

FORT GANSEVOORT

ARTFORUM

PÒTOPRENS: The Urban Artists of Port-au-Prince

Myrlande Constant, *Exorcism* (1994–2019). Collection Pérez Art Museum Miami.

Print, December 2018

When the Haitian artist Myrlande Constant was a teenager in Port-au-Prince, she went to work with her mother in a factory making elaborately beaded wedding dresses. When she left, she began using the beads to make extremely unorthodox versions of drapo vodou—the small embroidered and sequined flags that have been produced in Haiti for generations, as both religious objects and artworks for sale. Constant’s imagery drew equally from vodou mythology, current events, and popular culture, and her densely textured flags are large, more like quilts, crammed with figures, scenarios, and decorative elements, all competing to tell a story. She is one in a number of contemporary practitioners who have revolutionized Haitian drapo by entering what had been, until the 1990s, a field completely dominated by men.

“PÒTOPRENS: The Urban Artists of Port-au-Prince” at Brooklyn’s Pioneer Works was a show in four parts. In a screening room on the third floor, a rotation of videos, documentaries, and feature films— by Anne Lescot, Jorgen Leth, and Beatriz Santiago Muñoz, among others— covered several decades of Haitian history. On the second floor, three series of photographs—by Josué Azor, Maggie Steber, and Roberto Stephenson—delved into contemporary aspects of the city’s lived experience, from sexual intimacies to the destruction of Port-au-Prince’s main axis during the devastating earthquake of 2010. In the garden behind Pioneer Works, the writer Richard Fleming had built a fully functioning Port-au-Prince-style barbershop adorned with portraits by the painter Michel Lafleur. But the most powerful and prominent part of the exhibition by far was the intense arrangement of sculptures, installations, masks, and flags by eleven artists on the ground floor, including skeletons and several wall-mounted snakes by André Eugène and a suite of large, totemic figures made of wood, metal, and rubber by Céleur Jean Hérard.

Constant was one of just two women on the first level (the gender imbalance associated with traditional flag making echoes throughout Haitian art history and is reflected in the contemporary art scene of Port-au-Prince). Organized according to four prominent neighborhoods in the Haitian capital, each known for its distinct forms of artmaking, this part of “PÒTOPRENS” wound its way through Bel Air, Rivière Froide, and the Grand Rue to finish in Carrefour Feuilles, where Constant keeps her studio. Three of her enormous flags, including the epic *Ceremonie Saint Brigitte Baron La Kwa*, 2005–16, hung opposite the artist Katelyne Alexis’s sinister-looking dolls, which were suspended from the ceiling on either side of *Ayiti malad (Haiti Is Sick)*, 2017, made of another doll in sunglasses, placed on a pink plastic bed piled high with metal refuse and discarded bicycle tires.

FORT GANSEVOORT

This was the first time Alexis's works had been shown outside of Haiti, and their pairing with Constant's quilts—effectively ending the show on the idea of opening up—made for one of many breathtaking moments, which gave capacious life to an exhibition that was surprisingly (and commendably) streamlined. In the years since the 2010 earthquake, there have been several notable shows devoted to contemporary Haitian art, including “In Extremis: Death and Life in 21st-Century Haitian Art,” at the Fowler Museum at the University of California in Los Angeles, and “Kafou: Haiti, Art, and Vodou,” at Nottingham Contemporary in the UK. Each show featured more than thirty artists and took a broader, more national, even civilizational view. Focusing tightly on the city and insisting on the term majority class, Leah Gordon, who organized “PÒTOPRENS” with the esteemed Haitian American painter and sculptor Edouard Duval-Carrié, admirably sidestepped the issues of “outsider” or “vernacular” art. She also drew attention to the materials, not only placing ten of artist Ti Pelin's remarkable, haunting, masklike granite sculptures on the floor or on old wooden beams, but also contextualizing them within the story of the Rivière Froide, the river into which Pelin plunges his stones for greater porousness. “PÒTOPRENS” was filled with figures created to be life-size but evocative of ghosts, spirits, casualties, and decomposing corpses. Their installation both reveled in and demanded great acts of imagination, along with an acknowledgment of how crowded, and how coterminous, the logistical and spiritual realms of the living and the dead are.