

Kantara Souffrant in the galleries of the Richard and Erna Flagg Collection of Haitian Art (Photo credit: Front Room Photography)



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**By J.O. Haselhof**

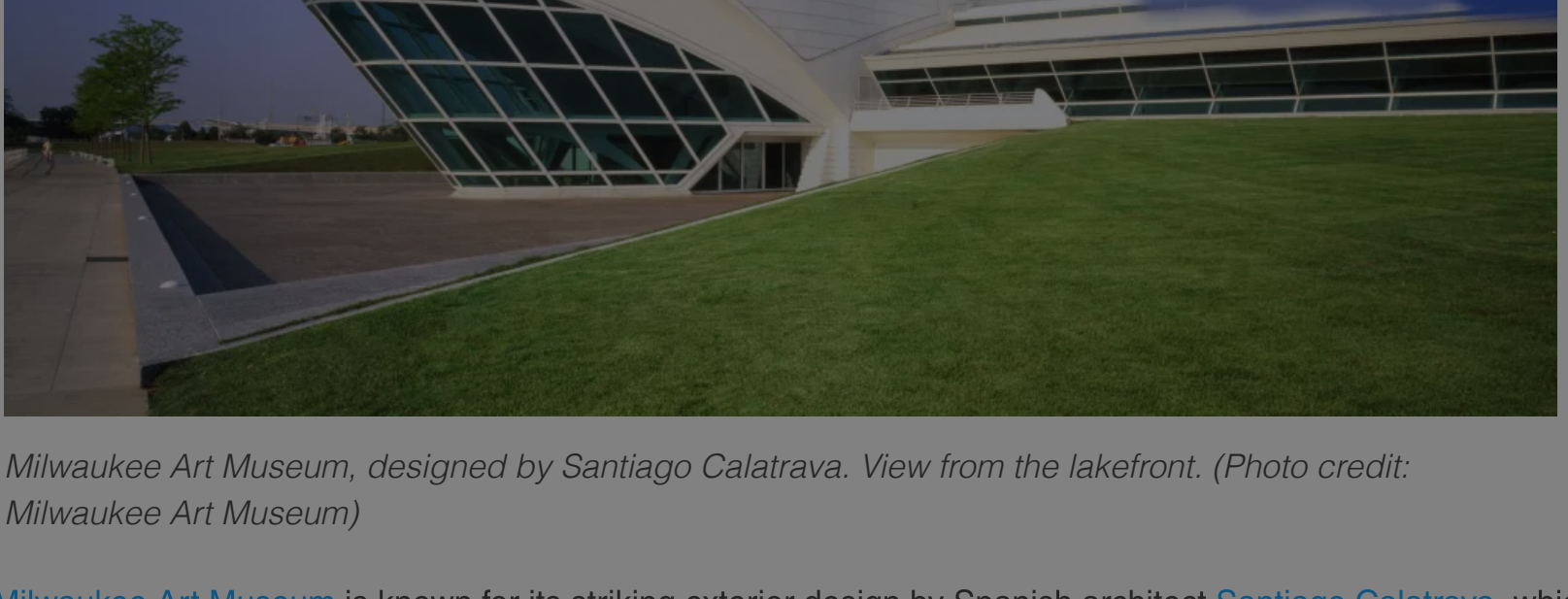
Kantara Souffrant, the curator of community dialogue at the Milwaukee Art Museum, asked to share her screen during an interview over Zoom. She quickly uploaded an image of Castera Bazile's [Petwo Ceremony Commemorating Bwa Kayiman](#) — one of the highly acclaimed works in the museum's Haitian art collection.

It's become second nature for her to explain why this piece is so important — not just to Haiti, but to the history of art, the museum and to Souffrant herself. The Castera Bazile painting of the Haitian [lakou](#) — a courtyard within a cluster of homes belonging to an extended family — is a safe gathering place. The painting contains political and [religious](#), as well as elements of everyday domesticity.

"The lakou really helps us to think about Haitian culture as rooted in gathering and community," Souffrant said.

"Sometimes all you can do is provide people with that kind of safe space for conversations and gathering," she added, when speaking about the museum.

**Made for her new position**



Milwaukee Art Museum, designed by Santiago Calatrava. View from the lakefront. (Photo credit: Milwaukee Art Museum)

The [Milwaukee Art Museum](#) is known for its striking exterior design by Spanish architect [Santiago Calatrava](#), which makes a strong visual statement along Milwaukee's Lake Michigan waterfront. Inside, many of its collections are among the world's finest, including the [The Richard and Erna Flagg Collection of Haitian Art](#). Primarily from the 20th-century, it features works by artists such as Hector Hyppolite, Wilson Bigaud and Prêfète Duffaut.

Souffrant's appointment to her position resulted from the museum's strategic direction, announced a year ago, that emphasized strengthening the relationship and responsiveness of the art institution to the surrounding community. Milwaukee has often been called out for its racial and economic disparity. The art museum is looking to be more active and relevant to the community through its art and programming as well as new efforts to increase its hospitality.

Souffrant, 34, has built a reputation as a strong and multi-talented professional. She has experience as a performing and teaching artist, an art researcher, curator and historian of Haitian art and, most recently, assistant professor at Illinois State University.

Her personal attributes contribute as well. She admits that she "learned disruption from her [Haitian] elders" and credits the Haitian community that surrounded her during her youth with how she is today and how she connects with other people in the city.

"When I think of community, community is really family," Souffrant said — again harkening back to the collective idea of community that the lakou offers.

Souffrant will serve on the museum's senior leadership team that will help direct the new initiatives. In announcing the hiring, Marcelle Polednik, director of the Milwaukee Art Museum, said, "The Curator of Community Dialogue position became a high priority as a critical piece to the important work the museum needs to start doing — today."



Kantara Souffrant (Photo credit: Rosen-Jones Photography)

Souffrant grew up in her own family's lakou, of sorts — a tightly-knit Haitian-American community in Brooklyn, New York — and later relocated to Maplewood, New Jersey. Both her parents, from the [Arbonite](#) region of Haiti, immigrated to the U.S. in the late 1970s and raised their two children within a network of extended family. Souffrant and her sister played with their cousins, and their aunts and uncles often cared for them.

As a child, she visited family in Deschappelles and Coupon, Haiti, but her family stopped traveling there during her teen years. Souffrant distanced herself from Haiti out of a sense of shame because of the media representations of the country and its people.

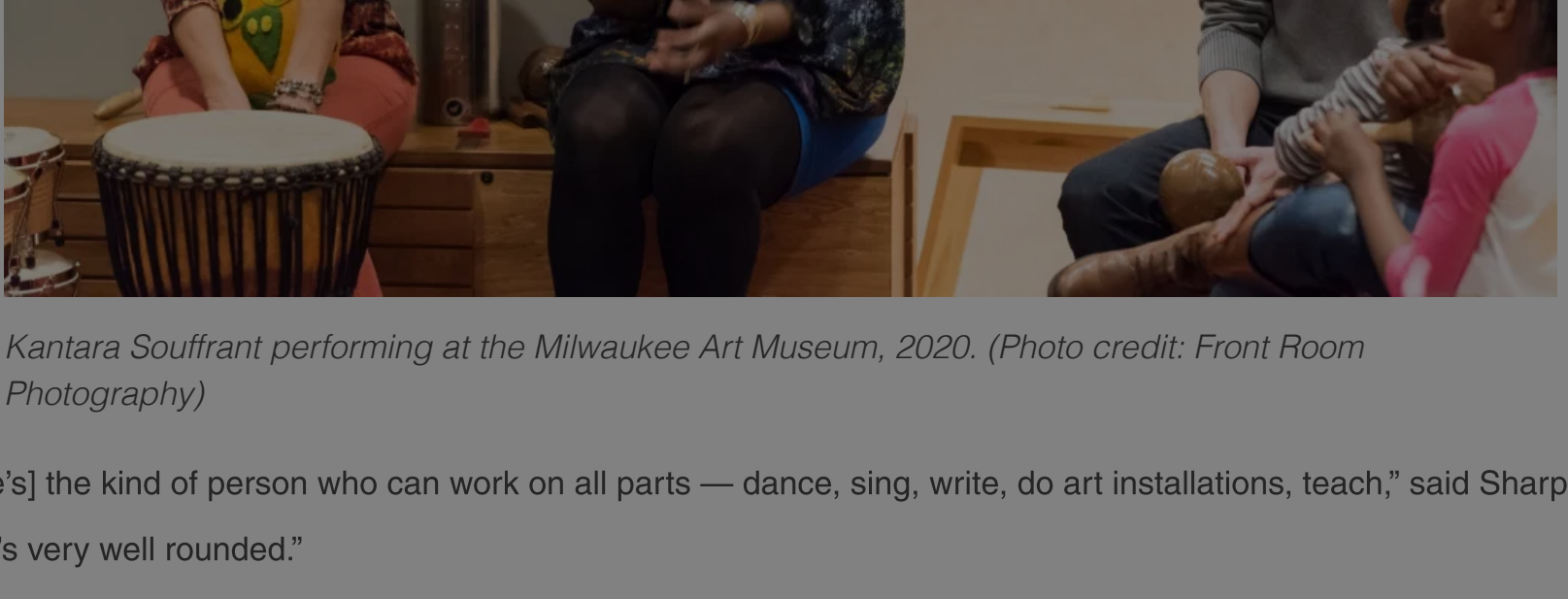
After the earthquake in 2010, she returned with her family. When she exited the plane, Souffrant realized how much she had missed Haiti — the smells, the sun, the heat — even the mosquitos.

By her 20s, she was able to address Haiti's complexities — class, vulnerability, beauty and hardship, "through more complicated language and nuanced questions," said Souffrant.

**Heading westward, toward social justice**

Souffrant attended Ohio's Oberlin College, a school she chose because of its social justice commitment. Leaving the Haitian community in which she was raised, she found other social structures that reminded her of the Haitian lakou — the African Heritage House where she lived and the group playing [Capoeira Angola](#), an ancient martial art of African origin that uses dance-like movements and music played on traditional instruments.

At Oberlin, she met Adenike Sharpley, Africana Studies artist-in-residence, and founder of Dance Diaspora. Sharpley and her dance company gave Souffrant license to develop into her own self. Sharpley described the young woman that entered Oberlin and the powerhouse that exited the college.



Kantara Souffrant performing at the Milwaukee Art Museum, 2020. (Photo credit: Front Room Photography)

"[She's] the kind of person who can work on all parts — dance, sing, write, do art installations, teach," said Sharpley. "She's very well rounded."

Souffrant's graduate work at Northwestern University resulted in her dissertation that focused on second-generation feminist and queer art and performance in the Haitian diaspora after the 2010 earthquake.

Souffrant had noticed many female and women-identified artists in the diaspora turning to Vodou as a framework for healing themselves and their communities and creating artistic-scholarly work. Their work critiqued Haiti's position on the global stage, its continued colonialism, patriarchy, gender-based violence, and the disavowal of Haitian Vodou by Haitian people.

For Souffrant, these new narratives were central to thinking about Haiti's future. The work decolonized Haiti by decolonizing its religious practices.

"There is more than one path to salvation," said Souffrant, "and Vodou honors the divine humanity of Black people."

In 2015, she worked at the Milwaukee Art Museum as the manager of school and teacher programs, using the Haitian art collection as an introduction to the museum. Two years later, after teaching at Illinois State University, where her classes focused on the intersection of art history, African diasporic culture and museum studies, she's back in Milwaukee in her new role.

Her newly created position centers on community engagement, developing new partnerships and audiences. She'll work to make art more relevant by addressing social issues through the museum's programming and offsite projects.

**Changing the culture of museums**

When Souffrant stood for the first time in front of a work of art by [Hector Hyppolite](#), she got chills.

"There's something transcendental about that moment," Souffrant said.

She wants to share that feeling with others — those who might not feel at home in the museum because, said Souffrant, "You, one, don't feel cultured enough, or, two, don't feel smart enough, or, three, don't feel wealthy enough, or, four, don't feel white enough."

She hopes, in keeping with the museum's initiative of 2020, that, "Regardless of your ZIP code or the shade of your skin," said Souffrant, you'll say, "Oh yeah, I'm often at the Milwaukee Art Museum."

She's clear that statement cannot come just from rolling out a red carpet — it's really about change.

"Changing the culture of museums and changing how people are treated in museums [and] changing who we feel like museums belong to and what kind of stories they're supposed to archive and collect," she said.

Souffrant conveys that she's the kind of person who can work on many parts, like her Oberlin mentor described. Her life is layered — from [the review of a book about a Vodou initiate](#), through her training and volunteering as a doula to provide emotional assistance during childbirth, to her own husband and toddler, who were "literally outside the door."

All of these layers suggest her ability to connect past to future, as well as family to community and community to museum — like the lakou.

"Because," said Souffrant, "we understand that our survival is contingent on each other."

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J.O. Haselhof is the author of "Give & Take: Doing Our Damndest NOT to be Another Charity in Haiti." She co-founded "Yonn Ede Lot" (One Helping Another), a nonprofit that worked with volunteer groups in La Montagne ("Lamontay"), Haiti from 2007-2013. She lives in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

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