

# FORT GANSEVOORT



## Myrlande Constant's vibrant art plays 'ambassador' for Haiti in Ohio

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Myrlande Constant, *Sosyete Radha*, 2024, Beads, sequins, and tassels on fabric, 96 x 109.5 in (detail)

Myrlande Constant creates intricately beaded tapestries, packed with vegetation, people, animals and various symbols from Haitian Vodou.

“‘Painting with beads’ as she calls it,” said art historian Katherine Smith, who co-curated an exhibition of Constant’s work at the [Fowler Museum](#) at UCLA in 2023.

Constant’s contemporary art has been featured around the world, including at the Venice Biennale and Art Basel in Miami Beach.

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Myrlande Constant, *Rozoli*, 1995-1998, Beads and sequins on fabric, 62 x 74.5 in

The Akron Art Museum is the latest U.S. institution to honor the trailblazing artist with an exhibit of her drapo, Haitian Vodou flags often depicting spirits and traditionally adorned with sequins.

"She was the first one to really introduce narrative into this artform. The imagery traditionally was very static, and she was the one who really began telling stories," Smith said.

With political instability in Haiti and now a recently instituted travel ban, she can't witness these exhibits in person. But her art plays a messenger for her culture and creativity in a time of misinformation about Haitians in the U.S. since the last election cycle.

"You can also ask if that's a fair role to put Haitian artists in," Smith said. "Haiti is a frequent subject of her work, Haiti, Haitian history. So, I think she takes on that role with a certain amount of pride."

## An early start

In her youth, Constant learned beading techniques from her mother. She worked alongside her in a factory on wedding dresses as a teenager. But as Constant grew up, she needed to move on.

"If you meet Constant, sort of working in a factory all day and answering to a boss is not really something she was capable of," Smith said.

Constant initially tried painting. When that didn't work out, she brought her beading skills to drapo, a traditionally male field, mixing sequins and beads. Her drapo are dense with imagery, incorporating Vodou spirits, history and current events.



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Myrlande Constant, *Lasirène*, c. 2000s, Beads and sequins on fabric, 33 x 43 in

“Her work, yes, kind of stems out of her Vodou tradition, her religious tradition ... But at the same time, she's also creating ... for a wide group of individuals who understand moments of joy, moments of celebration, moments of trauma,” said Haitian art scholar Jerry Philogene, who co-curated the Fowler Museum exhibit.

Constant hand draws the designs and then sews them into the fabric with the help of apprentices at her home studio in Haiti. A [short documentary](#) filmed there featured in the Fowler Museum exhibit shows projects spread out on the ground with chickens and birds passing through the space. In Haitian Creole, Constant discusses her work and says that it is a gift from her mother.

“The way that she speaks and understands the world and her art and her spiritual practice is through allegory,” said Maggie Dougherty, director of Fort Gansevoort, the New York gallery representing Constant. “She’ll rarely answer a question directly, but I think that that also really shows through in her art making.”

## **Drapo in Akron**

The Akron Art Museum has been working with Fort Gansevoort to acquire one of Constant’s drapo for its permanent collection.

“Labor, effort, texture, craft, color, detail, density, were things that made her work really jump out to me,” said Jeff Katzin, senior curator at the Akron Art Museum.

The acquisition, “Sosyete Radha,” is 72 square feet and the centerpiece of the Akron exhibition, [“Myrlande Constant: DRAPO,”](#) featuring 10 of her large flags on view Saturday through January 4, 2025.



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Myrlande Constant, *Sosyete Radha*, 2024, Beads, sequins, and tassels on fabric, 96 x 109.5 in (detail)

“When you start to look closely, it's an image overall of, in the center, a figure who's extending his hands outward in a gesture of protection. There's a sort of color and energy emanating from him. Above him and around him are geometric symbols that represent different Vodou spirits. And then underneath him is a scene of pastoral life in Haiti,” Katzin said.

It is very difficult to reach Constant amid political unrest in Haiti, so Katzin wasn't able to ask her about the meaning behind the work. But he sees a strong theme of protection.

“To me, this piece most likely represents Myrlande's desire for peace and healing and stability in her country,” he said.