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CRITIQUING THE PHYSICAL MATERIALS OF EBONY PATTERSON'S ARTWORKS FROM A PHOTOGRAPHIC LENS

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ABSTRACT

This case study examines how viewing the photograph of tangible artworks with special focus on their physical materials might affect or value meaning of the work by viewers. This qualitative inquiry examines international artist Ebony Patterson's photographs of her artworks published on the World-Wide-Web, through a critical lens, to understand how truth represented in photographs might provide positive educational implications, especially relating to interpreting works of art.

INTRODUCTION

This paper examines some of Ebony Patterson's photographed artworks, to help determine the extent to which photograph represents the value of original artworks. Critical matters in this focus are physical materials and objects, and their potential meanings in artworks and the repercussions these posed as illusions in a photograph. There are varying theories about the representation capability of photographs. One theory that is most applicable in visual culture is Roland Bathes' who is a French philosopher. Barrett (2017) asserts that Bathes is quite certain about the representational truth of the photographic picture more than other medium. This means, "that there is a directness of reference to the thing that is photographed" (Piper as cited in Barrett 2017, p. 31). While there are works of art, especially flat pieces that photographs represent reasonably well, there are others with thick or unique materials, and intricate details that still pose problems detecting in photographs. This is important when interpretation focuses on physical materials for meaning- as despite viewing materials through photograph, one has to first see or, and recognize the materials to make sense of its reality or to effectively achieve an aesthetic experience.

Perhaps what might cause the judging of photographs of artworks to be an increasingly important issue, is how some art museums and galleries have fully adjusted to online exhibitions and virtual tours, as a result, closing their physical doors due to COVID 19. Photographs along with high quality videography, and virtual tours provide valuable insights to viewers as to the likely artworks on display in the physical art establishments. While photograph is a stilled picture, and videography is motion pictures, we can still agree that neither is fully valuing the real artwork as viewers can have doubt, particularly viewing unfamiliar materials. Barrett (2017) raises cultural critic Jean Baudrillard's concerns about the representations of digital screen images, and photographs for example, and how they "create a false sense of reality or a replacement reality that obscures what is really real" (p. 23). In no way I am implying that the directors of art museums that are adjusting to online exhibitions are advocating for viewers to take the digital images of

artworks for the real artworks. It is a certain fact that the real artwork is a unique intimate processed creation of the artist and therefore, more valuable than the representation of it. However, I wonder about those of Patterson's works that have real human models in them. Can such works stand on their own forever without their photographs? If the real original work no longer exists, except its photograph, what level of value would this photograph be placed?

Making sense of objects is the first line of appreciation. The clearer we see objects is the more we will appreciate them. With regards to viewing to gain a closer sense of an object or objects as a group through photograph, we would want to experience very clear photos. Which begs us to ask the question, if we are not deeply viewing the real thing but a representation of it, what deep perspective are we seeking to value? Are we to give the things we see a voice? Perhaps this might take a different mode of motive for viewers: the motive of user experience. *User experience (UX)* is a term that identifies a field of study that places user experiences as the primary focus in problem solving (Hassenzahl & Tractinsky, 2006). If we conduct user experience study on photography to improve representation of artwork for users, wouldn't we be branching off into a different line of inquiry? The question still exists, "how reliable are judgements made of artworks, through viewing their photographs?"

Photographs and User Experience

A photograph can be tangible by appearing as printed matter, or none-tangible, appearing on electronic peripherals such as lap top, cell phone and television. The world today is experiencing the pandemic due to COVID 19, and people are being cultured to be paperless and not only keep their gaze at various screen peripherals but to interact with them. What is worrying about this is that people might be more eager to look at images on these peripherals than at the real world. There is a factor of superficial glamor about digital communicable media that is in the hands of consumers that seem to be improving through the field of user experience designing. Hassenzahl & Tractinsky (2006) in their Abstract statement, declare that due to maturity in user experience, interactive products are increasingly becoming useful, fashionable, and fascinating to desire. The capability to see and interact with objects' representation on desirable devices has the propensity to create a user visual aesthetic experience of inferior motive.

Materiality

When we address identity of the physical materials of an artwork by means of seeing them from their photographed perspective, what should we be telling our audience? Should we provide samples of the physical materials for our audience to see and feel? Should our audience know if they are hand-made or machine made? Christina Mills (2009) titled her research paper as "Materiality as the basis of aesthetic experience in contemporary art". She defined *materiality* as the study of a work's physical matter and information about the work's physical existence. She states, "the artwork's physicality, those aspects that can be sensed and verified by viewers, is a first consideration; physicality impacts content and, subsequently, meaning" (p. 1). Therefore, there are aesthetic benefits that are attached to beholding the physical material of an artwork. A viewer can achieve aesthetic experience from combining informed details with seeing concerning the physical aspects of an artwork.

Mills (2009) includes viewer's perception as a valuable commodity in aesthetic experience, especially relating to the physical aspects of an artwork. She declares how the viewer's perception is challenged in the digital age.

The rapid technological change of the current digital age is dramatically impacting the nature of how art is physically manifested and perceived; perception requires that something engage the senses and provide a corporeal experience. It stands to reason that the tools of the digital age might distance one's perception of art objects, stripping away qualities necessary to art's function while also presenting other as yet unrealized potentialities for art production and experience. Subsequently, the role of art in society is in flux. For example, while seeing an art performance in person is not the same as looking at a black and white reproduction of it in an art history book or "zooming in" on a virtual digital image on the internet, the distancing effect of so much second-hand or mediated experience, can mean we are both closer to and farther away from art in our lives (Mills, 2009, p. 5).

Gaining an experience from viewing art in-person or its image brings one to the point of perception. Perception is personal, but can be measured qualitatively as well as quantitatively. In viewing perception from a qualitative point we can still gain an idea of what it might be quantitatively.

Viewing art from the perspective of its image through digital means can be an engaging experience for viewers. Digital communicable devices are increasingly providing interactive options such as zoom technology, which is a different experience than from viewing images as prints. For example, images presented on digital platforms are device lighted combine with external light, while prints depend on external light besides its generic light. Prints do not naturally have digits to distract viewers. They are stilled pictures, and except for their visual quality, prints could arguable be a fair representational format to which to debate the value of viewing art presented in its image format. Artists today are taking advantage of the engaging interactive capabilities exist in digital communicative devices. It is therefore important, that this research does not exclude photographs in digital format from the argument of valuing artwork presented as image. Among the representational technographic products mainly photograph, videography and movie, photograph best represents the stilled image, as it is printable with high quality. Printed photograph is tangible and can be presented in a variety of ways and sizes and maintains its initial shot. Whether in print or digital format, the fact still exists that photographs can be produce or presented with defects and intentional and unintentional technological manipulation. This paper focuses on photographs that captures a work of art without any other digital manipulation such as with Photoshop, or any unintended altering.

Ebony Patterson

Ebony Patterson is a Jamaican and international visual artist and educator. She was born and began her tertiary education in Jamaica. In 2006 she obtained her master's degree of Fine Arts in printmaking and drawing at Washington University in St. Louis. She thereafter has lectured at the Edna Manley College of the Visual and Performing Arts, in Jamaica, the University of Virginia as well as at the University of Kentucky. Her work as been featured in a few solo, and group exhibitions particularly in Jamaica and throughout the United States. She is well known for her colorful, flowery mixed media in a variety of art forms.

Figure 1: ...they were just boys (...when they grow up...)



Note. This figure is 2016. 88 × 116 1/2 inches done by Ebony Patterson in 2016.

The reason I chose Patterson's work is because I was privileged to observe her while working in the painting department during the period of completing our undergraduate studies at the Edna Manley College of the Visual and Performing Arts. At that time as a student, she explored mostly with acrylic paint, fabric and papery mixed media. My interest in her work grew when she began establishing herself as a professional artist. I often viewed pictures of her works on social media. I soon after viewed some of her works at the National Art Gallery of Jamaica and discovered a new experience than when I viewed them as photographs. The materials she used are of bright colors. Before I saw her works at the National Gallery of Jamaica, I usually wonder about her use of physical materials because they were many, variously, and colorfully mixed. At first, I questioned her use of physical materials even when I saw her actual works. However, I was able to distinguish perhaps most of the physical materials that she used. I recognized, fabric, glitter, printed flowery papers, beads, paint, small toys and artificial flowers. All these materials suggest a consistent approach in her paintings, installations, tapestries and other expressive art forms in terms of material choice.

My intellectual position in viewing Patterson's recent photographed artworks through the World Wide Web, and which concerns this research, is quite neutral. Even from reading articles on interviews with her, as well as various views by authors, I have not come across any material of which addresses much interpretive meaning of the physical materials in her work. I think this is important to note as this position helps me to detach myself from informed intellectual preconception and from interfering in the just possibility of this study. In the piece, *...they were just boys (...when they grow up...)*, (Figure 1.) seen on Studio Museum Harlem's website, the media used are listed as: Beads, appliques, fabric, glitter, other embellishments, ribbons and glue on digital print on hand-cut matte photo paper with hand embellished toy guns. While this information is useful it does not tell what shape or image that these media create. For example, in this piece, we can see an all-over presence of circular white overlapping a multiplicity of colors.

However, I am not able to identify what material the circular whites are by just looking at the picture. It could be that interpretive value is intended in the physical material of the circles, which could mean possible loss of strong interpretive value for an uninformed viewer viewing this material through photograph.

Descriptive Analysis

A consistent feature of Patterson's recent hanging works is the extension of materials beyond seemingly edges, or what most often appears to be irregular edges. In the piece shown in Figure 1, established width, and length edges are clearly revealed, yet crossing over them are a few bits of materials. Among all that may seem artificial, are the realistic images of two Black boys almost camouflaging with the rest of the picture's elements. The images of the boys are the largest recognized forms in the picture and therefore set up as the emphasis of the piece. The principle of repetition is also dominant through appearances of thin lines and abstract white shapes. Some of the lines extend beyond the edges of the body of the work especially at the bottom. Two white lines that stand out in the body of the piece seem to make a symmetrical balance, marking enjoinments of three body panels. The colors seem to be mostly hues but appear as mixes through overlapping technique and juxtaposition of whites. Although there are a wide variety of colors all over, the piece appears unified.

Figure 2: Screen shot of *...they were just boys (...when they grow up...)*



Note: Zoom technology shows picture maintaining its initial quality. See Figure 1.

There are a lot of visible and non-visible information in the work that could possible stimulate anyone's curiosity. Three points concerning this are as follows: One is about the many different visible details, particularly concerning physical materials and how they are arranged to express oneness. For example, it is difficult to distinguish the base material on which visible materials and the images of the boys are situated by just looking at the photograph. Even not knowing the base material, the visible elements and materials all seem to be constructed on the

same base even if that is not the true case. There is a feeling of allover technique infused with the technique of overlapping that is unlike a much easier identifiable pattern of media arrangement seen in knolling. *Knolling* describes a part of the broad study of material culture in which viewers are provided the experience of detecting and reading disciplinary arranged objects, especially through the lens of photographs (Fritts, 2019). A second point about the work that would attract curiosity, is how flat the materials might be on the base surface and how this might affect matters of depth and objects' dimension. The third point is how Patterson portrays the effect of painterly quality with the use of abstract white throughout the piece, and the use of strings, like drips of paint. To this inquiry we may need to investigate the applied techniques of the artist.

How can the Artist's Techniques Help in our Visual Inquiry?

Techniques are often identified when something is being completed. In the case of finished artworks, it is the physical materials that is left for us to see and not so much the technique. To further facilitate for the materials that are used, worded biographical information are provided in informational forms such as magazines or books. In most cases, techniques are not mentioned unless extended writing is involved. In an interview with Cole Rachel published on *The Creative Independent*, Patterson hints a bit about techniques. She speaks of first planning how a piece might look digitally, then she proceeds to move her plan to action. One of her early moves is to organize a photoshoot, "then collaborate with a tailor who would sew all the garments for me. Then I'd figure out who the models were beforehand and take them to the tailor who would do the fittings" (Patterson, 2018, p. 3). Patterson also mentions that her graduate training in printmaking plays an important part of her art making process. Which causes me to think, how? Is there something else we may see on the real artwork pertaining to printmaking that we are not detecting on the photograph of the work? While we are still left to fit in missing pieces, we can commit to the assumption that the material of the boys' clothing is made of some fabric based on her mentioning of garments. From her statement, we learned that the human figures in her work are life size. In some of her projects, real human beings are a part of the physical material being photographed. She would have also incorporated photo imagery in her work.

Figure 3: Don Quixote in his Study, after William Lake Price c. 1890 (from Rubus)



Note. This figure is a portrait of Don Quixote in his studio after William Lake Price 1890. The 87 3/4 x 72 inches (222.9 x 182.9 cm) piece was constructed and developed by Vik Muniz through Chromogenic process. This process results in photographic print made from digital images.

The use of real human beings in some of Patterson's works raises questions about the role of photography in capturing officially recognized mixed media pieces that involve real alive human beings as content. While we can view in-person the alive models in the original work this experience is not afforded in the image constructed through photo-electrical means. What we can value in photographs bearing images of mixed media piece with real models, is photograph with its copy-resemblance nature, immortalize the human beings it captures.

Other artists, such as Vik Muniz have employed similar materials and have achieved somewhat similar effects in their representational paintings. They have however, used photograph as a new media of representation. Muniz's portrait of Don Quixote although not flowery as Patterson's works, comprises an arrangement of artificial materials as used by Patterson, such as dolls, plastic toys, diamonds, digital prints and other ornaments against tinted spaces which was photographed and represented as such. As a photograph, this piece is described based on viewers' feedback by Heartney (2008) as quite convincing, until from closure look, they discovered the glitter and shininess that the various materials reflect. Hearney quoted the artist as saying, "I don't want the viewer to believe in my images; I want him or her to experience the extent of his or her own belief in images – period" (Muniz as cited in Hearney, 2008, p. 97). Perhaps Patterson would want both intentions mentioned by Muniz- for viewers to believe in her images, as well as to extend their belief in images they see. This might be so as she is often consistent with her choice of physical materials in majority of her works perhaps with the intention of attracting a fan-based-audience or inspiring object meanings, through a creative identity.

Patterson employs zoom technology to enhance viewers experience of her work in photographic state on her website. Her work also features on artsy website, a website that also provides zoom technology for viewers to interact with (see Figure 2). This enables viewers to interact with the digital tool to see details expanded to perhaps up to one hundred percent of the

initial size, without losing any of its initial quality. This capability allows one to identify individual object and physical material much better than viewing the initial size as a whole or using any other zooming technology. It is possible that Patterson uses photography, and the World-Wide-Web, to reach a mass audience. She may have provided zoom technology for viewers to see the objects and materials clearly should they be confused or overly curious. However, is this enough for viewers to be able to draw their own aesthetic value from the piece? No matter the artist's intention and visual state of the work, viewers will always apply their own appreciation as they are interpreting a creative result whether the artist intended it (Barrett, 2012).

Matters of Interpretation

We can assume that some of Patterson's work base materials are of fabric qualities. Of what are mostly common to us about fabric, one is that some fabrics have decorative threads embedded in them, portraying rich colorful ornaments. Another feature about fabric is that various fabrics exist for different statements or uses. A third feature is that fabric is a tactile and flexible material suitable for a multiplicity of techniques. Do fabric and its qualities have any artistic or symbolic meaning? In the prelude of her interview with Patterson, Rachel highlights an excerpt from Patterson's artist statement.

My work often explores working-class cultures and spaces, and the engagements in declaring presence as an act of protest. I aim to elevate those who have been deemed invisible as a result inherited colonial social structures, by incorporating their words, thoughts, dress, and pageantry as a tactic to memorialize them. It is a way to say: I am here, and you cannot deny me. (Ebony Patterson, 2018, p.1)

Her tactics to use garments in her work could very well celebrate memories of those that are under recognized. Of the many possible functional meanings of fabric, its use for providing human beings covering as a means of protection for ages stands out as a primary interpretive consideration in Patterson's work. Patterson also recommends that we find a fabric store, as they are "filled with wonderment" (Patterson, 2018, p. 8). For example, it is wonderment using fabric as a social voice such as using the term "memorialize": referring to the experiential and shareable propensity of fabric. There are many things of the past that has gone obsolete, but not with fabric. The flexible and sharable nature of a fabric can inspire multiple meanings including genetic and cultural sharing and cross-sharing. Patterson's use of fabric, combined with more sophisticated ready-mades, artificial lightings, and relevant techniques puts her as a well entranced contemporary artist of postmodern culture.

The fact that Patterson included live models in some of her works, has various implications for interpretation. The mixed media physical matters surrounding these live models are very important to recognize in order for us to interpret each piece as a whole, especially since these models are Black and could have inference of racism. We are living in a material culture but objects can mean different things to different individuals (Barrett, 2012). The idea of fabric and blanket has symbolic meaning of warmth and protection for everyone; yet; Black models are presented to us. How are Blacks observed to be treated today? How much our answer can help us to find connection to Patterson's work?

Patterson's Work: Judgment through Photograph

As we scrutinize Patterson's mixed media works through a photographic lens, we may ask if photographs, maintain, add to, or decrease aesthetic value of her artwork. Despite Patterson's employment of digital zoom technology that can hold fixed value of photo imagery of her works on her website, (<http://ebonygpatterson.com/mixed-media-works.php>) we will still miss the reality experience of seeing her work face-to-face.

It would rest on our minds that the real work is out there. Especially since finished visual artworks are not presented for touching and further physical searching, but for looking. Digital interaction online does offer advantage to viewers. As a professional artist, Patterson uses high visual digital solutions that is accessible in today's world to promote her work. Her work is filled with colorful wonderment to which photographs present well. The lighted, glassy screen of computers, tablets, and cell phones add a layer of artificial glamor. The colors on the physical materials appear pure and bright, and with photograph, this quality inspires a sense that the colors are as is the actual artwork and will never fade over time.

CONCLUSION

A photograph is likely to be believable from the perspective that what it is representing exists. The complexity of mass matters existing in one object can be even more complex when multiplicity of objects is being studied from the lens of photograph. Yet this state of representation does not bear the physical touchable truth of the targeted object itself. With the case of artwork being represented through photograph the issue can be a common one and poses even more challenges such as being able to identify where relevant, foreground, mid-ground, background, depth, dimension, color value affected by light value, formedness, estimation issue such as with foreshorten and proportional relationship among subject matters. These issues are long debated issue of realism theory. Barrett (2017) argued that "all realism, in their account, is relative to culturally based pictorial systems, which allow ease of recognizing depicted things" (p. 34). He made comparable example between the Renaissance picture system of the West's perspective and the flattened bird's eye view of the Egyptians. The matter of photo quality is unavoidable important one because a photograph's quality in terms of visibility is a part of its identity. This means that photograph cannot be viewed as a fixed matter for all cases as photographs can vary due to several factors especially with the level of capability of its camera and lens to produce clear shots. Through this paper we are seeing how investigating Ebony Patterson's work through photographs helps us to better understand this issue generally.

One advantage that Patterson has over many other artists, is her use of advance technology that allows viewers to digitally zoom in on a photograph and view it without distorting its original state. The advancement in technology that impacts photographic image quality adds value to the zoom feature. Patterson's aim to allow viewers to interact digitally in investigating visual aspect of her work might very well be met. Another valuable perspective of this research is the prevailing value of the artist. The discussion of using social media to promote original artworks is a Post-Modern phenomenon that does not exclude the artist but places him or her in a competitive stage of value. Using high quality photography is a great way for artists to raise viewers' awareness and curiosity in valuing not only his or her intellectual marquetry, but also the biographical or interpretive meaning of physical materials sort in viewing an artwork. There is no conclusive evidence that one can be sure in everything they see in a photograph (Barrett, 2017.) Patterson's work through photographs supersedes her own intent interpretation and give viewers their own sense of appreciation. The various multiplicity of elements in her work would certainly require

human-computer interaction technology. Many art museums can be found through online research to be offering an interactive experience with viewers. These interactive opportunities are provided both online and on Campus. Some of these art museums are: The City Museums in St. Louis, Wisdome in Los Angeles, and ARTECHOUSE in Miami and Washington.

Through this research we are learning that the Post-Modern worldview is enforcing an intertwining of aesthetic experience with user experience. What this means is that visual art is not about just viewing but personal interacting in the enactment of an experience. This is an important phenomenon in discussing art as object of experiential value whether from the perspective of its original physical state or of its image. The image of an object cannot be the object (Barrett, 2017). The visual quality of photographs today is giving viewers the feeling of getting close to the original art. This can be exciting for viewers, especially using digital tools to view images and being able to zoom in without losing visual quality. The study of print could be an important one going forward as it relates representing traditional ways of value of artworks. Art is ever reinventing and changing the way we interpret and define it. The inclusion of alive models in some of Patterson's original works has heighten our awareness of how an artist can express meaning, and the roll of photograph to keep such visual expression immortal. This makes photographs a sustaining branch of exposure for the new age.

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