

**Waters of the Abyss:
An Intersection of Spirit
and Freedom**

Large Print Labels

Hostetter Gallery

Haitian artist Fabiola Jean-Louis confronts a profound question: What lies at the heart of Black freedom? Her artwork explores the cultural and spiritual underpinnings of Haiti's history. Its revolution (1791–1804) ended violent French colonial rule and established the first free Black nation in the Americas. Vodou played a transformative role. Jean-Louis's work centers this religion that, created by the enslaved people of Haiti, combines West African, Indigenous Caribbean, and Christian ritual practices.

Jean-Louis turns paper into relic-like sculptures that guide us through her personal journey, reconnecting with Haitian spirituality as a path toward freedom. Inspired by Vodou imagery and practice, the vessels, mirrors, mermaids, and spirit figures in this gallery collapse time. They open channels between our mortal world and the metaphysical dimensions of reality beyond ordinary perception. As an Artist-in-Residence at the Gardner Museum, Jean-Louis also drew inspiration from Isabella Stewart Gardner's immersive installations of sacred objects and altars.

Waters of the Abyss begins outside on the Anne H. Fitzpatrick Façade with the revolutionary rallying cry *Ayiti-Tomè*, translated as “from now onwards this land is our land.” It continues in the Fenway Gallery of the Palace, where Jean-Louis reflects on her own biography and imagines herself as both a present and future ancestor. The journey culminates in this gallery, evoking an ancient realm of Haitian spirits.

Paper Alchemy

This space with objects housed in niches recalls a columbarium, a reverential structure for memorializing the dead. Jean-Louis has set the stage for us to quietly remember her Haitian ancestors. For the living, it is a place of love and devotion, offering a space to reflect on our common humanity and past lives.

All the works in this room—and throughout the exhibition—are made principally with papier-mâché. Paper is sacred for Jean-Louis. Paper documents, from birth certificates to public records, build worlds and form identities. Jean-Louis merges paper with materials that reflect light, like shells, sand, gold, and crystals, to call to ancestors.

Paper, as a symbol of identity and proof of existence, allows me to rebuild, to reframe old narratives, and to engage in acts of repair.

Papye, kòm yon senbòl idantite ak prèv egzistans, pèmèt mwen rebati, refòmile

**ansyen kont yo, epi angaje m nan repara
sa ki te pase. —Fabiola Jean-Louis**

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Throughout the exhibition, Jean-Louis's words are translated into Kreyòl (Haitian Creole). Jean-Louis is actively expanding her use of Kreyòl as part of her journey of reconnecting with Haitian culture.

[For objects in the niches please see laminate nearby.]



Out of Obsidian

2024

Obsidian, 23K gold, paper



Peregrine

2024

Papier-mâché, crystal,
natural sea sponge, stone

These two papier-mâché busts welcome us into the room. In **Out of Obsidian**, on the left, flowers burst through hard rock. The angel-bird Peregrine, on the right, takes flight from a mountain perch near a cascading waterfall and blooming tree. They are both self-portraits of Jean-Louis, whose face and body appear to merge with and absorb new life and energy from Haiti's mountainous landscape.

Water

In Vodou, spirits reside in the waters of the abyss. This place is the source of life, cosmic memory, and wisdom. Vodou practice opens a gateway to this invisible world.

Jean-Louis sees the sculptures in this room as portals. They are a crossroads where the spirit and human worlds intersect, and where the wisdom of the past and the possibility of the future collide. Vodou spirits respond to light, so Jean-Louis decorates these objects with materials that reflect light like water.

The waters around the island of Haiti are populated with the spirits of enslaved people who died there. Connecting with those ancestors and the **lwa**, or angels of the spiritual realm, can shape and inform visions of a more liberated and beautiful future.

We think about portals as a means to jump to another place, another place that's different from where we are.

Lè nou panse ak pòtay nou wè yon fason pou w janbe al nan yon lòt plas, yon lòt plas ki diferan de kote nou ye a. —Fabiola Jean-Louis



An Entry Point to Heaven #1

2024

Papier-mâché, shells, crystals, glass, resin, copper



An Entry Point to Heaven #4

2024

Papier-mâché, shells

These sculptures imagine rock cities carved into the side of a Haitian mountain or an underwater cave. Jean-Louis presents the island as an ancient civilization, inspired by stone ruins across global cultures. She writes a new history, calling attention to centuries of nobility, creativity, and energy of Haitian culture. As portals for time travel, these sculptures can open gateways between an imagined past and a future that looks like heaven.



Amphora Vessels (a pair)

2024

Papier-mâché, cardboard, wire, driftwood, crushed glass, pearls, golden highlights



Lwa

2021-22

Papier-mâché with painted surfaces and applied abalone shells, glass, crystal, metal, and other mixed media

This central **Lwa** combines many different spirits into one towering figure. With a golden crown and crystals radiating from a heart space, the sculpture makes harmony from contrast and difference: softness and power, water and stone, luminous light and solid mass. This warrior angel meditates with closed eyes and gently holds out a sword with the phrase **pran tèt** (take heads), inviting us to take up the torch for freedom.



**An Entry Point to
Heaven #3**

2024

Papier-mâché, crystals,
coral



**An Entry Point to
Heaven #2**

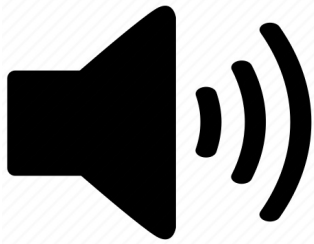
2024

Papier-mâché, shells,
crystals, glass, resin,
natural sea sponge

The ocean is the mirror to the sky and the heavens. When I talk about the ocean, I am talking about heaven as well. They are the yin and the yang, or perhaps the same thing.

Lanmè a se reflè syèl la ak paradi a. Lè mwen pale de lanmè a, m ap pale de paradi a tou. Yo tankou yin ak yang, oswa petèt menm bagay la. —Fabiola Jean-Louis

These two sculptures of underwater realms seem to arise from mountainous cliffs and volcanic craters of Haiti. They are meditating pools of water inviting us to rest, regenerate, and reflect. For Jean-Louis, the pathway to heaven—transcendence, freedom, collective awakening—is an inner journey of enlightenment with moments of deep self-reflection and personal growth.



Ginen Zansèt (Ancestors of Ginen)

Ginen is the ancestral homeland in Haitian Vodou, symbolizing a connection to African roots

Sound concept by Carl Damas and Fabiola Jean-Louis

Sound design by Carl Damas

The sound in this gallery combines ocean waves, bells, windchimes, and a conch shell horn. Each element taps into spiritual and emotional echoes: the eternal rhythm of nature, the centering of spirit, and the awe of immersing in the present moment—the **now**, alive with shimmering variations and infinite possibility.

Tune into the sound. You might try breathing in and out alongside the cycles and rhythms

you receive. Some sounds may be familiar and comforting, others may be eerie or startling.

What do you notice around you? What do you notice inside you? Are you able to quiet the mind?

Freedom

A Vodou ceremony was the catalyst for the Haitian Revolution, which overthrew French colonial rule and abolished slavery. The island's inhumane and violent sugar plantation system caused the death of hundreds of thousands of enslaved Africans. That changed one August night in 1791, when hundreds of enslaved people gathered to call on all the spirits to advise and inspire a movement for freedom. For them, as for Jean-Louis, the liberation of the physical world depended on communicating with the spirits.

In Jean-Louis's spiritual framework, time-traveling, shape-shifting spirits are summoned to serve the global pursuits of Black freedom. The works in this gallery reflect Jean-Louis's belief in the power of art to heal, inspire, and bring about meaningful change.

When Black people pay attention to where we actually come from and the

things that spiritually inspire and guide us, we are a stronger people. We can overcome and we will overcome.

Lè pèp Nwa a reflechi ak kote nou soti toutbon ak tout sa lespri yo enspire nou epi gide nou, nou vin yon pèp ki pi solid. Nou ka genyen e nap genyen. —Fabiola Jean-Louis



Celestial Portal

2024

Papier-mâché, shells,
crystals, glass, resin,
smokey crystal quartz,
brass



Mermaid Portals (a pair)

2024

Papier-mâché, shells,
crystals, mirror

In Vodou there is really no such thing as good or bad; it is up to the practitioner who uses it.

**Nan Vodou pa gen afè bon oswa pa bon;
sa depan de moun k ap pratike l la.**

—Fabiola Jean-Louis

This **Celestial Portal** and the two **Mermaid Portals** in the middle of the gallery seem to have emerged from the sea. Resplendent with shells, they look like coral formations shimmering under water.

In Vodou, the mermaid is a **lwa** named La Sirene, who can be a beautiful and joyful enchantress or a figure of vengeance and violent justice. La Sirene, like many **lwa**, responds to the needs and purposes of the practitioner. Jean-Louis placed a mirror in one mermaid portal, suggesting that “the only way to get to that other place is to look at yourself, is to go through yourself” (“sèl fason pou w al nan lòt plas sa a se lè w gade tèt ou, se lè w pase atravè tèt ou”), while the other mermaid offers a lens to the world beyond us. Where might your own self-reflection lead you?

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Fenway Gallery

This gallery features the work of Gardner Artist-in-Residence Fabiola Jean-Louis, a Haitian artist working in paper, textile design, and sculpture. Here she tells a personal story of connecting with her own Haitian culture. She reckons with her Catholic upbringing and investigates her relationship to Vodou, a Haitian religion created by enslaved people that combines West African, Indigenous Caribbean, and Christian practices.

Research is crucial to Jean-Louis's self-taught practice of making. She creates objects that travel backward and forward in time, connecting her own biography to a larger sense of history and ancestors. She says, "There is something about how we understand the present and even the future when we go back in time" ("Gen yon bagay nan fason nou konprann prezan an e menm lavni lè nou tounen nan sa ki te pase"). The paintings and paper dresses look to the past to assert power for Black women now.

As an Artist-in-Residence, Jean-Louis was drawn to the way Isabella Stewart Gardner installed sacred objects and altars throughout

the Museum. Both women invite us to engage with art, spirituality, and history on our own terms.

It evokes all the things that the ego is attached to, all the pieces of culture and tradition that shape what a person is like. ... These connections with ancestors and the Iwa [spirits] of the spiritual realm, combined with an understanding of oneself as a future ancestor, shape and inform visions of a more liberated and beautiful future.

Li pale de tout bagay ki atache ak fyète a, tout moso kilti ak tradisyon ki fè yon moun vin sa li ye a. ... Koneksyon sa yo ak zansèt yo ak Iwa yo [espri yo] nan monn espartyèl la, melanje ak yon konpreyansyon de tèt ou antanke yon moun ki pral vin zansèt alavni, fasonnen epi eklere vizyon pou lavni sou yon fòm ki libere e ki bèl. —Fabiola Jean-Louis

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Vèvè II
2024
Papier-mâché



All That Was and Nevermore

2024

Papier-mâché, paint on paper, crystals, resin enamel, sequins, beads, mixed media decorations, and Haitian Vodou flags

Jean-Louis quietly meditates on her past and how it has shaped her sense of self. A vignette on the right depicts her marrying a man on horseback in a Christian ceremony. To her left, three of her children look beyond frames, dressed in the style of privileged women and men living at the time of the Haitian Revolution.

Joyful and belligerent spirits populate the Haitian landscape that surrounds Jean-Louis. Above are two **drapo**, sequined ceremonial flags that salute the spirits and energize their devotees during ceremonies. The painting's frame resembles a tombstone, recalling a past when spirits worked in harmony with the elements, celebrating the universe in the starlit sky above.



Paradise Lost

2024

Paper, acrylic, resin,
papier-mâché, 23K gold

Atonement **was about my personal connection with God and the reclamation of my Black ancestral, spiritual identity.**

Atonement **se te koneksyon pèsonèl mwen ak Bondye epi reklamasyon identite ak rasin spirityel zanset Nwa mwen yo.** —
Fabiola Jean-Louis

Jean-Louis wore this period dress in a single photograph (below), for a self-portrait series called **Atonement** that remains unfinished. At that time, Jean-Louis was reflecting on the immeasurable losses inflicted on the enslaved, such as losing the right to honor ancestors with song and dance and replacing African-centered spiritual practices with

Christian rituals. It evokes impermanence, fear, guilt, and her years in Catholic school, which distanced her from the Vodou practices of her ancestors.



Paradise Lost
2020
Photograph



Justice of Ezili

2021

Papier-mâché, gold, crystals, lapis lazuli, labradorite, brass, ink, and resin

Commissioned by The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2021

Courtesy of Diane Dickensheid & Victoria Sanders Collection

We cannot change the past, [but] we can act to change the present as we activate the memories, visions, and legacies of our ancestors.

Nou pa ka chanje sa ki pase, [men] nou ka aji pou chanje prezan an lè nou aktive memwa yo, vizyon yo, ak eritaj zansèt nou yo.

—Fabiola Jean-Louis

Jean-Louis's adaptation of a 1700s corset dress features a gilded brooch at the neck portraying Ezili Dantor, the Vodou **lwa** (spirit) of vengeance, justice, and motherhood.

Ezili Dantor was one of the spirits who helped inspire and guide Black enslaved people during the Haitian Revolution (1791–1804), which overthrew French colonial rule, abolished slavery, and created the first independent Black republic.

The assertive wearer of this regal and ornate dress pushes against racialized expectations of the past and forges a new path in the present. She wears the mosaic on her back like armor.



The Avatar Knows

2024

Watercolor, acrylic, and
pencil on paper

It takes a lifetime, I think, to know oneself—the avatar anyway—and to understand all the things contained in your person ... there are many times when some pieces don't quite fit but they are all a part of me. I want to understand better how those experiences have shaped me into the form I present to the world.

Sa ka dire tout lavi, mwen panse, pou w rive konn tèt ou—imaj la antouka—epi pou w konprann tout bagay ki gen lakay ou ... ap gen anpil fwa moso yo pap kole men yo tout fè pati moun mwen ye a. Mwen vle konprann fason eksperyans sa yo fasonem nan fòm mwen prezante bay

monn nan. —Fabiola Jean-Louis

Jean-Louis's eyes are open in this self-portrait. She sees a vision of the universe where Vodou spirits are in harmony with her. Dambala, the snake **lwa** (spirit) associated with ancient wisdom and creative potency, glides around Jean-Louis's shoulder. Above, a female spirit holds a child—an icon that combines a Christian Black Madonna holding baby Jesus with the **lwa** Ezili Dantor, protector of mothers and children. Jean-Louis presents herself as a future ancestor, at peace with Haitian spiritual inheritance.

Ezili's Command: By Ursa and Orion's Light
2025

Coffee-stained hot press cotton paper, watercolor,
pencil, ink, gold leaf, 24K

The Alchemy of Belief

2025

Coffee-stained hot press cotton paper, watercolor,
pencil, ink, gold leaf, 24K

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Anne H. Fitzpatrick Façade

Fabiola Jean-Louis

Ayiti-Tomè

2025

Digital Composite Vinyl

Haitian artist Fabiola Jean-Louis merges different source material into one image. She combines photographs of recent visits to Haiti—the fertile red soil of its mountains, the rural burial sites—with early versions of sculptures now on view inside the Museum.

Jean-Louis tells us, “I aim to capture the essence of unity in diversity—a visual testament to the complex tapestry of Haitian culture and history. [It is] also a personal journey of understanding and connecting with the profound spirit of its people” (“Mwen vize pou m kaptire sa ki esansyèl nan divèsite a—yon prèv moun ka wè konsènan tout sa ki genyen nan kilti ak istwa Ayisyèn nan. Epi tou [li se] yon pakou pèsonèl nan konprann epi konekte ak lespri pwofon pèp la”).

The title **Ayiti-Tomè** means “from now onwards this land is our land” in Fon, a language spoken by the African enslaved

people who won independence from France in the Haitian Revolution (1791–1804).

The Anne H. Fitzpatrick Façade on Evans Way has been dedicated to commissioning and rotating new site-specific works since 2012. The fabric scrim serves as an outdoor canvas that extends the gallery space beyond the Museum's interior walls and serves as public art in the city of Boston. The Artist-in-Residence program is directed by Pieranna Cavalchini, **Tom and Lisa Blumenthal Curator of Contemporary Art**, and is supported by the Barbara Lee Program Fund and Lizbeth and George Krupp.