

# FORT GANSEVOORT

## COLOSSAL

### Embellished Vodou Flags by Myrlande Constant Spotlight ‘The Spiritual World of Haiti’

By Kate Mothes, January 28, 2025



Myrlande Constant, "Ceromine Bois Caiman" (date unknown), beads and sequins on fabric, 52 x 82 inches.

When Myrlande Constant (previously) was a teenager, she worked alongside her mother in a commercial wedding dress factory in Port-au-Prince. There, she learned the *tambour* embroidery technique, which utilizes a hook to create chain stitches with beads and sequins on fabric.

“By foregrounding her specialized skills honed in the fashion industry, Constant’s approach to *drapo* has broken gender barriers and elevated the overlooked creative labor of Haitian female factory workers to the realm of fine art,” says a statement from Fort Gansevoort, which will present the artist’s work next month in a solo exhibition titled *The Spiritual World of Haiti*.

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Myrlande Constant, "Marasah-Cai Leh-Créole-Marasah-Guinin-Marasah-bois" (date unknown), beads and sequins on fabric, 74 x 55.25 inches

Drapo, or *drapo Vodou*, typically describes a style of embroidered flag embellished with beads or sequins, but the term can also be applied to a wide range of art forms like painting, clothing, assemblages, and sculptures. Constant's pieces, which she has been renowned for since the 1990s, highlight a variety of materials, colors, textures, and all-over compositions brimming with ritual activity and symbols.

Haitian Vodou, an African diasporic religion that developed between the 16th and 19th centuries, merged Western and Central African traditions with Roman Catholicism. Its divine creator, Bondye, is inaccessible to humans, so spirits known as *lwa*'s serve as intermediaries that can be invoked during ceremonies by possessing individuals, enabling communication with Bondye and transmission of advice, admonishment, or healing.

"Though she considers her art-making to be rooted in spirituality, Constant does not create her works for the purpose of display in Vodou temples, preferring instead to exhibit them in museums and galleries internationally," a statement says.

For Constant, art-making is a statement of resistance within the context of Haiti's extreme political and economic instability. The nation's current unrest was spurred by protests against high fuel prices in 2018 and a demand that then-president Jovenel Moïse resign. He refused to step down but was assassinated in 2021, further escalating tensions. A federation of gangs



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continues to clash with the government, spawning more protests, violence, and perpetuating an evolving humanitarian crisis.



Myrlande Constant, Detail of "Au nom de 29 points cimetiére par pou voir Baron Samedi"

"Marinette Bois Chèche" is the earliest work that will be on view in the exhibition and depicts the martyrdom of Vodou lwa Marinette. According to folklore, Vodou lwa Marinette was burned alive for fighting against slavery and participating in a paradigm-shifting Bwa Kayiman ceremony in 1791, which spawned the 12-year Haitian Revolution.

The insurrection, an uprising of enslaved people against French colonial rule, is unique in history because it led to the founding of a state ruled by former captives and non-white people and free from slavery—although it still permitted forced labor. Constant's title translates to something like "Marinette of the dry wood," evoking the ceremony that typically takes place around a bonfire and calling upon a momentous period in Haiti's history.

The artist's drapery are densely beaded and often much larger than their traditional counterparts. The most recent work on view in the exhibition, "Devosyon Makaya" spans ten feet wide and took around three years to create. Constant describes her process as "painting with beads," transforming fabric and findings into elaborate narratives evoking time-honored Haitian customs.

The Spiritual World of Haiti opens on February 27 and continues through April 26 in New York City.



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Myrlande Constant, "Au nom de 29 points cimetiere par pou voir Baron Samedi" (date unknown), beads and sequins on fabric, 58 x 70 inches



Myrlande Constant, "Marinette Bois Chéche" (1994), beads and sequins on fabric, 33 x 37 inches



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Myrlande Constant, "Par pou voir torit les saints torit les morts torit armes ou purgatoir bó manman ak bo papa maternel et paternal en non digr cela mizerricorde" (date unknown), beads, sequins, and tassels on fabric, 76.5 x 96 inches



Myrlande Constant, Detail of "Par pou voir torit les saints torit les morts torit armes ou purgatoir bó manman ak bo papa maternel et paternal en non digr cela mizerricorde"

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Myrlande Constant, Detail of "Ceromine Bois Caiman"