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HYPERALLERGIC

Myrlande Constant Composes the Tapestries of Life

For the Haitian artist, both art and life are a mixture of joy and pain, of rituals and healing, and a celebration of nuance and interconnectivity.

Jennifer Remenchik - June 27th, 2023



Myrlande Constant, "Haiti", Tuesday, January 12, 2010" (2012) (all photos Jennifer Remenchik/Hyperallergic)

LOS ANGELES — The work of Myrlande Constant, a kaleidoscope of dazzling sequins, swirling designs, and intricate beadwork, is inseparable from her Haitian heritage and spiritual beliefs. Like many citizens of colonized countries, Constant's spiritual practice is hybridized. Hers is a syncretic blend of Voodoo (an African diasporic religion specific to Haiti) and Catholicism, which was established as Haiti's official religion by the French in 1697 and remained so up until 1987. So important is this aspect of her life to her art that the introductory wall of *Myrlande Constant: The Work of Radiance* at the Fowler Museum includes this quote from the artist: "After God and the Lwa (ancestral spirits), it's my mother. If you don't get that, you don't get me."

The work in the retrospective is gorgeous and emanates a sense of lived experience. Looking at Constant's tapestries can feel like directly witnessing the way in which she processes and creates meaning from that experience. Her tapestries are grounded in the historically male-dominated practice of *drapo* Vodou. While traditionally *drapo* flags depict individual figures and motifs, Constant creates

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entire scenes and stories through her beadwork; the resulting artworks read as a mixture of *drapo* and Catholic Renaissance painting, reflecting her hybridized spirituality.

In another departure from tradition, some of her pieces depict historical and cultural events, such as “Haiti, Tuesday, January 12, 2010” (2012). The chaotic scene portrays the aftermath of Haiti’s devastating 2010 earthquake, suffused with despair, skeletons, and tombs. The same scene incorporates several lwa that represent death and sexual regeneration: Gede, Grann Brijit and Bawon Samdi. Other works look to the abundant, rather than the destructive, aspects of nature, such as “*Negre Quimbois Lasirene Negre an Dezo*” (2013), “*Union des Esprits Sirenes*” (2020), and “*Danbhalá Hwedo et Aida Voir Preface*” (1998–2001). These three pieces represent different takes on the importance of life-giving water. In “*Union des Esprits Sirenes*,” Constant shows a ceremonial meal presided over by an aquatic Black queen with tentacles for legs, while in “*Negre Quimbois Lasirene Negre an Dezo*,” she celebrates the different characteristics of water: salty, muddy, and fresh.

Also included in the retrospective is a short video directed by Natacha Giafferi-Dombre, “*Myrlande Constant: Staging the Invisible*” (2023). Filmed in the artist’s atelier and home in Haiti, the piece contextualizes the work and the cultural sphere from which it comes — far from the grounds of UCLA. The video offers a look into Constant’s labor-intensive process, set against the sounds of chickens and goats in the background, and what I assume to be a couple of her four children darting in and out of the camera’s view. The artist discusses her mother’s influence on her work as well — for instance, she learned beadwork working alongside her mother as she made wedding dresses in a Port-au-Prince factory.

As one might expect from an artist whose work is inextricable from her life, Constant expresses no intellectual distance from her art. For her, both art and life are a mixture of joy and pain, of rituals and healing, and a celebration of nuance and interconnectivity.

Myrlande Constant: The Work of Radiance continues at the Fowler Museum (308 Charles E. Young Drive North, Westwood, Los Angeles) through August 27. The exhibition was organized by the Fowler Museum at UCLA and curated by Katherine Smith, Fowler curatorial and research associate of Haitian arts, and Jerry Philogene, associate professor of American Studies at Dickinson College.