how challenging it was to see the piece from a wider perspective. It was a work that sparked new considerations and prompted me to reflect on race and class. We were all at home during that time; we were all watching television and consuming other media. For me, the garden has long been a place of conversation, metaphorically speaking, and as I was watching all the protests happening at that time and all the responses to them . . . it made me think about the notion of land and change, the landscape changing, and so on . . .

SMS Was the lockdown as difficult in Jamaica as it was then in Chicago?

EGP The challenges varied, but the effect on us was generally the same, and it was the hardest on people from working-class communities. But several months before the pandemic, when I was home in Kingston, I saw a leucistic (white) peacock in an enclosure undergoing moulting, the changing of its feathers. I had never seen a white peacock before, and he was alone in his enclosure, separate from the other peacocks, because he was moulting. Seeing this peacock, a symbol of beauty, in a state of unravelling, of transformation, made me wonder: what does it mean to witness your own ugliness?

SMS Is that the reason for the Peacock's backward-turned gaze and its contorted posture?

EGP Exactly. There's a West African word for it: Sankofa. It's a concept and symbol that derives from the Akan people of Ghana and essentially means that in order to move forward, you have to look back to the past. Because the past provides lessons. How can we move forward collectively if we are unable to come to terms with the lessons

of the past? Growth happens when we seek to understand what has happened. And that means examining what is fruitful and what is difficult. So, we think about the repetition of our own histories - those we have lived through and those we are currently shaping. How can we not examine and learn from them? To dismiss them is to continue silencing those who were oppressed in those histories, and the lessons will only repeat themselves . . . unless and until they are learned. There will be no real moving forward, and the future we create will be no different. It's difficult, but it's also incredibly necessary.

SMS Let's move on to your other work, . . . *fester* . . . , a double-sided sculpture resembling a wall. One side is composed entirely of red lace gloves, while the other features rolled-up tapestries and added objects made of glass and other materials.

EGP For me, this work could not have come about without *when the land is plumage* . . . This was the first time I tried making my tapestries more sculptural. Before that, they had been more confined to a two-dimensional surface. Then I started making these works on paper that were incredibly three-dimensional, and I struggled with fact that the tapestries were so flat. So all these elements came together to make them more sculptural.

SMS You started as a painter . . .

EGP Yes, I *am* still a painter, but I sometimes make sculptures [*laughs*]. I've never really thought about the implications of sculpture; I tend to think of it more as painting. The gloves aren't painted but were found in various shades of red. They are completely hollow and fragile but attached to a lace structure that is then hung on a wooden structure that snaps together. The textiles on the other side are Jacquards, which are embellished. The entire piece stems from my ongoing reflection on the garden as an embellishment that conceals complex and difficult histories that endure. What would it mean to lift up the garden like a rug and fold over the corner? What would

be underneath? But for me, for as arresting as the work is in its scale and complexity, it needs to be even bigger, even more, because I think the questions I'm grappling with also demand a sense of impossibility and an overwhelming scale, in which I want to immerse the viewer.

SMS In this assemblage of different landscapes, we also see glass elements and rolled-up objects. Each piece can be unrolled to create a certain image of a landscape. I would also interpret this as a kind of conceptual repository of different notions of landscape.

EGP I just read them as skins. You see next to the glass thistles there are also golden spines. On the other side of the piece, you'll find the bird-of-paradise flower, which has been introduced all over the world.

SMS You've mentioned on several occasions that you use 'beauty as a trap'. What does that mean?

EGP We are, first and foremost, visual beings. Even before we learn to speak, we consume visual information. Our visual intelligence begins earlier than we realise, but somewhere along the way we are told that we aren't good enough at making things, drawing things. This makes us insecure about how we respond to visual stimuli. We like beautiful things, but we also struggle to deal with things that are difficult. So, what does it mean to use something that is beautiful and seductive to pull people in? When I was an undergraduate (2000), a professor of mine, Cecil Cooper, would tell us that the attention span of the audience is incredibly short. He said you have three seconds to get someone to devote time to looking at a work. Today that's even shorter. As an artist, it's challenging to slow down this perception and engage the audience. I want to hold the audience's attention and ask them to engage in the act of looking. And I use beauty to talk about the complexities of our histories and social conditions.

SMS In your work, you bring together an overwhelming amount of information, an abun-

dance of elements – glitter and opulence, a mix of materials and media, a concept of multi-layering and so on. It's almost a kind of baroque approach.

EGP I don't think of it as baroque at all. I can be a little obsessive. Everything could be a little bit denser or bigger, and so on – but for me, it's all just a matter of layering. It's an engagement with various traditions of ornament. It's not decorative; it's more an attempt to engage with form and space using a range of materials and getting all of it to embody the ideas in the work.

SMS Can you ever stop working on a piece? How do you know when it's finished?

EGP The work has its own voice. You can overwork and kill a piece if you don't listen to it and don't allow yourself time off in between. This understanding is something that just comes with practice.

SMS You live in Kingston and Chicago. For the context of your work you use metaphors such as 'the garden' or 'the tropical garden'. Is Jamaica the most important setting and source of inspiration for your work?

EGP My home is definitely a site for many of my considerations. But *never* exclusively so. I have a studio in Kingston and one in Chicago. Many things begin when I am home, and they might end elsewhere. They probably get realised in Chicago, Philadelphia, Montego Bay or the UK. I use a lot of photo-based information from all over the world and explore a wide range of post-colonial issues. But I am home as often as possible. That's very important. It feeds me.

SMS You are quite famous in Kingston now. How do you work there?

EGP Oh, I'm not. Jamaica has a vibrant [art] scene, but the art community is quite small. You know many people, directly or indirectly. The oldest art school in the English-speaking Caribbean is in Jamaica, the Edna Manley College of the Visual and Performing Arts in Kingston, where I studied, and I am very proud of my time there. There are also the National Gallery of Jamaica and the National Gallery West, as well as

a few artists run community-based scenes, most of them based in Kingston. But there has always been a history of these kinds of initiatives on the island and throughout the Caribbean region.

SMS Do you speak for a Caribbean generation, as was written in an exhibition text?

EGP No, of course not. But I do understand the importance and the significance of my presence here in Venice. The history of the biennale, which claims to be a global conversation, certainly hasn't lived up to that idea in most editions – and still doesn't fully do so. When you look at the current exhibition and consider where many of the artists come from, or where they live and

work, you realise that Koyo's contribution is incredibly brave. She could have played it 'safe' ('safe' is relative here), but the exhibition, with all its complexities, affirms that she was never interested in playing it 'safe'. That would have been a totally different biennial. And there's definitely a special kind of energy here during opening week. I feel a deep sense of community, the way artists interact with each other. Who you are really depends on the environment you come from. So, if you've grown up in a place where people share, look out for each other and understand each other's experiences, you can feel at ease even in the back seat. There is a strong sense of that in the energy of the main exhibition.



Ebony G. Patterson, *Der Falke blickt hinaus... während sie den Ort umarmt... und Fliegen kommen, um sich zu ernähren...*, 2021, digital print on watercolour paper and paper elements, on wallpaper designed by the artist, Courtesy: the artist, Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago and Hales Gallery New York London, photo: Robert Chase Heishman