

On understanding what an education can and can't do for you



Visual artist Ebony G. Patterson on taking a break from academia, embracing a nomadic studio practice, and why you should be realistic about what you hope to gain from art school.

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As told to T. Cole Rachel, 3274 words.

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You just left your job in academia. Was trying to balance your own art practice with the demands of teaching a difficult balance to strike?

A lot of things have shifted for me, certainly, in the last four years or so. I've been gaining greater visibility and the demands of my practice certainly have increased. I think I've managed to balance things out, but what makes it tricky is when there isn't enough infrastructural support to help make things work. I always say to my students that I'm an artist before I'm anything else. I think it's really important that young people who are interested in being artists see that. It's not about just helping them to figure out what it means to be that person, to be an artist, but also to demonstrate what that means through my own practice.

It's about making them understand, "Okay, being an artist isn't just getting up and going to the studio. And then going to your nine-to-five that supports the studio until the studio supports itself." It's much more than that. Sometimes, your practice demands that you have to go and do a lecture somewhere, and talk to a group of people about your work. Sometimes, it demands that you have to go and meet other students in other institutions. Sometimes it means you have to sit down and write things because you're trying to get financial support in order to make projects happen that you may not have the immediate wherewithal to do.



Ebony G. Patterson: ...*PRESENCE*..., 2016, (detail). Site-specific commission for Barneys New York. Photos: Tom Sibley. Courtesy the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago

Of course, teaching provided a kind of certainty. At the end of the month, I know what I'm getting and I know what I can do. That kind of security does go a long way. But if one isn't organized, it can certainly throw things off in terms of the balance. Worse, if you don't have infrastructural support within your institution that kind of allows you to figure out how to do it all together, then that becomes even more challenging.

You were teaching in Kentucky, but also traveling a lot and spending a lot of time back home in Jamaica, a place that is often the subject of your work. Did that geographical distance feel weird?

I mean, my subject is not exclusive to Jamaica. When I started a lot of my earlier work, so much of it related in a very close way to the space that I lived in 24/7, and that I grew up in. My practice has broadened. It has become so much more about spaces that are like Jamaica, in the sense that they're post-colonial spaces having to deal with relics of colonialism as it relates to status, as it relates to social hierarchy, and how certain economies drive that. I remember having a conversation a few years back with a colleague of mine. We talked about when we both left home, meaning when we both went away to study. Somehow, after moving away, we began to make work that started to look a lot like home. As opposed to when we were home, our work didn't resonate with that.

I've been having conversations with other artist friends of mine who are immigrants who, like me, spend a significant amount of time outside of what we call home. In an interesting way, there is this constant need to feel connected in conscious and unconscious ways to a space that we still feel very rooted in, but then, at the same time, have distance from. I'm beginning to understand it more. People who are immigrants also often grapple with the sense of feeling a kind of displacement. You don't necessarily belong in the place that you're in, but you feel connected to a place that you're *not* in, meaning the place that you came from.

As I've grown as a person, so has my practice. As my concerns become more rooted in political discourse or social discourse, then it only makes sense that the work will also begin to reflect a lot of those concerns. It's not to suggest that these concerns weren't there before, I just think that perhaps I wasn't mature enough yet. I was still figuring out what is this thing I'm trying to do as an artist. Another thing that happened was that a lot of the conversations around the work became so much about where I came from. Many times I've pushed back, saying, "I'm an artist. My geography shouldn't be the thing that becomes most important in order to read what my work is about."



Installation view, Ebony G. Patterson: ... *PRESENCE...*, 2016. Site-specific commission for Barneys New York. Photos: Tom Sibley. Courtesy the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago.

When things are in flux—having just left a job, traveling, juggling projects that are happening in various different cities—how does that affect your practice? When you don't always have a studio to go to, how do you make work?

I still have a studio in Jamaica. I've always had one. My process has always started at home and then it ends in Kentucky, or wherever I happen to be. In more recent years, I had allotted a certain amount of space in that place to work. Technically, my house is my studio. When I'm going on the road to work for the next 12 months, a lot of it relates to work I've been building out for the last two years. For example, the first project that I have coming up is a piece in Kansas City, Missouri. That project is a site-specific work, but a lot of the work around that had to happen digitally and it had to happen through research.

I'm collaborating with Kickstarter to make that one and doing crowdfunding. A particular portion of that project is to make these ornate customized benches that are going to sit at the site, which is a revitalized swimming pool that has been abandoned for many years. A lot of the work is already happening virtually. I create and plan everything in the digital realm. And then when I get to the actual site, then that's a whole different thing. Then I'm collaborating with somebody who's going to make these benches—a fabricator I've never met in person.

This is one of the things that I think is interesting about practicing in a nomadic way. For years, when I would come home to Jamaica during these long breaks, I didn't have a "studio." This is how I functioned. Nomadically. I'd work from my bedroom in my mother's house and organize a photo shoot, and then go to my Alma Mater and say, "Hey, can I borrow this space for a day to do this project?" And 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. I was just orchestrating all these things from wherever I happened to be.



Ebony G. Patterson: ...*PRESENCE*..., 2016, (detail). Site-specific commission for Barneys New York. Photos: Tom Sibley. Courtesy the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago.

Even though I am a painter, I attribute this ability to be able to work in this kind of way—to work collaboratively and to trust other people and let them into my process—to having studied printmaking when I was younger. That's what I did for my graduate degree. Printmaking is such a communal activity. As somebody who's a painter, who is working in a really tactile way, I know that if I make this mark, this is what will happen. But when you surrender to the printing press, you don't know what the fuck you're getting out of it. You've just got to wait. If you like what comes out, then great. If you don't, then you have to respond to it or start over. Learning that kind of openness and responsiveness in my formative years was really helpful along these lines.

Right now a lot of my work is just coordinating things. A bulk of the work is already done and I'm waiting on fabricators to finish making the other elements for various portions of the exhibitions. 80% of the work is in storage waiting to be shipped somewhere. I'm just plotting the next move. That's the other thing that you don't necessarily learn about when you're in art school—especially as your practice evolves—there's just so much managing. I don't have a studio manager. I can't handle that. I need to have my hands in all of it. I need to have my fingers in every part of the process.

As someone who has been an art student as well as an arts teacher, do you think young artists need to go to graduate school in order to get a jump on their careers? Is it worth going simply for the contacts and connections you make?

I was just having this conversation with a friend yesterday. An education is all about discipline. That's the first thing. It's about structure. It's about helping you to negotiate structure. It's about helping you figure out how you want to set up your own structure. It definitely cuts out a lot of the leg work that one would do independently, in the sense that there are people who've already negotiated or navigated the field, who have experience, and who are there to guide you. That's the best resource within an institution—the teachers.



Installation view, Ebony G. Patterson: *Dead Treez*, 2015, Museum of Arts and Design, New York. Photos: Butcher Walsh. Courtesy the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago.

I always feel like students never really capitalize on using their teachers. Also, the idea that going to grad school is going to somehow set you up and be a career game-changer is a huge misnomer. I'll tell you why. Because hundreds of thousands of people graduate from grad programs every year. And if going to a grad program was the thing that was going to set you off on the right track, then we would have hundreds of thousands of people doing well. The world would be packed with successful artists. We wouldn't need to read articles about artists still struggling or things like that. This wouldn't even need to be a conversation at all. In reality, only a fraction of people will go from high school to college. A fraction of those people will go on to doing graduate work. And only a fraction of those people will still continue to work in the field that they studied. That's logical.

So if going to grad school is not the thing that's going to set it off for you, then what is it? It always comes down to the work. If the work isn't interesting, it doesn't matter if you went to grad school or not. Nobody's going to care. It's always about the work.

Now, what grad school does in relation to the work is that it certainly helps to push you, right? Of course. There's also this other thing where people say, "Well, does going to a particular kind of grad school help? Like, what if you go to one of the big-name grad schools?" There's this idea that if you go to one of these big-name grad schools, say for example Yale, that somehow it's going to change everything for you.

And there're some people it has changed things for, right? There are. But guess what? There're tons of other people who it *hasn't* helped. I always say, "Think about that." I won't call out any names, but when somebody would say this to me, I said, "Well, have you ever heard of so-and-so?" And they would say, "No." I said, "Exactly." They went to that school, but you've never heard of them. It clearly cannot be the schooling. It has to be what you're doing. It's always about what you're doing.

Then, of course, there's also the other thing. Right now, we're in a moment where you have women artists who are active, who've been making amazing work for a long time but because of the sexism that has existed—and in some ways still does exist—in the art world, they never got recognized for their work. Then there's also, of course, the color and race factor that also exists around that. Now we have a wave of people who are finally getting their attention. Is it that they were never making good work before? Of course not. Culture had to change. What would've happened if those people had just given up on making work because, "Oh, I wasn't making it. I wasn't getting it. I wasn't getting where I needed to get to." We've all struggled and felt that moment of wanting to give up. But to that I always say, the work is what has to propel you, because fame is fleeting. You're hot today. Tomorrow, nobody is interested in you. Then what? You stop making work?



Installation view, Ebony G. Patterson: *Dead Treez*, 2015, Museum of Arts and Design, New York. Photos: Butcher Walsh. Courtesy the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago.

So it really is always about the work. I know sometimes people don't want to hear that, but it's the work that gets people interested. It's the work that should keep you going. If you are relying on all of these external factors like how many people are liking a picture of your work or whether or not this person is interested versus that person, then something is wrong. Having people interested in the work does certainly give you a good ego boost, but your sense of self as an artist cannot be dependent on the reactions of other people. You're relinquishing your power as an individual when you do that.

As someone who went to an MFA program for poetry—arguably one of the most impractical degrees on earth—I always say it was totally worth it in terms of how it impacted the way I read and think and how I view the world. It was incredibly valuable. There are kinds of value that you can't always quantify in terms of money or jobs.

You just can't think that if you don't go to grad school that you won't be able to make it. I have colleagues who've done incredibly well without a graduate degree. After they finished undergrad, they applied to residencies or they applied to exhibitions. They tried to reach out. They got involved in the art community. They got to know curators. They got to know other artists. They invited those people back to the studio to see what they were doing. The truth is, when you finish grad school, you're still going to have to do all that.

There are plenty of successful people who didn't go to school, which suggests that what they brought to the table, or the way that they read, or saw things, was a really interesting perspective. And that they worked their asses off to get it done. That's what it really is about. It always comes back to the work. A person might ask, "Do you need art school at all?" Maybe you don't. But you're still going to have to do that work, whatever that is, no matter what.

I wouldn't tell somebody not to go to school if it's something that they're genuinely interested in, because I know how valuable that experience was for me. I know what it meant to be in a community of like-minded people who wanted to be artists. What it meant to work alongside professors who challenged me and helped me to grow, and pushed me to take risks sometimes, even when I didn't even think that I was capable of taking those risks. That's the point of it. That's the point of it all. It cannot be anything else. If it's anything else, you're standing on really, really shaky ground. We all want to succeed, but "success" cannot be the foot that you lead with, it can't be your reason for making things, because if it doesn't happen, you're going to die. You're going to be very unhappy.



Installation view, Ebony G. Patterson: *... when they grow up...*, 2016, Studio Museum in Harlem, New York. Photos: Adam Reich. Courtesy the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago.

Having just stepped away from the role of being a teacher, do you imagine that you'll go back to it? Will you miss it?

I do imagine my going back to it at some point. I mean, I taught for 12 years. It's a really long time. I was a tenured professor and I know that nobody walks away from tenure. When I chose to leave, everyone was like, "You're crazy." I also think there is something to be said about telling my students continually that they have to take a leap of faith sometimes for their work. What does it mean if I'm not willing to truly do that, too? I've always done it. And now the ultimate leap is to somehow find a way to be totally committed to my practice. That's always been my dream.

Of course, I'll miss teaching. I had really great experiences with a lot of my students. Once you're a teacher, you're always a teacher. Your students are always your students. I learned a lot from my students, too. That's one of the great things about teaching. That's one of the great things, also, about being an artist who is teaching. I'm teaching them and then they're also teaching me. Then I take that fuel and go to the studio and use it to keep pushing. I tell my students all the time, "My responsibility is not only to you, but you also have a responsibility to me. I give you some energy, you need to give me something back. It should always be going back and forth." So yes, I will miss it, but I'm giving myself some time to figure out some things. It was the right time to take this leap, especially with all that is ahead for me this year. I'm just excited about all of what's coming up. I am busy up the wazoo, which is how I like it to be.



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Ebony G. Patterson recommends:

Make time for people who you love and who love you

Drive through the hills or take a trek in the bush

"Selassie is the Chapel" by Bob Marley and the Wailers is the most beautiful song I have ever heard. I cry every time I hear it.

Bounty Killer's "Poor People Fed Up" made me cry the first time I heard it

Fabric stores are filled with wonderment - FIND ONE!

Name

Ebony G. Patterson

Vocation

Visual Artist

