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Verdant Surfaces and Ambiguous Vividity

Everything is everything and everything is beautiful
—Brittany Howard, “Stay High”

Illustration 1: Ebony G. Patterson (1981-), *...between the stems sits a red cap above and below crown imperials....*

Installation view. Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, 11 September 2020-21 February 2021.

Photograph: Dusty Kessler

- 1 Before I reach the check-in desk at Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis (CAMSTL), Ebony G. Patterson's clean yet chaotic *...between the stems sits a red cap above and below crown imperials...* (2019) engulfs my attention. The image is somehow all surface yet infinitely layered in the same instant, presenting a rainbow of cut- or torn-paper flora and fauna, fragmented images of Black women, and red feather butterflies overlaid on massive sheets of archival paper. The diptych stands in parallel, vitrine-like frames in the museum lobby. The image of the work converges across the axis of the frames, leaving almost no visual space inactivated, while folding in aporia through shadow. Visible pins near the top of each case suggest the collage cascades from the top of the work; a few hand-illustrated water droplets and globules of glue highlight the fluid motion of the work. Illustrations and found photographs of foliage litter the surface of the piece, referencing anthuriums (flamingo flowers or laceleaf in more common parlance), monstera, and countless other species. Images of parrots and grouse perch among the dense paper plant life. Vines and foliage cut from orange, tan, black, red, green, white, or yellow construction paper hang down from several points on top of it all, casting arbitrary shadows.
- 2 A pleasurable deluge of optical information characterizes my whole experience of *...when the cuts erupt...the garden rings...and the warning is a wailing....* My eye moves to new imagery before my mind can identify and process any information. "Beauty, for me, is a tool of seduction... a trap," the artist says ("Ebony" 2020). Critic and queer theorist Amber Jamilla Musser affirms Patterson's sentiments, suggesting a vocabulary for the overwhelming lushness in many works by Black and brown queer, trans, and femme artists. Musser posits that such images allow the embodied knowledge of the minoritarian artist to "hide in plain sight—opacity is found in the inability to take it all in and produce coherence" (Musser 2018, 10). The opacity of Patterson's work traps

penetrating gazes and the forces of whiteness at its surface, protecting an unknowable interiority. It is in this shielded interior that Musser locates *brown jouissance*: “a reveling in [...] sensuous materiality that brings together pleasure and pain” (Musser 2018, 3). Patterson’s exhibition combines the luxurious with the damaged, the fragmentary with the manifest whole, and the decadent with the sacred.

- 3 The collage certainly aligns with Musser’s claim; other details on the surface of the collage make it even harder to find an optical foothold. Holes, about an inch in diameter, cut across the entire image, revealing the sterile, white archival backdrop. Plastic cockroaches peek out from some of these holes and find their way into other spaces of the work. Faces, all smiling and some upturned, come into view throughout the garden of the collage at close glance, with what might be a family photograph scattered as an under-collage. Even fragmented under the violent logics of the collage garden, Black joy remains. Petals, leaves, and feathers twirl in imagined wind at the margins of the image.

Illustration 2: Ebony G. Patterson (1981-), *...and the dew cracks the earth, in five acts of lamentation...between the cuts...beneath the leaves...below the soil...*

Installation view. Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, 11 September 2020-21 February 2021.

Photograph: Dusty Kessler

- 4 I move to the main gallery space of CAMSTL. The space is mostly empty, affording spectators a wide view of the museum’s sixty-foot Project Wall, across which Patterson’s *and the dew cracks the earth, in five acts of lamentation...beneath the cuts...beneath the leaves...below the soil* (2020) reaches. Something of an extension of the 2019 *...between the stems sits a red cap above and below crown imperials...*, the work on the Project Wall consists of five enormous collages, housed in vitrine-like frames. Each of these contains a central vignette featuring opulently dressed Black figures. Paper-garden abundance frames (and partially obscures) these vignettes, in which the figures might be celebrating, enacting ritual gestures, lamenting, or simply hanging out. They don anachronistic and unquestionably couture garb, including fancy dresses and a

reptile-skin suit. The figures' noble dress hearkens to the glamour of Kehinde Wiley's portraiture, though motifs of constraint—chains, buckles, straps—emerge from the glamour. Patterson's figures are also headless. Perhaps these headless bodies reference Brett Bailey's controversial *Exhibit B*, which presented a set of singing decapitated heads on tripods, among other vignettes of suffering Black bodies in an exploration of violence in colonial Africa (Bailey 2010). Patterson's figures don beautiful garments, even with the motifs of constraint, yet their identities remain concealed. Patterson challenges presumptions of the Black body's objectification while enacting a strategic objectification of her own.

- 5 The images indicate no obvious sequence and enact no obvious plot, suggesting a co-presence with each other. The density of motifs and the figures' opulence conjure fairytale or myth, but the narrative is ambivalent and incomplete. Patterson's layering and puncturing technique emerges in the temporality as well as the materiality of her images. She extends this temporality in her ellipsis-laden titles as well as her objects. Patterson's titles for the works and the exhibition prefigure pauses in spectators' reading. The language of each title is evocative but incomplete, refusing to cohere with a settled meaning. (It also makes shortanding them in essays like this one almost impossible, staging a playful resistance to didactic matrixing.)
- 6 Patterson is Jamaican-American. She was educated at Edna Manley College in Kingston and Washington University in St. Louis. I suggest that the fulsome yet fragmentary presence of her figures could indicate the simultaneous splendor and trauma of diasporic hybridity. The garden thematic doubles down on this possibility. In the garden, the decisive hand of the gardener controls space, fetishizes some plants as exotic, and restricts plants to object status... yet the plants insist on vivid life-in-color. "Here things are growing, but they are also dying," says Patterson (Otten 2020). "This garden is filled with beauty, but it is also filled with tragedy." This framing aligns with cultural critic José Esteban Muñoz's argument that "identity practices such as queerness and hybridity are not a priori sites of contestation but, instead, spaces of productivity where identity's fragmentary nature is accepted and negotiated" (Muñoz 79). Patterson's artistic and personal identities spring from histories of colonialism, forced migration, and capital flows across the Commonwealth, but her work insists on exuberance. The artist, like her paper, generates majesty from an embodied understanding of material violence.

Illustration 3: Ebony G. Patterson (1981-), detail of *...and the dew cracks the earth, in five acts of lamentation...between the cuts...beneath the leaves...below the soil...*

Detail. Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, 11 September 2020-21 February 2021.

Photograph: Dusty Kessler

- 7 The larger, more recent collage shares many motifs from the earlier one I encountered in the lobby, including the construction-paper vines, feather butterflies (this time in the purple to indigo spectrum), Black facial fragments, plastic cockroaches, perforations through the whole image that expose the white background, and suspended petals and leaves at the margins. *and the dew cracks the earth, in five acts of lamentation...beneath the cuts...beneath the leaves...below the soil* diverges from its predecessor beyond the central scenes. Black silhouette hands interlaced with delicate white floral print, like wallpaper, clap from the upper sections of all five frames, amid the scattered and seemingly twirling petals, leaves, and vines. The images of bulbs and roots reach down from the bottom of each image. Repeating purple wallpaper patterns surround the frames, covering the entire Project Wall. The butterflies make their way out of the frame, spreading out in banks above and below the collages on the wall. From the distant end of the gallery, the images bulge in their flatness, much like Kara Walker's intricate black silhouettes. Musser and Ellis note this characteristic earlier in Patterson's oeuvre, characterizing the artist's paintings as "simultaneously flat and full; skin-deep rehearsals of blackness—particularly black femininity—as always-already, and nothing-but, flesh at the same time they are simultaneously ciphers" (Ellis 23).

Illustration 4: Ebony G. Patterson (1981-), *when the land is in plumage...a peacock is in molting*.

In situ. Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, 11 September 2020-21 February 2021.

Photograph: Dusty Kessler

- 8 Patterson's exhibition committedly leaps into the third dimension with *when the land is in plumage...a peacock is in molting* (2020), which both reimagines and fills the small front gallery it occupies. A bifurcated, gauzy scrim—flat yet bulging—acts as a ceiling to the space, with spotlights just visible through it.
- 9 The titular peacock stands in the foreground. White porcelain flowers cover its mannequin foam body, a decadent ornamentation that doubles as armor. A large white plaster flower adorns the bird's head. Its red glitter feet—talons in the same material as Dorothy's ruby slippers—stand atop a heap of conch shells in gold-leaf. A pair of purple hands made from a floral textile reach out from the work. The bird is ostentatiously white in its porcelain armor, suggesting one possible reading of the scene Patterson casts in the installation. Is the peacock the force of whiteness, crushing and obscuring a body of color? Did the peacock kill or crush the bearer of the purple hands? The hands could be reaching out to the spectator in desperation for aid. They could stand in opposition to the peacock, but it is equally possible the hands mark a vital force reaching out from the statuesque bird. The hands could be taking the eucharist or demonstrating vulnerability. Ellis suggests that "[Patterson] has been exploring gender's iterations from the beginning of her career" (Ellis 20). The peacock is dripping with jewels, lacing a feminine-coded opulence with a masculine-coded swagger; it could simply manifest a queer performance of self, replete with the gorgeous and the traumatic. No matter how one reads the peacock as analog of the raced and gendered body, its complicated position within an aesthetic field of power is central to the encounter.

Illustration 5: Ebony G. Patterson (1981-), *when the land is in plumage...*

Detail. Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, 11 September 2020-21 February 2021.

Photograph: Dusty Kessler

- 10 The “point of origin” is unclear in the work. The peacock could be receding into the wall or it could be marching forth from it. The work bends, again suggesting a cascade. White pearlescent beads, like those of a rosary or Mardi Gras necklace, extend as the bird’s plumage, reaching five to ten feet back from its body. A few strands of red beads stand out in the shimmering river of white. The sea of beads merges into a vast, printed textile that reaches up the back wall of the gallery. Foliage returns from the collages as a decorative motif, manifesting in prints, sequins, glitter, and tassels through the wall-hanging. Fiber-printed hands reach from either side of this quasi-tapestry, possibly referencing violence done to Black people (cutting off their hands), especially in the Congo under Leopold II (Bailey 2010).
- 11 The entire exhibition revels in the hypervisibility which accrues to Black and brown, queer and femme bodies (Phelan 92). A subtly funerary air hangs in the darkened and altar-lit gallery, but *when the land is in plumage...a peacock is in molting* puts on a dazzling spectacle, much like the collage works before it. The possibility of a joyous self-knowledge, informed by trauma but neither deadened nor diminished by it, transpires from Patterson’s surfaces. There is pain and perversion in this twisted Eden, not so much lurking beneath the surfaces as woven into them. Patterson joins the uncanny and violent with the delicate and opulent to co-constitute the ebullient complexity of...*when the cuts erupt...the garden rings...and the warning is a wailing...* The exhibition marks key experimentation for this important artist.

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