

**Kathia ST. HILAIRE**

*L'Officiel,  
A Miami Pilgrimage of the Soul*

*January 2022*

# A Miami Pilgrimage of the Soul

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**L'Officiel had the chance to interview Miami-born Haitian artist Kathia St. Hilaire about her first public art commission, *The Pilgrimage of the Soul*, a 24 x 30 foot mural in Miami's downtown.**

Since graduating last year from Yale's MFA program and winning the YoungArts award, Kathia St. Hilaire has gained attention for a relief painting technique that was developed based on the study of traditional Haitian Vodun flags. Kathia creates mixed-media paintings that mix images of Caribbean seascapes and family gatherings with the ephemera of daily life. The work is premised in Haitian Vodun, which if you aren't familiar, is a religion based on ancestral spirits and patron saints, and served as a form of resistance against the French colonial empire. Imitating traditional Vodun flags, Kathia developed a technique called reduction relief printing

— she starts with a large drawing before transferring it onto a sheet of linoleum, which she then carves out in small sections and prints onto everything from beauty products to tires, until the whole linoleum is carved away.

*L'Officiel: You just unveiled your first public art commission, entitled *The Pilgrimage of the Soul*. Can you tell us about this project?*

*Kathia St. Hilaire:* When I was offered this commission, I constantly thought about the function a mural. The idea that mural painters in Mexico around the 1920's were to create true public art for the people could help distance Mexico from its colonial past. Murals cannot be moved, unlike painting, taperties, therefore cannot be brought and put in private homes. Thinking about the murals I've seen growing up in south florida and brooklyn are used to attract new local business and help bring customers to a preexisting location that might have been unnoticed in certain communities. This project allowed for exploration into the relationships between materials, locations, and cultural processes. The work incorporates materials that are significant to my culture or signify broader themes of labor and migration.

*L'O: This is a 24 x 30 ft piece. How do you craft work in such a large format?*

*KSH:* This work was made out of small 18x24 inches oil based relief prints. I had to do this because I worked out three different studios (Palm Beach, Miami, and New York), this allowed me to put everything in a suitcase. Then each 18x24 inches were sewn together to make a five large piece that were around 8x12 feet. I used different paper, commercial ads, metals, oil paint, fabric to shape the imagery. The seams of the painting was resin and placed on a tarp. I was thankful to have help from Krystal DiFronzo,Katie Miller, Justin Long, Jesus Pedecini, Deborah Lehman Di Capua, Pebble Yaffee, Patrick, Avlon, Carlos, David and Perriton.

*L'O: Your worked has gained attention for a relief painting technique that was developed based on the study of traditional Haitian Vodun flags. Can you tell us a little about this technique?*

*KSH:* My interest in Vodun Flags and retelling my own narrative related to the Haitian diaspora led me to imitate these flags through a printmaking technique called reduction relief printing. Starting with a large drawing that is transferred onto large sheets of linoleum, I meticulously carve out small sections and print on a variety of surfaces like paper, beauty products, industrial metal, fabric or tires. These material choices are aligned with culturally significant references. For each carved layer, I think a lot about the viscosity of printmaking ink, the pressure that is applied on the linoleum, and the objects that I choose to print on. This process creates a shiny-textured dense surface for me to layer with sewing, collaging, carving and weaving processes.

*L'O: What does the visual language of Vodun flags mean to you?*

*KSH:* I see Vodun flags visual language and the history of the Caribbean as mystic. Vodou is a religion that has roots in West African traditional religions and was brought to Haiti by slaves. Europeans saw vodun as devil religion which cause the Haitians to assimilate elements from Europe and the Americas to the religion. After receiving independence, religion continued to be banned, and as the Catholic church undertook a campaign against Vodou, ransacked temples and burned religious artifacts. Many of the techniques of sacred art have now been forgotten but since the 1950s there has been growing demand for Vodun art by tourists and collectors. This is why I am drawn to these flag, not only because of the craftsmanship but also because complex history of erasure and permanence.

*L'O: A lot of your works draw references to angels and the divine, the spiritual world. What does your own religious or spiritual path look like?*

*KSH: This is a hard question for me to answer. I would say I am a very spiritual person and do believe in a higher power. I had always been interested in the intersection of Christianity, Catholicism, Vodun and how it relates to Caribbean culture. Many European, Haitian, revolutionary, and spirits have become syncretized.*

*L'O: You grew up in a predominantly Caribbean and African American neighborhood in South Florida, how has this influenced your work?*

*KSH: Growing up in an area like this opened my eyes to different Black subcultures and made me understand commonalities and differences we share. There was an emphasis to create an identity that can assimilate in various parts of American culture. Often my family and the community I lived in invested a lot of money into beauty supplies. Using skin lightening creams, relaxers and different hair products allowed you to remove stereotypes that people place on you. Looking back this experience made me realize how race is surface level and the materials we engage with form our society. This is why I am invested in using commodity-based materials because of its abilities to talk about current and past issues.*

*L'O: You were also making work for the booth of Perrotin gallery at Art Basel. What work did you intend to show?*

*KSH: I intended to show a painting based on Clément Barbot, the top aide to Haitian President François Duvalier and was first leader of the Tonton Macoute.*

*L'O: How and when did you meet Emmanuel Perrotin?*

*KSH: I haven't met Emmanuel Perrotin in person yet, but Yale MFA had our thesis show on Perrotin's online viewing room during the start of the pandemic. From there, the gallery stayed in touch with me and has been very supportive of my experimental practice.*

*L'O: When did you begin artmaking and when did your career really kick off?*

*KSH: I come from a family who are craftsmen and musicians, so I was studying drawing, painting, printmaking, and ceramics at a young age. And did not start pursuing printmaking seriously till I got to high school. I would have to say my career started when I worked with Derek Eller while attending Yale's MFA program. He was the first gallery I have worked with and was truly understanding of my experimentation as an artist.*

*L'O: What are your upcoming projects?*

*KSH: Currently I am taking a break because 2021 was a hectic year for me. I plan to work on a series of hurricane paintings, creating water base prints and creating sculpture.*

Kathia St. Hilaire, *The Pilgrimage of the Soul* (2021)

24-foot by 30-foot painting-mural

On view 148 East Flagler St. until Nov, 2022

For more information: @kathiast.hilaire

Image courtesy of Kathia St. Hilaire, Fringe Projects, and Perrotin; photography by Zack Balber

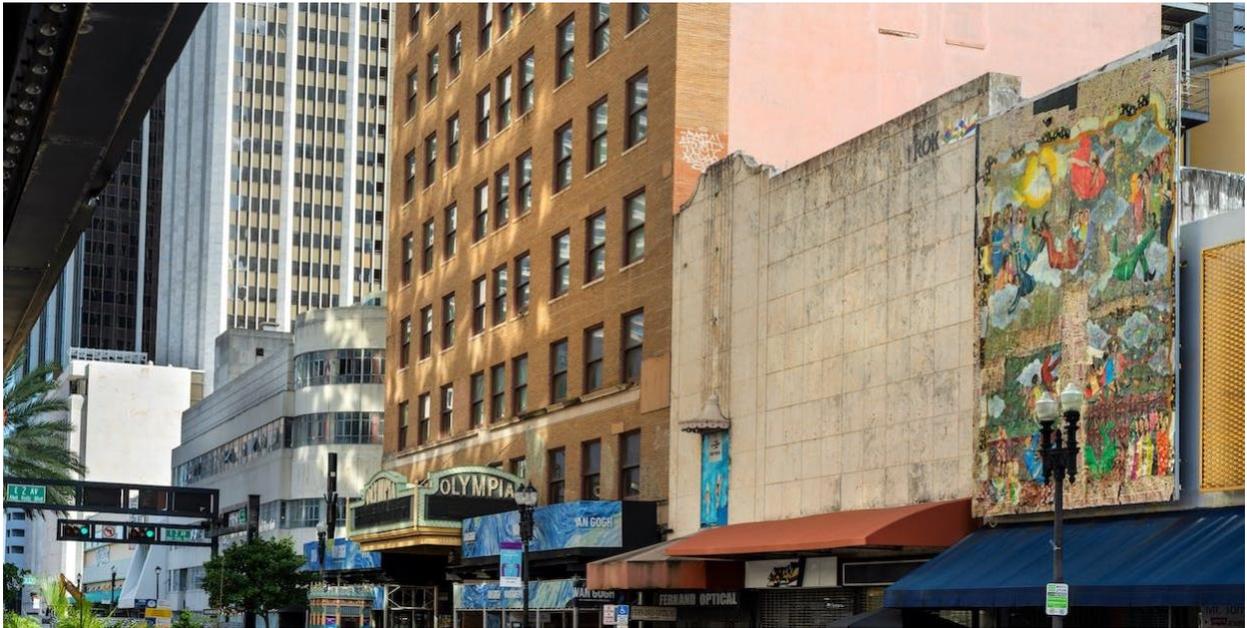


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