

FORT GANSEVOORT

ARTFORUM

Critics' Picks: Myrlande Constant

Fowler Museum at UCLA, 308 Charles E Young Dr N, Los Angeles

March 26-August 27, 2023

Annabel Osberg – May 2023



Myrlande Constant, Still life, ca. 1995, glass seed beads, bugle beads, sequins, cotton fabric, and foamcore, 31 3/4 x 29 1/4".

Myrlande Constant's sumptuously detailed textile works elaborate mystical realms where mermaids, serpentine beings, angels with axolotl-like heads, and tentacled half-human deities interact with each other and, occasionally, mortals. Evoking tapestries and mosaics, the artist's compositions scintillate with thousands of punctiliously stitched glass beads and sequins that change color and reflect light when viewed from different angles. But these tableaux are not intended to merely titillate: the Haitian artist is a *manbo makout*, a priestess by blood; her objects take the form of *drapo*, ritual flags involving spirits, or *lwa*, from the Vodou pantheon.

Constant began making art in the 1990s when, frustrated with low pay and poor treatment, she quit her factory job as a wedding-dress seamstress to start, in her words, "painting with beads." She revolutionized the male-dominated craft of *drapo* by introducing the tambour embroidery stitch, a technique that allows for the creation of greater depth and tactility. Constant's wide-ranging influences

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beyond Haiti are evident in one of the earliest works on view, *Still life*, ca.1995, whose exquisite floral motifs recall those of Matisse.

Her later works dig further into Haitian history and Vodou. A selection of small-scale drapo mostly depict figures individually, in pairs, or in trios, including *Èzili Balian*, ca. 2005, which portrays a strong Black maternal lwa based loosely on the Catholic Madonna. Her largest pieces, however, illustrate religious lore and stories about her home country. Rendering the aftermath of a devastating earthquake, the sprawling layout of *Haiti madi 12 janvye 2010 (Haiti, Tuesday, January 12, 2010)*, 2012, brings to mind Renaissance altarpieces, such as Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*, 1490–1500.

A brief documentary, *Staging the Invisible*, 2023, featuring interview footage of Constant in her atelier in the hills above Port-au-Prince, intimates the complicated reality she faces in her dual role as priestess and working artist achieving recognition outside of Haiti. Constant faces criticism from people who accuse her of “selling the image of the *lwa*,” she says in the video. But this, she goes on to explain, is a nonissue, as “the spirits are always with us . . . all around us, all over the world.”