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Kathia St Hilaire

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Kathia St. Hilaire's work holds many secrets, embedded within compressed layers of sediment hidden beneath its surfaces. In fact, describing her practice simply as painting would miss the point: her work exists primarily in its thickness — within its flesh — transforming each piece into a three-dimensional installation.

Working from a printmaking practice, St. Hilaire produces vibrant works through an innovative reduction engraving technique inspired by French Impressionism, combined with collage and weaving. Beneath the surface, her pieces are composed of dense assemblages of paint, wire, and found materials, printed onto unlikely and heterogeneous supports. This wide range of mediums includes remnants of other artworks, shredded tires, torn banknotes, sugarcane bagasse, banana leaves, oil prints, textiles, metal, glue, pigments, thread, and even packaging from skin-lightening creams. The result is bright, intense, and visually seductive. Rich in detail, the works invite deep contemplation of their material complexity. Yet the stories St. Hilaire tells are far less joyful than they first appear. In one piece, a scene resembling the execution of three Black men emerges — likely resistance fighters under the authoritarian regime of François “Papa Doc” Duvalier, who ruled Haiti with an iron fist for nearly three decades before passing power to his son, Jean-Claude “Baby Doc” Duvalier.

We met Kathia St. Hilaire at Perrotin, where she is currently presenting *The Vocals of the Chaotic Burst*, a new exhibition whose works, like her previous ones, draw inspiration from Haitian writer Frankétienne, founder of the literary movement *Spiralisme*.

Fabrice Tayeau So I thought it would be nice to do the interview while moving through the space, so we can react to things organically.

Kathia St Hilaire Sure !

Fabrice The first thing I'm very curious about in your work is that every piece of imagery you create seems to be part of a much wider frame. I see that especially with the spiral one that isn't presented today.

Kathia Oh yeah, the circle.

Fabrice Yeah, exactly. For me, it's kind of obvious that the painting tries to emancipate itself from the frame.

Kathia When I did that big Hurricanes piece, it was a time when I didn't want any type of rectangle, not because I have anything against it but sometimes I just create challenges for myself. For this current show, I came back to square because it's easier for the registration system. When I do prints, everything is made in sections, for example, 19-by-25-inch panels. I create registration marks on all four sides so I can align everything efficiently.

Fabrice But what I find interesting is that even when it is square, there are no sharp limits to the edges, they're left very raw. It feels like you could create thousands of them and assemble them into the larger fresco they seem to belong to.

Kathia One hundred percent. When I was a printmaker, before showing professionally, this work would have become five different works. I would have kept it for years and kept working on top of it. There wouldn't have been a final step as I would still be experimenting on it. For me to be happy with the work, I need to make sure I could re-use it. Also, I need it to be very mobile. I want to be able to restart my practice wherever I go, let's say Paris. I can fold this, or take everything apart and reassemble it again. Back when I lived in Miami, I used to go back and forth to New York all the time, and I would have to put everything in a suitcase.

Fabrice It's interesting that your art is travel-ready.

Kathia It had to be.

Fabrice It resonates so much with what's in the image, which is often a story of migration. Even in its material reality, your work echoes this psyche of being ready to leave your place at any time if required.

Kathia I've thought about it. I've been blessed to always have a stable place to live. But it's always hard when you don't have a stable place to work. So it makes it very convenient to be able to put everything in a suitcase and constantly restart, or create a new starting point wherever you are.

Fabrice And the fact that your work often portrays the story of Haitian people, or the Haitian diaspora, and more broadly, the history of Black people, their travels, their migrations, and the political and social issues that flow from colonialism, slavery, and imperialism. As mentioned earlier, each work seems to be a fragment of a wider fresco yet to be completed. That resonates with the lack of archives in the history we're talking about. Many things haven't been written or documented, and a large part of addressing this history is about filling the void, even through fiction. I kind of recognize that in your work.

Kathia That was especially true for my first show at Perrotin, Mounting Spirits, Resisting Empire, which I did in 2024. I essentially had no archive to talk about the interventions that happened in the 1920s. But what made THIS show special is that I did have a lot of archives, even though the regime of Papa Doc was very hush-hush. So there wasn't a need to fictionalized. It was more about this idea of how one deals with something they can't really share with others. When you think about that kind of political regime, the kind Papa Doc installs, where everything and everyone had to be monitored for one man to stay in power, it shapes the psyche of the people who lived through it. There are parts of what happened that

people will acknowledge, and other parts they won't, because they don't want to get in trouble. I think Frankétienne explores that so well in his books through Spiralism. If you read *Ready to Burst* you're always wondering why the main character, Raynand, is constantly being beaten up randomly. Then you realize: "oh, it's the secret police monitoring him."

Fabrice There's also something almost cubist in the way the different stories you represent are placed within a non-linear time and space continuum. It relates to Frankétienne's Spiralism, where everything is a glimpse from within a turmoil. A painting of a scene that happened under Papa Doc's regime resonates with one portraying the contemporary day-to-day experience of someone from the diaspora. I find it interesting how you distance yourself from a purely subjective experience of time and space in order to create a web of stories that is still under construction.

Kathia Yes, absolutely. Like for *Ready to Burst*, for example, I feel that if Frank were alive today, he would honestly continue it. The way things constantly continue was something I really wanted to echo. For my work, I looked at different types of migration photographs, because people often see migration as something mainly happening right now in America or Europe. But honestly, immigration has always been an issue since the beginning of any country. People will always move if there are better opportunities for a better life.

Fabrice And it's hard not to see how it resonates with our time. We've just had a very blunt example of the scale U.S. imperialism can take, with what just happened in Venezuela, or the way migrants are criminalized, either in Europe or in the U.S., in such a violent way, especially with everything happening with ICE, for example.

Kathia Yeah, I've always been obsessed with places like Guantánamo Bay. It was such a major topic during the War on Terror in the early 2000s, and then it turned into a detention center for immigrants.

Fabrice What I find very interesting in your work is that, if you don't pay attention, the images can appear very peaceful. For example, these two guys over there, it's so colorful, so sunny, with these golden touches. There's even a bird. At first glance, it feels cheerful. And then you realize it's an execution pit. The line created by the folded fabric of the canvas figures the pit, and these people are about to be murdered.

You use many tools to abstract elements that might otherwise give too many clues to the viewers. So it allows them to immerse themselves in the image and, in a way, tell their own story, to fill the void themselves.



Kathia That brightness goes back to why I add certain materials, things you can find in a beauty supply store, even creams, and use them as ingredients woven into the painting, or embed text within the work. I know how avoidant people can be. They don't really want to talk about what's going on because sometimes they just can't. And it's interesting to see what people can excavate from a painting. I love going to museums and looking very closely at surfaces. I'm obsessed with noticing little details I hadn't seen before, it makes me so happy. So with these paintings, I wanted to create moments where you can spend hours looking at the painting, discovering different elements, activating the work for yourself, and finding new meanings or connections. Some people, when they see these weavings, for example, think about Celtic patterns or about Jacquard textiles. And I like that you don't have to come from a Black or Caribbean background to understand what's happening. If you have an appreciation for materials, the work can resonate with you.

Fabrice Yes, that's exactly what I was thinking, that you give your work a universal dimension by abstracting certain details. For example, you don't explicitly paint Black skin, even though you're portraying black people. I spent a long time looking closely at the details of the painting, just like you described it. I was amazed by how many colors and textures there are, like some matte, some glittery, some very vibrant... while depicting people who seem to be entrapped with barbed wire cables. There's a tension in your work that is quite showstopping. As a viewer, you need to figure out what it's really telling you. Is that something you enjoy exploring?

Kathia Yes! I'm obsessed with Vodou flags and French Impressionism. I didn't know how to merge the two, but I felt they were connected somehow. But since I'm not a practitioner of the religion, I didn't want to make actual Vodou flags. And there are so many artists, especially practitioners, who already bring so much to that tradition. So I thought, I'm a printmaker. Let me

figure out how to approach it through my own language of printmaking. And honestly, I hate painting. Painting is the thing I do the least in my studio. Everything is process-based or involves some kind of printing. I rarely even like holding a paint brush. I have very few paintbrushes. So I'll use a Dremel, for example, and excavate down into the surface, then lightly paint over it to get the color. And then it's just multiple layers of printing. Originally, we printed these (she points) in acrylic, about 20 layers on the press, then another 20 to 30 layers of oil. Then it's sanded down, and everything melts together, creating these different textures. And of course, they're done in sections because they have to fit into the press. This is basically the size of the press bed (she gestures with her hands).

Fabrice And your support is so compacted. All these layers you're mentioning create thickness which allows you to create within the material, not just on top of the surface, if I'm correct.

Kathia Yes.

Fabrice And this idea of compacting everything, the paint, the wires, the cosmetic products, it feels physically syncretic. All the stories that are present figuratively are also present materially. They become the flesh of the painting.

Kathia I'm super obsessed with flesh. I've had family members who went through terrible processes trying to change their skin, using all kinds of creams, and it damaged them. And then there's the fact that Papa Doc was called that because he was a doctor. He started as a doctor treating skin diseases, little bumps that could morph someone's skin to the point where they might lose a limb. Skin was always something very important to me growing up. I've seen people be very particular about the skin color they wanted their children to have.

Fabrice I love this connection you're making between Vodou flags and Impressionism.

Kathia My mom had a whole collection of French Jacquard textiles, so I was already enamored with fringe patterns and learning relief printing. At the time, I didn't even realize there was this whole Haitian art tradition I could look at. It was only later, when I came to the Rhode Island School of Design, that I encountered these amazing traditional works that were actually contemporary.

A lot of the time, when people talk about African art or Caribbean art, it's placed in its own separate category. But I felt it work could be considered contemporary, and in fact, it was contemporary at some point, yet it wasn't appreciated as such. Even in the 1950s, you had artists like Pollock, or later Basquiat, being labeled contemporary. But someone like Philomé Obin, for example, would be placed in a separate category and wouldn't receive the same kind of critical recognition.

From my experience, African art is often studied from a historical perspective, rather than through a critical lens.

Personally, I love the idea of craft. I always knew I wanted craft to remain central to my work. Even if I didn't express myself through traditional painting, I wanted to merge these influences because, in Haiti, craft and art are deeply connected through making.

When I discovered Vodou flags, I became obsessed — because I could imagine them hanging next to a Renoir.

Image courtesy of Galerie Perrotin