

# FORT GANSEVOORT

## LA WEEKLY

### Enter the Fantastical World of Myrlande Constant at the Fowler

By Shana Nys Dambrot – May 04, 2023



Myrlande Constant: Union des Esprits Sirenes (Union of mermaid spirits) (detail), 2020; sequins and beads on cotton (© Myrlande Constant; Image courtesy of CENTRAL FINE; Photo by George Echevarria, 2020).

Haitian artist Myrlande Constant’s fantastical world is a vast expanse of gods, demigods, spirits, saints, symbols, nature, myth, and magic — expressed in large-scale embroidered and hand-beaded narrative tapestries of superlative shimmer, divinity, and detail. For more than 30 years, Constant has labored night and day in the service of her visions, translating lived experiences and compositional directives received from her religious consciousness into symphonies of hundreds of thousands of stitches, beads, and sequins. For sheer intensiveness of her process — quite apart from the pointed and poignant content — it’s easy to understand her work in a ritualistic, devotional framework. But it’s in considering the operatic tableaux and the transcendent stories of men, women, gods, monsters, and integrative post-colonial religiosity that the mind is truly set ablaze.

Constant’s works are in the Vodou *drapo* tapestry/flag tradition and depict Haitians, Catholic saints, and Vodou spirits in sweeping yet detailed scenes of Haitian history and everyday life. Among the roughly 30 works in the Fowler Museum’s retrospective survey *The Work of Radiance*, consider single masterpieces like *Milokan*, *Tous les Saints*, *Tous les Morts* (*Milokan, all the saints, all the dead*), c. 2000. The work depicts a gathering under the billowing canopy of a broad-limbed, majestic, dark-limbed, sentient tree. A diverse crowd of figures that includes everyday folks, fancy dressers, *lwa* (Vodou spirits), ancestors, saints, and departed souls, singers, drummers, and winged angels is arrayed among a field of flags and banners, skulls and symbols, stars and waves. The level of detail from

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textile patterns to tree leaves, grains of sandy earth, and human emotions is as precise as a painting. In fact Constant has been known to refer to her approach as “painting with beads,” although there’s so much more to it than that.

Constant depicts religious ceremonies, important events in Haitian history, and the richness of everyday life; alongside both critiques and celebrations of complex post-colonial religion and nationalism, as well as major works commemorating events like the 2010 earthquake, one finds still lifes, wedding scenes, single-figure portraits, and ornate abstract pattern-pieces as well. These are made with the same adventurous palette and allure of reflective textures, and the same painstaking attentions, as the more literary works, reflecting the advanced level of craft and pleasure that animate Constant’s practice—and her capacity for personal expression alongside her work with the Vodou spirits. As a short but powerful documentary film and an accompanying monographic publication eloquently unpack, for Constant it’s all one big interconnected idea and all inspirations are allowed—but at the same time, the work of the spirit always comes first, and she’s suffering no fools in its pursuit.

Throughout, Constant’s drapo makes clear that Vodou is not an olden-time religion, but rather a vital foundation of Haitian heritage and modern culture. Constant grew up in Vodou; her father is a Vodou priest and a Christian and this is not seen as a paradox. One strategy for surviving colonialism was the absorption of the European religion’s structures into their own hierarchy in which Bondye, the all-powerful and remote creator God, is represented in this realm by a host of supernatural agents, such as the thousand or so lwa who appear throughout Constant’s scenes. Vodou practitioners commonly cross-identify Catholic saints with lwa—expanding, rather than erasing, the scope of Vodou belief.



Myrlande Constant: *Nègre Danbala Wedo*, 1994–2019; sequins, glass beads, and silk on cotton (Collection of Pérez Art Museum Miami; image © Myrlande Constant; image courtesy of CENTRAL FINE; Photo by Armando Vaquer, 2020)

*Rassembleman Soupe Tout Eskòt Yo*, 2019, reimagines the traditional biblical Last Supper by centering a Black Bondye amid a gathering of lwa more like a worshipful party than a solemn meal. St. George, dragon-slayer, is quite popular within this idiom, as is St. Patrick, snake-charmer. Constant’s *Pierre Danbalah Pòt Limyè Oufò Vodoo*. *Yon Gran Poison Nan Cilti Vodoo*. *Metres Aidah Wèdo Repezantan Metres Labanirne*. *Tout Mètres Èzili an Jeneral (Pyè Danbala bearer of light of the Vodou temple. A big fish of Vodou culture. Mistress Ayida Wèdo representative of Mistress Labalèn [the whale]. And of all mistresses Èzili in general)*—a particularly symbol-rich scenario from 2017—depicts just such an episode. In the gameboard-like construction, St. Patrick and all manner of serpents (powerful

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symbols in most religious texts) form a web and borders with an energetic movement across a church, a mitred bishop, a Biblical fish, indigenous royalty, open tabernacles, a table of holy sacraments, and more such elements in a fertile and bountiful landscape.

This integrated existence of the human and supernatural, past and present, ancient and modern, living and dead, sacred and secular, celebration and suffering, catastrophe and miracle, healing and justice, faith and science, governance and revolution, invasion and liberty, art and service is the driving force in Constant's life and in her studio. The monumental *Haiti Mardi 12 Janvye 2010* (Haiti, Tuesday, January 12, 2010) chronicles Constant's personal recollection of the aftermath of that year's devastating earthquake, when the lwa grieved together with humans, and every single one of what seems to be thousands of individual figures is shown both struggling themselves and rushing to help others.

Constant was born in Port-au-Prince where she learned the art of beading by working alongside her mother in a wedding dress factory. Once she felt the calling to a higher service, she quickly became a pioneering female figure within the traditionally male dominated drapo space. The Fowler Museum's long-planned survey now follows a star turn at the 2022 Venice Biennale (a few pieces of which are in this exhibition) and an extensively acclaimed solo show in NYC at Fort Gansevoort. The prolific scale of her output is made all the more impressive when, confronting the works in person, it becomes clearer than words could ever express just how much patience, precision, focus, finesse, faith, passion, and vision flow into their making.

*A free one-day symposium on the art of Myrlande Constant convenes scholars from around the country on May 12. Myrlande Constant: The Work of Radiance is on view at the Fowler Museum at UCLA through August 27; admission is free; for more information visit: [fowler.ucla.edu](http://fowler.ucla.edu).*