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## What It Is To Become: The Astonishing Art of Patrick Quarm

Kea Wilson

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Even when you stand completely still, you are changing. But when you move across the room—or to a new continent—the legacy of that former self still clings to you, a ghost whispering in the ear of the person you’ve become.

Whether that’s a comfort or a curse is the open question of Detroit-based mixed-media artist [Patrick Quarm](#)’s work. Born in post-colonial Ghana to a family of nine and educated in Western-style classical painting, Quarm has wrestled with questions of identity throughout his career, excavating the legacies of influence on his home nation alongside the more universal questions of what it means to bear a body that persists through time and space, even as the self is a state of constant flux. But when Quarm attended Texas Tech to pursue a master of fine arts degree—and came to live in the U.S. for the first time—it opened up his practice to a whole new realm of questioning. And it took his work to an astonishing new level.

We spoke with Patrick Quarm about hybridity, migration and why Detroit is the perfect place to maintain his art practice.

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**Your work explores the idea of hybrid identity: the person you once were holding space within the body with the person you've become; the identity you had in one country merging with the identity you take up as you acclimate to another.**

**Could you tell me a little more about that, and how your decision to do your masters degree in the U.S. shaped this direction in your work?**

Moving to the U.S. was a big transition; really, this was me moving from one social space to another, totally different one. And I also went to Texas, which is more of a conservative space than what I was used to.

During that adjustment, I started asking myself questions like, "Who am I?" America has a lot of issues with race. When I'd encounter that, I'd ask myself questions like, "Why is it that I'm being defined that way? Why is it that I'm being seen that way?"

I started investigating my history and my family's Ghanaian history. Through colonial rule, African culture and Western culture came together, and there was a new breed of culture which the modern African represents. The Africans living within that third space create a culture that is not always recognized, in part because it keeps evolving over time. That's how I started thinking about hybridity.

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**It seems like the kind of cultural hybridization you're talking about—and the powers that initiate it, like colonialism and migration and interracial conflict—carry a really specific charge in the context of U.S. history. How does your work seek to complicate the idea of the hybrid, beyond what, for many of us, might be knee-jerk associations of violence and erasure?** One thing I notice is that when you talk about hybridity [in the U.S.], people think of that as an end point. Or when you're talking about history, people see it as a completed thing. For me, these things are constantly evolving. You're constantly evolving and growing into a new realm, a new reality, redefining who you are.

I'm trying to present the hybrid as the kind of individual who is able to camouflage him or herself in any space they come across. If you take a look at my process, I actually cut into the painting, right? I'm excavating history. I'm digging into the history of the hybrid, and I'm revealing all the nuances there. I want you to question what is true and what is false, and whether history is complete or if it's layered. I see hybridity as this combination of past and present, as a way to redefine what it is to become.

**Let's talk about that process a little more. I'm interested in your use of African fabrics and your decision to paint directly on them and then manipulate them as a method of excavation, as you say. How did that material become a part of your practice?**

I'd start by considering the history of the fabric, because it's not just a fabric. I see the material as this entity on its own. It's a being. It's called an "African print" fabric, but that's where the contradiction comes in, because the process involved in making the fabric originated in Indonesia, and through trade, this process ended up in Africa. We took the process and put our designs into it, and called it the African print fabric. But today, the companies that actually manufacture the fabric are all Western companies.

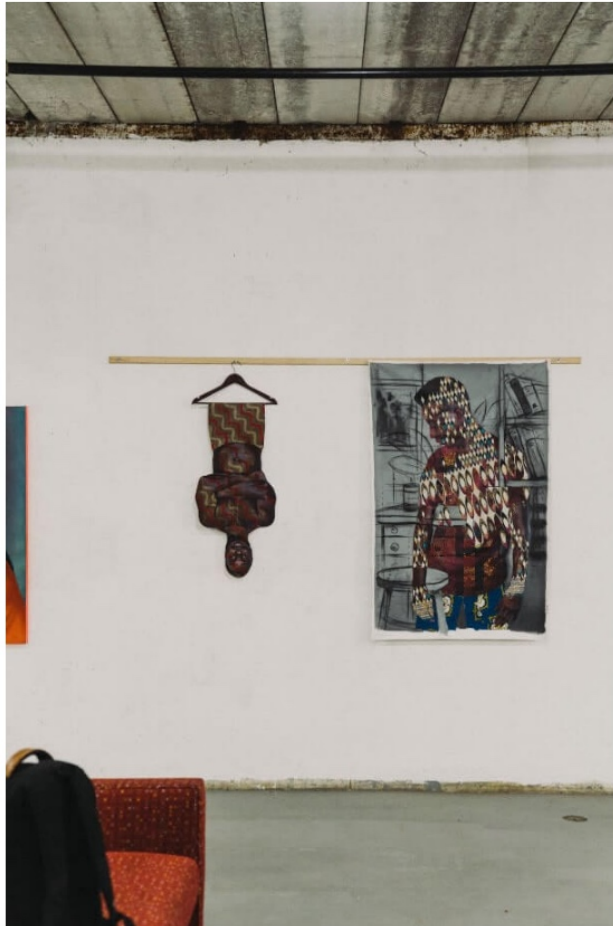
So through globalization and trade, the fabric picks up this dual identity. But within each space, it changes. I think of this in the same way as the hybrid individual. Depending on the space, the hybrid redefines itself based on its history. That's what excites me about these fabrics whenever I use them as a material in my work.

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**Let's talk about another migration. You moved to Detroit pretty recently—partially to be closer to family there, and partially to start the Red Bull Arts Detroit artist residency. How has that new setting impacted your work?**

Detroit is interesting, right? As much as its history is complicated, with the [financial] crash, it has this vibrant arts scene, and this is one thing that I realized was important to me. Most of the artists you think of as creating, at least in part, for money, but in Detroit it was different. It's pure passion. They do it because it's the culture; they do it because that's what they love to do.

So I moved down and just started exploring the spaces around here, talking to galleries, connecting with the art community. I realized that this is such a great place to be as an artist. If I moved to New York, the city would be a distraction; there's so much going on at the same time. But being in Detroit, it's this place where I can have my quiet time, my peace of mind to create the best work ever, and from there, I can show it to the world.

**What's next for you? I know you might be showing at Art Basel, and you've got exhibitions coming up in New York and in museum contexts, too.**

It's an exciting time for me. I was telling a friend of mine, "Man, it feels like I was born at the right time." I got to the point where I'm pushing my career to the next stage, and at the same time, artists who are of African descent or African American descent are the new talk of the art world. Everything is working out; the attention is coming.

*Images courtesy of Attilio D'Agostino.*

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