

FORT GANSEVOORT

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BRIDGING THE GAP

Myrlande Constant: Drapo at Fort Gansevoort

Cherkassky's solo exhibition "The Arrival of Foreign Professionals" is currently on view at Fort Gansevoort, New York.

By Melissa Stern – April 29, 2023

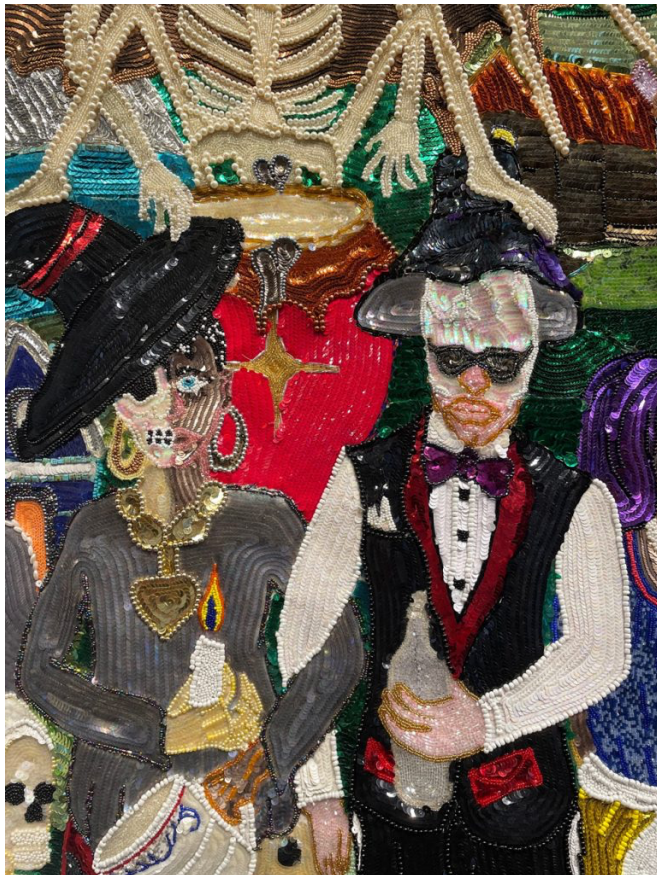


Reincarnation Des Morts 110 x 111 inchex. Beads, sequins, tassels on fabric. 2022.

Fort Gansevoort Gallery in New York's Meatpacking District has long been one of my favorite galleries. Housed in an old three-story building, they have been presenting some of the freshest and most original shows in the city. The current exhibition, Myrlande Constant: Drapo is one of their best. Constant is a Haitian artist who works in textiles, taking a traditional form called "drapo" and rocketing it into the realm of contemporary art. Drapo is based on a 19th century embroidery technique developed in France, called tambour. Fabric is stretched tautly over a wooden frame and embroidery, using sequins and beads done from the reverse side.

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That is—a drawing is sketched on the upper side of the fabric. The artist can see the drawing, which will be on the back of the work, but she reaches underneath and applies the sequins and beadwork from the underside of the fabric. It's extraordinarily time consuming and conceptually complicated work. Constant's pieces can take months to make and employ up to 20 people to help her with the fabrication. Drapo has traditionally been used in Haiti as a visual expression for the adherents of Vodou, a syncretic religion which combines aspects of diasporic African-religions with Catholicism. Myralande Constant has taken the pantheon of Vodou symbols, deities and mythologies, and suffused them with a contemporary spirit and sensibility.



Reincarnation Des Morts, detail, 110 x 111 inches. Beads, sequins, tassels on fabric. 2022

The work is fascinating and works both from several vantage points. Seen from a distance the densely narrative textiles tell macro stories of the Vodou deities. Seen up close the detail and nuance that Constant has achieved in sequins and beads is remarkable. The deep texture of these works and the way light plays off of the shiny and matte surfaces imbue the visual stories with a sense of life and constantly shifting possibilities.

The largest piece in the show is Reincarnation des Morts (2022). It is 110 x 11 inches and portrays the family of Haitian Vodou spirits associated with the dead.

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Reincarnation Des Morts, detail, 110 x 111 inches. Beads, sequins, tassels on fabric. 2022

I love the way that Constant embroiders the landscape and sky behind the figures. The picture plane is flat, moving us from below the earth to the sky. Nothing is static in this piece. The dynamic swirl of the lives of the spirits is reflected in the dynamism of the textile. The work has an affinity to painting that is unusual in this field. Vodou banners were traditionally made by men and typically more static in their portrayal of the world. Constant brings both a mastery of the craft and a mastery of composition to this body of work.

Constant is deeply connected to her spiritual practice. That is evident in both the artwork and the way in which she speaks about it. It is for her, an act of both artistic and spiritual devotion to make Drapo. The spirits and stories that she portrays are living vibrant beings. To further this point she also incorporates bits and pieces of Haitian daily life and history into the tableaux.

In *Aprè Gran Met La Fey Nan Bwa Se Tretmant Yo Viy* (2022) Constant presents a rural agrarian scene. People preparing food, tilling the land and chatting. But presiding over the scene are two giant snakes that represent two important spirits in Vodou. Danbala and Ayida Wedo symbolize sexuality, fertility and the land. Constant lets us know that no matter how mundane the task, the spirits are always with us.

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Apre Gran Met La Fey Nan Bwa Se Tretmant Yo Viy. Beads, sequins and tassels on fabric.
80 x 112 inches. (2022) Detail

Myrlande Constant started her artistic career as a low-wage worker in the garment industry. She toiled in factories, along with other women, working long hours for meager wages. The triumph of her artwork is the triumph of her determination and spiritual drive to make artwork that honors her religion. This is a remarkable show, by a remarkable artist.