



Death, Beauty, & Bling

Amy Zhang

THE LAST TIME I SAW SUCH LARGE TAPESTRIES, THEY WERE HUNG on the Vatican Museum walls in Rome (papal scenes in muted reds and browns, Italian princes in funny hats). Or, rather, it was in home goods stores in Brooklyn, the faux tapestries adorned with flowers, not unlike the carpet rolled under my mother's couch, forgotten and dust-covered.

Ebony G. Patterson makes tapestries new again in her first New York solo show, *Ebony G. Patterson: Dead Treez*. Pulled from their usual European and/or domestic contexts, the tapestries hold narratives of more political significance, narratives particular to Patterson's experiences growing up and living in Kingston, Jamaica.

Walking into the third floor exhibition at the Museum of Arts and Design, the first thing I notice are the sparkles. The bling. I have to reorient myself—most of the artwork is laid out flat on the floor, save for *Swag Swag Krew*, an arrangement of bedazzled and patterned mannequins in the corner that, at first glance, reminds me of an H&M window display.

From the gallery text I learn that the bodiless, heavily embellished clothing sewn into the tapestries were inspired by images and reports of violent deaths that Patterson saw circulating on social media. Suddenly, their expansive flatness and placement on the floor makes me uncomfortable. The clothes are arranged to suggest bodies shot in movement; legs splayed, arms spread. Walking around the tapestries I feel like a witness to a sinister scene but I can't stop looking (Is that really a Mario Kart emblem? A flower-patterned toy gun?). They're scenes of brutality that are depicted with such aesthetic overload, but each intricate detail denotes a deep consideration on the artist's part.

Patterson places two pairs of shoes—men's brown loafers and teal high-heels—in front of where we found them. It's a smart way for Patterson to force the viewer to think about his or her position as witness to scenes of public violence. The shoes rest on top of pink crochet flowers which extrude from the rectangular tapestry, creating a space beyond the photograph-like scene. A pair of people are standing nearby, watching the scene, and a well-heeled pair at that. Are they complicit?

But the tapestries are also less literal than that. A piece that I keep walking around and around is wilted roses. It's only after a few minutes of staring at the sparkles, colors, and objects that I begin to identify the many layers that Patterson pieced together: jacquard flowers, painted flowers, knitted flowers, yarn, sequins, glitter. Black flowers erupt

from the tapestry like a pox, as if the whole scene has been taken over by a disease that is growing from the ground. I note, throughout the gallery, the intermingling of organic objects and man-made, consumerist objects, which are placed together in a web that suspends the hinted-at body. Paradoxically, life seems in full bloom—you would only describe the tapestries as vibrant.

While the flamboyant and colorful clothing is borrowed from Jamaican dancehall culture, (explained in the gallery text) it seems no accident that it's not stated clearly whether the murder victims only belong in a Jamaican context. The clothes evoke bodies, but they're hollow; no body claims them. In *root and shrubz 2014*, a toy car and toy gun are glued onto the tapestry, and when I saw it I immediately thought of Tamir Rice. In where we found them, the two pairs of shoes made me think of the four hours that Michael Brown was laid out on the street after he was shot, for all eyes to see. Whatever Patterson's purpose was, the tapestries certainly arrived for their American debut at a time when they are needed, challenging us to spend more time reimagining the murder scenes and also the lives of the victims.

Because of what the media shows us, I realized that the images we get are ones of darkness. Grainy and hard to decipher, they contain a dreariness that makes us want to look away. At a glance, we see only bodies. We don't see their owners' hobbies, family relationships, quirks and talents—we see only bodies in relation to violence. We see a victim, or as media sometimes narrates, a provoker.

In *Politics of the Imagination*, the anthropologist David Graeber writes that violence is essentially a form of stupidity that bureaucrats can wield, stupidity in the sense that violence does not require any empathy or understanding from the wielder of the gun—it is a reaction to a situation whereby people are transformed into objects. In *Dead Treez*, Patterson forces us to look, for a long time, at these victims in their lost lives' colorful glory, at all the details that were stripped away.