

FORT GANSEVOORT

BLACKSTAR S E E C

‘Embroidering the Otherworldly’

By Allison Noelle Conner, Summer 2023



Detail of Myrlande Constant, *Union des Esprits Sirenes (Union of mermaid spirits)* (2020), courtesy of CENTRAL FINE, Photo by George Echevarria

The search for freedom necessitates an undoing of Western logic and reason, as the Martinican theorist Suzanne Césaire has written. Such undoings permit the emergence of new possibilities, ones that guide us towards a fuller appreciation of the mysterious forces of life. Haitian Vodou embraces these mysteries as expressions of lwas, spirits who serve as links between the earthly and divine. These mysteries make contact with us, a touch that upends the finely-drawn schisms between life and death, body and mind, human and not. Vodou opens up the world through its disruption of our fixed narratives, allowing us to commune with the strange and fantastical. I could say the same about my time with Myrlande Constant’s glimmery tapestries, which felt like an encounter with marvelous spirits who led me towards other ways of being and knowing. I saw iridescent pink-finned mermaids combing their coily hair, a revolutionary charging forth on his horse, his sword replaced by a green serpent, and an

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older woman flashing her bottom during a feast for the dead. Surrounding me were luscious sequences bursting with the movement and energy of the seen and unseen.

Myrlande Constant: The Work of Radiance provides an introduction to Constant's 30-year practice. On view at UCLA's Fowler Museum and co-curated by Katherine Smith and Jerry Philogene, the retrospective is the first solo exhibition at a US museum centered on a Haitian woman. Born in Port-au-Prince, Constant worked in a factory that produced beaded wedding dresses for American and European markets. It was there that she learned tambour embroidery, a technique that uses a hooked needle on tightly stretched fabric. When low wages forced her to quit, Constant tried her hand at drapos, sequined flags used during Vodou ceremonies to call forth the lwas. Though inspired by the drapo tradition, Constant also extends beyond it, creating maximalist scenes teeming with cultural, historical, personal, and mystical meanings. From afar, her flags resemble ornate paintings, her shimmering beads densely affixed to the fabric like thick swirls of acrylic.

The exhibition is loosely organized around Constant's explorations of divine figures, rituals, and history. After introducing earlier works like the floral *Still life* (1995), the exhibition charts Constant's experimentation with the drapo form, as her flags grow more intricate, both in size and subject matter. In addition to straightforward portraits of lwas like Erzulie Dantor (1995-2020), and historical figures like Cathine Flon (Catherine Flon, 2011), she began depicting scenes in which ordinary people interact with Vodou spirits and Catholic saints as they experience weddings, funerals, healings, and other aspects of living. *Rasanbleman Soupe Tout Eskòt Yo* (2019) revisions *The Last Supper* through the lens of Vodou, recasting Jesus's final meal as a ceremonial gathering bringing together animals, humans, and lwas. In Haitian Kreyòl, rasanblaj or rasanbleman, is defined as an assembly or convening of different thoughts that involves, according to scholar Gina Athena Ulysse, a "regrouping (of ideas, things, spirits)." From this regrouping, new relations emerge. Rasanbleman captures the dynamism of this communion—there are no hierarchies here. Worshippers and spirits share verdant space, breaking bread together while surrendering to the rhythms of the drums and flutes.

The rasanblaj spirit infuses Constant's other works as well. Measuring 6' x 8', the expansive banner *Union des Esprits Sirenes* (2020) transports viewers to an underwater realm, where various Vodou water spirits enjoy a feast. Constant reveals the depths of her Vodou knowledge, depicting the many manifestations of Lasirèn, including one form as a shimmering whale. As I paced around the work, my movements followed by splashes of light, I was awed by the multiplicity of lwas, their ability to shapeshift and transmute. Here is Agwe, king of the sea, fashioned in an opal skirt. Merpeople swim with eels, their figures merging into a new form. To be enmeshed with these spirits is to encounter ourselves anew. We are reassembled by this contact, for it overrides our individual impulses in favor of this sensual convening of bodies and souls. "*Union des Esprits Sirenes*" outlines a different kind of freedom, one that embraces this intimacy between incantations of selves. For Constant, living involves a never-ending collaboration with the invisible forces that surround us all. Her drapos bring to the surface the energies that cannot be seen but are always present. To move through the mysteries is to be in communion with each other and the beyond. As Ulysse writes in the exhibition's catalogue, "li pa mache pou kont li... She does not walk alone." Myrlande Constant: The Work of Radiance continues through August 27 at the Fowler Museum at UCLA in Los Angeles.