

FORT GANSEVOORT

 **BROOKLYN RAIL**

Myrlande Constant: *Drapo*

By Ann C. Collins – March 01, 2023



Myrlande Constant, *Erzulie Dantor*, 2022. Beads, sequins, and tassels on fabric. 25 x 27.5 inches. ©Myrlande Constant. Courtesy of the artist and Fort Gansevoort, New York.

In Haiti, the practice of Vodou weaves the memory of spiritual beliefs carried by enslaved Africans into Catholic traditions. From this fusion an iconography emerges in which deities hide in images of saints, their identities revealed in furtive signs and symbols. In recent years, veneration of drapo Vodous, pictorial flags that adorn sanctuaries, has spread to the contemporary artworld where meaningful attention is finally being paid to the heritage techniques and traditional themes of the Global South. Enter Haitian textile artist Myrlande Constant, whose ten new works, all created in 2022, make up the exhibition *Myrlande Constant: Drapo*, at Fort Gansevoort Gallery. The daughter of a Vodou priest and a seamstress, Constant left a job in a wedding dress factory in the 1990s and developed an artmaking practice. Using tambour embroidery techniques—skills transferred from her wedding dress work—she creates elaborate portraits and genre scenes embellished with sequins, tassels, ribbons, and beads; materials attributed to women and not typically used in the making of drapo. Her textile compositions rethink the ceremonial, imbuing it with the modern considerations of gender, politics, and the sacredness of everyday life.

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Just inside the door of the gallery, I find a small portrait of Saint Patrick (Damballa Wedo), which features a familiar if glimmering image of the saint dressed in green with snakes at his feet, much as he appears in the prayer cards passed out at Irish wakes. Shiny beads and small pearls embellish his robe and staff. Two snakes rise to his left and right, outlined in silver sequins that catch the light at the turn of my head. In Haitian Vodou, Saint Patrick is “syncretized” with the lwa, or spirit, Danbala, the creator of life who is traditionally represented as a snake. On an adjacent wall, Erzulli Dantor, a small but glorious Madonna and Child image, riffs on Our Lady of Częstochowa, a 14th century Polish icon known more famously as the “Black Madonna” because of its dark skin tones. Constant dresses her mother in blue sequins and her child in tiny pink beads. She surrounds them with rows of gold spangles framed by a luscious red border of red metallic ribbon. The work holds both the image of the Madonna and that of the lwa Ezili Danto, but its evocation of the Black Madonna also recalls Polish mercenaries who turned against Napoleon’s army in the Haitian Revolution. Ezili Danto is believed to have guided Haitians to victory against French and British oppressors, and in Constant’s work, she appears as a Queen crowned in gold and jewels.

Measuring nearly eight feet across, Kouzen Zaka Minis Agrikilti celebrates the lwa Kouzen Zaka, the spirit associated with agriculture. Constant dresses him in his trademark denim work-shirt (indicated in blue beads) and a straw hat of coppery sequins. He carries a sickle and a bag of food and tobacco. Tiny pearls form his long, white beard, and the ten aqua-colored beads that make up his eyes give him a piercing stare. Beside him, Kouzenne Zaka, his wife, stands before an abundant cauldron of food, balancing a basket of produce on her head. People gather around them to dance and play music. One man rests on a bended knee, his hands clasped at his chest in a gesture of gratitude. In the distance, a patchwork of green fields studded with fruit trees give way to silvery mountains and a blue sky. The luminescence of Constant’s materials infuses the scene with life. Spirits seem to move, the landscape breathes. Working its charm, the drapo induces a visceral sense of place: I feel as if I am inside of the image, even as I am standing in the gallery looking at it.

Swirling clouds—think Van Gogh’s luscious brush strokes transposed in sequins—gather above a cemetery in Constant’s most ambitious work, a nine-foot square framed in purple and black fabric trimmed with white tassels. At the center of Reincarnation Des Morts, Baron Samdi, guardian spirit of graveyards, sports sunglasses and a red bowtie. His wife, Grann Brijit, whose partially decomposed face is offset by a wide-brimmed hat and big hoop earrings, links arms with him. A winged skeleton hovers overhead, leading a small band of drummers whose music summons the dead from their graves. The enormity of the work requires me to move around it, and as I do, the glittering figures sway and dance as Constant harnesses something fundamental that exists beyond the structures of religious forms, beyond her technique and materials: light, the source of life, the spark of magic.