

WEAVING HISTORY

Exhibition of Haitian vodou-flag tapestries highlights an evolving art

BY CELESTE FRASER DELGADO
Special to The Miami Herald

When Napoleon's army rode into battle during the Haitian Revolution in 1802, each legion of French soldiers flew a flag. Embroidered with gold thread, the standards made a powerful impression on the rebels. After independence, Haitians designed banners for themselves and used them to usher in "legions" of spirits during vodou ceremonies. Over the years, more accessible materials — sequins, for example — replaced the gold thread.

With their bold colors and mysterious symbols, vodou flags have become cherished art objects and the subject of museum exhibits and scholarly studies. *Contemporary Haitian Textiles*, the exhibition on display at the Little Haiti Cultural Center, shows that the tradition keeps evolving.

"We wanted to give an idea that these are not traditional vodou flags," says Miami-based artist Edouard Duval Carrié, whose organization, the Haitian Cultural Arts Alliance, curated the show. "A lot of these people consider themselves artists. The themes they use are far from religious. That's why I had to change the name and not call it 'the vodou flags of Haiti.'"

Whatever they're called, the tapestries are awe-inspiring. The pieces in a series by Edgar Jean Louis, a pioneer of sequin work who died last year, measure almost eight feet wide and seven feet tall — much larger than the typical vodou flag. They were created for a massive installation by Duval Carrié that was commissioned by the Haitian government to celebrate the country's bicentennial in 2003. Duval Carrié turned to Jean Louis to create tapestries based on his historical paintings. The pieces originally hung on the outside walls of a government building across from the Presidential Palace. This is the first time they have been displayed in Miami.

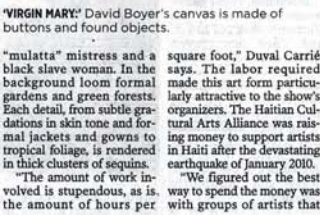
In one, revolutionary hero Toussaint L'Ouverture teeters in a canoe surrounded by crocodiles. Another presents a tableau of typical plantation figures, each labeled in Creole: the French slaveholder; the slave driver; the slaveholder's wife; his



'TOUSSAINT, SON TRESOR A L'ETANG CAIMAN' Crocodiles menace a revolutionary hero in this work by Edgar Jean Louis.



'BABY DOLL': Representation of a vodou scene in a piece from Lherisson Debricce of Kongo la Wouze.



'VIRGIN MARY': David Boyer's canvas is made of buttons and found objects.



'ROMAN A NOIR A SAINT DOMINIQUE' Edgar Jean Louis' work of raw silk, sequins, beads and muslin.

would, in turn, dispense a lot of work," Duval Carrié explains. With the exception of Jean Louis' work, almost all the pieces on display have all been produced since the earthquake.

Artist Myrlande Constant's tapestry *Baron Samedi's Triumph* is even bigger than Jean Louis' pieces by at least a few inches. Made of sequins and glass beads on cloth, it depicts a busy scene drawn from vodou mythology. Baron Samedi, the keeper of the graveyard, is a debauched, hard-drinking character in a top hat and tails, who displays the worse

vices of the old French slaveholders. In Constant's piece, he tramples through a cemetery on a white horse, snapping peasants with his whip.

If you go

What: "Contemporary Haitian Textiles"
When: 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday-Friday; 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday, through June 30
Where: Little Haiti Cultural Center, 212 NE 59th Ter., Miami
Cost: Free
Info: 305-960-2969; www.miamigov.com/LHCulturalcenter

to the traditional flags. Yet he presents the symbols and the sequin work more abstractly. Stripes, which measures 11 by 17 inches, alternates bands of blue and purple against a red cloth. Vodou figures, such as the seductress in *Erzule Freda* and the power twins in *Marassa*, are presented as flattened bodies with dots for eyes and lines for mouths. Rather than pile sequins into dense clusters, Jean Joseph often spaces them out in patterns across the background, topping each sequin with a single glass bead.

Lherisson Debricce and David Boyer, who create under the name Kongo la Wouze, introduce surprising materials into their textiles. In a series of portraits of Baron Samedi, each measuring 50 inches square, a frock coat is rendered in a mass of black and gray buttons, creating the effect of a Gustav Klimt painting. His top hat, monocle and whip have been replaced by a smirk, mirrored eyes and a gheri curl-like coil. Computer circuit boards show up as wings, halo and a cross in *Angel Baby with Cross*, one in a series of pieces by Debricce featuring plastic baby dolls representing vodou scenes. Tin cans make the tail of the *Deadly Siren*. Forks become praying hands in *Virgin Mary*.

Kongo la Wouze's work is dabbed in black, tarnished silver and gray, like industrial detritus coated with gunk as though sequins are too bright for a world in which technology is advancing too fast for symbols and myths to keep pace.

"Now anything is good as long as it's shiny and interesting," Duval Carrié says. "The materials are evolving. God knows what they will use next."

VISUAL ARTS



'BARON SAMEDI'S TRIUMPH': Piece by Myrlande Constant has glass beads and sequins on cloth. Samedi is on horseback in top hat and tails.