



*Caco*: Benoit Batrville, 2023. Oil-based relief on canvas collage with skin-lightening cream, steel, aluminum, bank notes, banana stickers, silkscreen, and tires. 64 x 54 inch. Photographer: Guillaume Ziccarelli. Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin.

## KATHIA ST. HILAIRE

### *MOUNTING SPIRITS, RESISTING EMPIRE*

January 12 — February 17, 2024

Perrotin is pleased to present *Mounting Spirits, Resisting Empire*, the gallery's first exhibition by Haitian-American artist Kathia St. Hilaire. In her new body of textile works, the artist will explore the history of the Banana Wars in Central America and the Caribbean in the early 1900s. Employing an innovative reduction relief printmaking process, and incorporating nontraditional materials, she creates ornate tapestries that seek to preserve Haitian history and Vodun religion.

There is a particular form of sensory consciousness present in Kathia St. Hilaire's work that demands focused attention because she embeds it with personal, historical, and sociopolitical experience. Her marvelous content offers an artistic language and world-making process that is complicated and richly imbued with visions that not only express a wide range of human emotions but are essentially and autonomously framed by her conceptual representations of the world of her ancestors, primarily those deriving from Haiti. Her artistic evolution is marked by a distinctive fusion of cultural influences and a profound exploration of identity, humanism, and social justice.

One cannot appreciate St. Hilaire's work solely for its beauty, as beauty conveys only a particular aesthetic. Aesthetic qualities don't necessarily unveil truths, and truth, in turn, exposes events that cannot remain hidden.

St. Hilaire's art actively challenges historical concealment, exemplified in the *Caco* series, which depict three prominent Haitian leaders of the Caco movement (Batrville, Péralte, Bobo) who led the peasant-based resistance against the violent U.S. occupation of Haiti (1915-1934) and were eventually killed by the United States Marines. To this day, Charlemagne Péralte remains synonymous to anti-U.S. imperialism. St. Hilaire's practice echoes German philosopher Martin Heidegger's (1889-1976) concept of art: barring aesthetics, the veritable essence of art lies in its capacity to express and expose truths. Through multiple canvases and panels, St. Hilaire not only reveals historical events but also incorporates her aesthetic signature, providing us with the opportunity to explore her world-making processes in a fundamentally different and insightful manner, through her use of color, materiality, and history.

St. Hilaire's remarkable paintings are a testament to her skillful use of color and texture. Her canvases feature vibrant colors, bank notes, skin-lightening creams, and intricate patterns that draw the viewer into a world of sensory depth. Her color palette seems carefully chosen to evoke emotion and arouse the senses toward an elevated consciousness. Bold, rich hues intermingle with soft, subtle tones, creating a visual experience that is both dynamic and harmonious. There is no timidity nor coquetry in her work. This careful selection of colors not only enhances



David, 2022. Collage with studio scraps: oil-based prints, tires, resin, banana leaves, fabric, metal, paper, rabbit skin glue, pigment, and thread. 9 × 12 ft. Photographer: Guillaume Ziccarelli. Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin.



Caco: Charlemagne Péralte, 2023. Oil-based relief on canvas collage with skin-lightening cream, steel, aluminum, bank notes, banana stickers, silkscreen, and tires. 55 × 64 inch. Photographer: Guillaume Ziccarelli. Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin.

the aesthetic appeal of her art, but also conveys the depth and complexity of the ideas she explores. St. Hilaire's mastery of texture is another defining feature of her work. She employs various techniques, including impasto and layering to create depth and tactile qualities in her pieces. The interplay of texture and color in St. Hilaire's practice mirrors the multifaceted nature of volatile human experiences that she seeks to capture and re-configure.

St. Hilaire's visual elements are not just aesthetic choices; they carry deep cultural significance, reflecting her Haitian roots and colonial remnants. Through her paintings, St. Hilaire explores the complexities of identity, the immigrant experience, the machination of imperialism, and her cultural hybridity as a Haitian-American or American-Haitian. She is both an outsider and an insider with a strong grasp on artistic expression. Her work juxtaposes themes of conquest, cultural suppression, and labor exploitation with imagery that challenges stereotypes and preconceived notions about race, gender, ethnicity, and power relations. As Martin Heidegger asserts, the "truth is inherent in the essence." St. Hilaire's hyphenated cultural identity as a Haitian-American is characterized by a history of struggle, freedom, autonomy, and liberation from the harsh chains of colonial slavery. It also involves the worship of non-European ancestral deities, such as Ogoun, the West African spirit-warrior. In one of St. Hilaire's works, *Caco: Benoit Batraverse*, Ogoun is depicted as a revolutionary peasant with a red scarf tied to his left thigh, riding a horse, and spearing a uniformed adversary on a white horse. This powerful representation encapsulates the essence of her cultural being.

History creates the habitat within Kathia St. Hilaire's mind. It is from here that she articulates the past via aesthetically pleasing representations. Imitating, and yet going beyond the aesthetic of the traditional Vodun flags, St. Hilaire 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. Her materials are vast, including those that either echo history (shredded tires, banknotes, coins, photographs, banana leaves,

scrap metal, and aluminum) or portray the emotional toll of certain legacies of colonialism (the use of skin-lightening cream). The pathbreaking and influential American philosopher, Susanne K. Langer (1898-1985), says, "Complete artistic success would be complete articulation of an idea...and the effect would be a perfect livingness of the work." The livingness of St. Hilaire's work brings history alive through a quasi-magical realism intersected by a figurative materialism.

Through her art, St. Hilaire invites viewers to question their assumptions and engage in meaningful conversation about the world we inhabit. St. Hilaire's work is a testament to the transformative power of art and its potential ability to inspire change and empathy in society. Susanne K. Langer poignantly indicates, "The life of art is a 'life' of forms, or even of space itself". Kathia St. Hilaire's *framing* of certain historical events through visual representation becomes a form of un-silencing—via recognizable artistic forms—which reveals a new life form (See *the painting entitled Mamita Yunai, for instance*).

St. Hilaire's art is inherently anti-imperialist, as she challenges the dominant narratives that have long glorified empire while silencing the voices of those who suffered under their rule. Her visual creations serve as a vivid and compelling counter-narrative, uncovering the concealed and untold histories of resistance and hardship that are often overlooked in the glossy, sanitized accounts of imperial rule. Her approach serves as a form of optical resistance against the sanitized, often mythologized, versions of history perpetuated by imperial power resonating with the global struggle for justice and decolonization. Her art serves as a catalyst for empathy, a catalyst for reconsidering the past's prevailing narratives, and ultimately, a means to forge a more equitable and inclusive future. St. Hilaire's exploration transcends artistic boundaries, sparking conversations that challenge, inspire, and enlighten.

— Dr. Patrick Sylvain

**[More information about the artist >>>](#)**