



‘Dancing’ plants, collage, fantastic landscapes among new works at Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis

by JANA HENDERSON
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Ebony G. Patterson won't be in town until a couple of months after her 52-foot creation takes over the Project Wall at the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis.

"I will supervise the install remotely," she said by email last week. And she means remotely. Patterson is in Jamaica, where she was born.

"Because of the pandemic, I had weighed not coming home at all this summer. But I needed to see my mother. She is my home."

The island's government has been good at tracking coronavirus cases and communicating with the public, she said:

"We started hearing about preparations since January. But this is not surprising, as Jamaica and the entire Caribbean region has had to mitigate multiple disasters annually. So every year we have to battle for our survival. It's not surprising then that so many emerging economies with similar annual disaster rates are doing well in terms of managing the pandemic."

The problem, she says, is that tourists often come from countries with looser control. "In the Caribbean we have a saying: Merica sneeze and di res' a wi ketch col (America sneezes and the rest of us gets the cold)."

Her awareness of political and cultural issues underlies deceptively pretty mixed-media installations in "... when the cuts erupt ... the garden rings ... and the warning is a wailing ...," the title of her CAM exhibition. The new exhibition opens Sept. 11, along with the Great Rivers Biennial, giving art lovers several fresh things to see during a somber year.

In addition to Patterson's collage on the Project Wall, she has an installation filling the Front Gallery. The pieces emerge from Patterson's previous garden-themed work, CAM says, evoking beauty, horror and colonial history in the "abundant plant-life she conjures through an excess of embellished materials."

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Patterson, who normally divides her time between Jamaica and Chicago, is scheduled to give a free artist talk Nov. 12 at CAM. The 39-year-old earned her MFA in 2006 from Washington University, where she had “really supportive professors that pushed my sense of curiosity” as she majored in printmaking and drawing.



“Rain of Signs” (2016) by Tim Portlock, Courtesy of the artist

Connections to the university also run through CAM’s other big offering, the Great Rivers Biennial, which recognizes St. Louis-based talent.

More than 80 artists applied to the ninth biennial, a collaboration between the museum and the Gateway Foundation that awards \$20,000 to each artist chosen.

Selected by jurors, Kahlil Robert Irving, Tim Portlock and Rachel Youn had to wait out a delay of the biennial when the pandemic temporarily closed the museum.

Their work, including kinetic sculpture, digital prints and ceramics, will now be on view through Feb. 21. Also on display this fall and winter are “Yowshien Kuo: Western Venom,” “LEAP Middle School Initiative: Lost Islands” and “New Art in the Neighborhood: Interiors.” Free tickets to the museum require reservations.

The three artists in the biennial recently answered questions by email. The delay of their exhibitions not only gave them more time to refine their work, but some also thought about how the pandemic affected it.

Youn’s work actually is titled “Gather,” an imperative contrary to virus mandates. Youn said: “At first, I was disappointed that viewers would not be able to congregate in the same way that they would in a pre-pandemic time. However, after months of contemplation, I’ve realized that the work takes on a new meaning because of social distancing.

“The environment this installation creates is one of a packed dance floor, something that many of us are far off from experiencing in our current reality. I like that viewers now have this chance to feel immersed in this experience, being surrounded by seemingly living objects and listening to vibrant dance tracks, all without fear of contracting the virus.”

Kahlil Robert Irving: 'At Dusk'

Irving, 28, has lived in St. Louis since he was 8. During the summer, with a few extra months to work on projects for the biennial, he says he added “quite a bit more detail to the installation. I added a few more works, made larger wallpaper works. My mind was made up to have some ephemeral experiences in the space, but since the pandemic and everything needed to adjust, I decided to remove those and make the installation a bit more immersive.”

Irving is “interested in making space for multiple experiences to occur simultaneously. I am thinking through history, mourning, life, death, monuments and moments that some people can enjoy in the work that others cannot. There are multiple realities at play in my work.”

One piece on display will be wallpaper measuring 6 feet by 66 feet: “There are thousands of images compiled to make this work, and I spent quite some time compiling it all. So I am excited to see it in its final form on the museum wall.”

In the future, Irving, who received his MFA from Washington University, will be included in exhibitions at Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh, Mass MOCA in Massachusetts and American University Museum at the Katzen Art Center in Washington, D.C.

Tim Portlock: 'Nickels From Heaven'

Portlock, who grew up in Chicago, says he knew when he was 6 that he wanted to be an artist. “However, my idea of what an artist actually is has changed many different times.”

Now 51, he is a professor in the Sam Fox School of Design and Visual Arts at Washington University, which describes his large-scale prints as combining “special effects software and the visual conventions of 19th-century American painting to creatively simulate real-world American cityscapes.”

Portlock’s CAM exhibition shows eight pieces, which pandemic audiences might read differently, he says: “Buildings in cities where no one is on the street are definitely going to be interpreted in a certain way. In one of the images for the GRB, I revisited imagery that I consciously made the decision to stop using several years ago. Public statues used to appear frequently in my work to reference the same kinds of problematic questions about public commemoration that people were dealing with over the summer. For my current work, I began to think about how in our present-day we still build contemporary structures that are oriented around these old contested narratives.”

One of his favorite pieces for CAM is “Sculpture Garden”: “It’s a huge construction site landscape that contains a building with a sculpture garden on the roof. It references Modernist cultures by Henry Moore and Alexander Calder as well as the abandoned Lewis and Clark Tower just north of St. Louis. I actually photographed the Lewis and Clark Tower with a drone.”

A common theme, he says, concerns “American optimism articulated through booming skylines of the last 10 years and the American landscape painting tradition. Abandoned and foreclosed buildings are an entry point to what that narrative leaves out.”

Portlock has been in St. Louis for four years and plans in the future to continue focusing on work specifically about this area. “I would like to make a series of images of St. Louis based on the oral descriptions of people who have lived in the city.”



He expects to have an exhibition next year at Locks Gallery in Philadelphia.

Rachel Youn: 'Gather'

From Albuquerque, New Mexico, Youn “loved art as a child and knew I wanted to pursue a creative path in the future. I especially loved to draw. As a college student pursuing art, I was really unsure of what the future held and what kind of art I’d make. I intended to be an illustrator, but here I am, making wacky moving sculptures!”

Now 25, Youn (who uses the pronoun they) lives in the Central West End, three years after earning a bachelor’s degree from Washington University.

Youn’s biennial kinetic installation includes artificial plants that will sway and dance with the help of motors from household massagers as a mixtape from St. Louis band GodsBod plays amid colored lights and a disco ball. There are about 50 sculptures in the exhibit, Youn says.

Having extra time to prepare for the biennial gave them “the opportunity to fine-tune the exhibition and bring it to the level of craft and completion that it needed. It felt good to not rush that process in the last month before installing it in May. However, I really did love the exhibition as it was and made the decision not to drastically change any elements.”

Youn is interested in “themes of authenticity and artifice, simulations of wealth and nature, suburbia and collecting. While making this work, I’ve been especially thinking about touch. Because the massagers are sold secondhand, I’m fascinated with the idea that these appliances were once used to comfort their owners’ bodies but eventually fell into disuse and were thus sold. The massagers have, in a way, failed to perform their expected function, and I’m interested in how failure is defined in this situation.”

In the future, Youn plans to work on molding and casting. They have a small exhibition planned for CXU Gallery in Los Angeles next year along with an ACREesidency in Steuben, Wisconsin.

What Ebony G. Patterson: “... when the cuts erupt ... the garden rings ... and the warning is a wailing ...” and Great Rivers Biennial: Kahlil Robert Irving, Tim Portlock, Rachel Youn • When Sept. 11-Feb. 21; hours are 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Thursday, Saturday, Sunday; 10-8 p.m. Friday • Where Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, 3750 Washington Boulevard • How much Free, but reservations required • More info 314-535-4660; camstl.org