Fowler
MUSEUM AT UCLA

Myrlande Constant: The Work of Radiance

First solo museum exhibition of a Haitian, female, contemporary artist

March 26–August 27, 2023 | Contact: Erin Connors, 714.270.6426, erinconnors@arts.ucla.edu

Los Angeles—*The Work of Radiance* is a retrospective of the groundbreaking, 30-year-long career of Myrlande Constant, an artist renowned for her monumental, hand-beaded textiles. The first major museum exhibition devoted to the work of a Haitian, female, contemporary artist, the Fowler presentation features 28 of her works and a short documentary showing the artist in her studio. An accompanying monograph examines the evolution of Constant's artistic vision, her innovative technique, and her impact on art-making in Haiti and beyond. In 2022, her work was included in the Venice Biennale.

Constant has expanded upon an older, male-dominated cultural practice of *drapo* Vodou (Vodou flags)—a dazzling component of Afro-Haitian religious regalia. While such flags are typically made with sequins and focus on individual figures or motifs, Constant "paints with beads," which significantly enlarges her representational repertory. She depicts *lwa* (Vodou spirits), Catholic saints, and regular people in meticulously detailed scenes of religious ceremonies, key moment in Haitian history, and everyday life. Her insistence on the primacy and ubiquity of *lwa* challenges Western art histories and foregrounds postmodern Black aesthetics and the role of Haiti in Black Atlantic visual culture. While intended for a wider public, Constant's art is also intimately personal: it is labor-intensive and profoundly entwined with her and her family's spiritual practices. Vodou is not only a theme throughout Constant's oeuvre, but an irreducible part of her identity and worldview.

About the Exhibition

The introductory gallery features photographs of Constant's atelier in Haiti and some of her earliest works, including a glittering floral still life that showcases her expert beadwork, honed in a wedding dress factory where she worked alongside her mother as a teenager. The other two textiles depict serpentine Vodou deities (*lwa*), their sinuous dynamism foreshadowing Constant's future narrative compositions—her innovation and addition to the *drapo* artform. A side gallery presents a newly-commissioned short documentary about Constant, shot in her Port-au-Prince home; it offers a vivid sense of her personality and environment.

Three thematic sections follow: **portraits of divinity**; **ceremonies and rituals**; and **beaded histories**. Throughout, Constant's *drapo* make clear that Vodou is not an arcane religion, but an integral facet of Haitian past and present. For her, Vodou is *eritaj* (heritage): "We must remember our heroes because they work for us," she says. "We must not forget them. Their blood flows in our veins." As she weaves together spiritual and secular worlds, personal and historical narratives, Constant challenges assumptions about tradition and modernity, artisanal craft and fine art.

Portraits of Divinity

Constant grew up practicing her ancestral religion, Vodou, in which *Bondye*, the all-powerful and remote creator God, is aided by countless supernatural agents, most notably *lwa*. The *lwa* are enmeshed in the lives of individuals and families. Their pantheon is vast, and this section spotlights a few to illustrate Constant's eclecticism. Vodou practitioners seldom see contradiction in embracing aspects of multiple faiths, and often identify Catholic saints with *lwa*—enhancing and expanding, rather than limiting, Vodou mythology.

Ceremonies and Rituals

Maintaining a bond with the *lwa* is key to healing and gaining wisdom in Vodou. Lush illustrations of curative ceremonies, dispensation of justice, and spiritual gatherings reflect Constant's view of reality, one in which everyday life coexists with the sacred. Her vibrant narratives reflect celebratory Black life as well as experiences of suffering, struggle, and sacrifice. The *lwa* offer an intimate connection to Haitians' familial and national histories, linking the past to the present, and guiding *sèvitè* (devotees) into the future.

Rasanbleman Soupe Tout Eskòt Yo (2019) reimagines the traditional biblical Last Supper by focusing on a Black *Bondye* who presides over an energetic assembly of *lwa* gathered to enjoy food, drink, and music provided by worshipers. Several works radiantly portray the living and the dead in celebrations led by the *lwa* of death and sexual regeneration: Bawon Samdi and Grann Brijit, master and mistress of the cemetery, and the many mischievous trickster *lwa* called Gede. These scenes not only show the central role of spirits in human affairs, but also express the yearning to be free from oppression and the hope for true liberation, if not in this world, then in the one ruled by the Gede.

Beaded Histories

Constant is one of the first Haitian textile artists to explicitly engage with historical content in her *drapo*. Her works in this gallery depict major historical events, national emblems, and heroic figures, such as Toussaint Louverture who led the Haitian Revolution, and Catherine Flon, credited with sewing the first flag of the Haitian republic after the revolution. The monumental *Haiti Mardi 12 Janvye 2010* (Haiti, Tuesday, January 12, 2010) offers Constant's personal recollection of the catastrophic 2010 earthquake, in which the *lwa* grieve together with humans. The exhibition closes with *Haïtien lonje men w bay manman w* (Haitians, lend a hand to your mother, 2012), in which an unnamed woman holds up Haiti's coat of arms—an essential emblem of Haitian collective identity and resistance to oppressive forces.

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About the Artist

Myrlande Constant was born 1968 in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. She is known for her striking beaded and sequin-embellished textiles. *Drapo*, her first solo exhibition with New York gallery Fort Gansevoort opened in 2023 to critical acclaim. In 2022, Constant's work was included in the Venice Biennale exhibition, *The Milk of Dreams*, curated by Cecilia Alemani. Her work has also been shown in various group exhibitions including *Reframing Haiti: Art, History and Performativity* at Brown University (2011); *Kafou: Haiti, Art and Vodou* at Nottingham Contemporary (2012–13); and *Pòtoprens: The Urban Artists of Port-au-Prince* at Pioneer Works in Brooklyn, NY (2018), which traveled to the Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami (2019). Constant's work is included in the following museum collections: Alfond Collection of Contemporary Art, Rollins Museum of Art, Winter Park, FL; American Folk Art Museum, New York, NY; Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL; Fowler Museum at UCLA, Los Angeles, CA; Lowe Art Museum, University of Miami, Miami, FL; Pérez Art Museum, Miami, FL; Tampa Museum of Art, Tampa, FL; RISD Museum, Providence, RI; and Waterloo Center for the Arts, Waterloo, IA.

Credits

Myrlande Constant: The Work of Radiance is organized by the Fowler Museum at UCLA and curated by Katherine Smith, Fowler curatorial and research associate of Haitian arts, and Jerry Philogene, associate professor of American studies at Dickinson College, PA.

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Museum Information

308 Charles E Young Dr N | Los Angeles, CA 90095 | fowler.ucla.edu/visit
Parking in UCLA Lot 4: 198 Westwood Plaza at Sunset Blvd, $3/hr
Rideshare drop-off: 305 Royce Drive

Hours: Wednesday–Sunday, 12–5 pm
Admission to the Fowler is free

CAPTIONS

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Myrlande Constant (b. 1968, Port-au-Prince, Haiti), *Milocan Tous les Saints Tous les Morts* (Milokan, all the saints, all the dead), c. 2000; beads, sequins, and fabric; American Folk Art Museum, 2012.3.1; Gift of Robert Brenner; photograph by Gavin Ashworth; image courtesy of American Folk Art Museum/Art Resource NY

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Myrlande Constant (b. 1968, Port-au-Prince, Haiti), *Rasanbleman Soupe Tout Eskòt Yo* (All the escort gathering for supper), 2019; fabric, beads, and sequins; Collection of Alan Faena; Courtesy of Faena Art; Photography and image © by Oriol Tarridas, 2021