



Leonardo Benzant: Artist Statement

My practice is driven by my connection to the trans African-Atlantic diaspora. I recognize both my ties and disjunction from an ancestral past by considering the possibilities of genetic imprints, cultural identification, innate and intuitive beliefs and a conscious seeking of links that reveal continuities that are hidden or largely unsuspected by the mainstream. I imagine myself as an Urban Shaman exploring both my familiar visible world and the hidden dimensions of other realms that lurk beneath the surface of daily life. The sense of personal cosmology in my practice grows from both experiencing and observing the details of everyday life and ritual. Artworks emerge out of the crossroads of life, history, memory and imagination, a place between that suggest multiple layers of meaning. Inspiration is derived, in part, from the various modes of communication that I have studied and encountered in African-derived rituals.

My work includes painting, performance, sculpture, sound, and installation. I work from the inside out relying on intuitive decision-making and a commitment to investigating deeply personal experiences of identity, ancestry, family, community and spirituality. Information is drawn from the uniquely shared history of code switching, double-consciousness and multiple narratives that people of African descent have inherited and are compelled to adopt as a survival strategy for daily life. Like this common experience my work straddles two worlds. The art that I make does not exist solely within a Western art frame but embodies the dynamics of being both sacred and secular. At the same time I consistently look at western art historical constructions, modalities of thought and contemporary discourse to inform my practice while centering my work in community practices and rituals, drawing personal inspiration from the spirit and the oral traditions of the African ancestors that came across the Atlantic Ocean during the middle passage slave trade.

Currently, I am developing two related but distinct series. Afrosupernatural: Entities And Archetypes, a cycle of works on paper and relief-sculpture-paintings on wood panels that emerged from a series of works on paper, by the same name, conceived, during my Galveston Artist Residency in Texas. After completing my residency, and returning home (Queens, New York) with my wife, after a 6-day road-trip, I had new insights and began to revise my concepts and visual strategies. I'm planning to conflate the visual vocabulary of my works on paper with the language and materials of my sculptures. I envision Afrosupernatural: Entities And Archetypes, as evocative of ancient, magical yet futuristic aesthetic worlds; an amalgamation of urban, primal, innovative visual vocabulary informed by contemporary art, African-Caribbean and diasporic culture, oral-history, timeless, classical archetypes, and personal insights fueled by years and periods of incubation, research, and transformation including: addiction, recovery, initiations and spiritual practices. In tandem, I've been cultivating the visual lexicon of work, in an ongoing series of sculptures, that I began in the summer of 2012, called Paraphernalia Of The



Urban Shaman M:5 (POTUS M:5). My practice of making is performative, ritualistic, labor-intensive and slow. The slowness is part of its meaning in a fast-paced world that seems to have forgotten that craft and mastery involves the need to overcome the impulse toward instant-gratification. I cut up fabric, roll it up, sew, sometimes reinforce parts of the structure with paper-mache, wrap forms with string, create very long glass-bead-strands I use to wrap around my signature tubular-fabric-forms, which remain flexible yet firm, In addition, I embroider, paint, collage and miscellaneous. As a Yoruba practitioner, engaged in an elaborate ceremony, I had received 5 consecrated necklaces made of glass beads called elekes, strung by priests, priestesses and the community that sang to me during the initiation. Essentially, an ancestral, earth-based tradition; my godfather bathed me, accompanied by ancient incantations. After various sensory and mystical experiences, and exposed to altars and beaded regalia, in tandem with, Kongo charms and avatars, I felt an inner-prompting to create sculptures that incorporate beadwork. As an African-descendant in the Americas, raised in the Bushwick section of Brooklyn, New York, attending the particularly, Eurocentric atmosphere of Catholic elementary and high-school, it seemed inevitable the pull to connect with healing and empowering cultural/spiritual practices that, involve altered states of mind I sometimes call "being home" because while residing in the West, I have been able to see African continuities comprised of adaptation, re-invention, innovation I envision as bridging the past, the present and the future.