



Steven Baboun

Ayiti, I Saw It In A Dream
SEPTEMBER 21 – DECEMBER 10, 2023

About the Exhibit

Steven Baboun has cherished his homeland of Haiti as a playground for self-exploration, an arena for political analysis and dissection, and a space for world-building outside of the Western gaze— a phenomenon used to harmfully misrepresent Haiti, its people, history, and culture.

Ayiti, I Saw It In A Dream allows the viewer to enter Baboun's Haiti, a state between dreaming and consciousness. A territory between the fantastical and a nightmare, between love and pain, between Haiti today and the dream of a utopian Haiti for all Haitians. *Ayiti, I Saw It In A Dream* derives from the importance of dreams in Haitian Vodou and Haitian society. In Haitian Vodou, dreams are portals and gateways to the answers to life. It is the conduit in which the Lwas (spirits) communicate with its people. The act of dreaming offers hope for a kinder future for Haiti, a safe haven for a country that has known years of political turmoil, international intervention, and the trauma of slavery and colonization. Dreams are real. This show offers a look at Baboun's collaboration between his own dreams and his country.

Baboun's photographs transform Haitian people into dignified monuments, a fragment of a dreaming state, and powerful altars, celebrating the Haitian existence through an anti-western gaze. Baboun's works counter the photographic canon of Haiti, an oppressive catalog of imagery plaguing the media and the internet, showcasing Haiti as a primitive, curse-stricken land. Baboun's photographs, often tableau-esque in nature, represent a wide range of Haitians: from artists to activists, queer Haitians, Vodou practitioners, and the artist's community of friends and family. Baboun spotlights the diversity and complexities of Haitian identity.

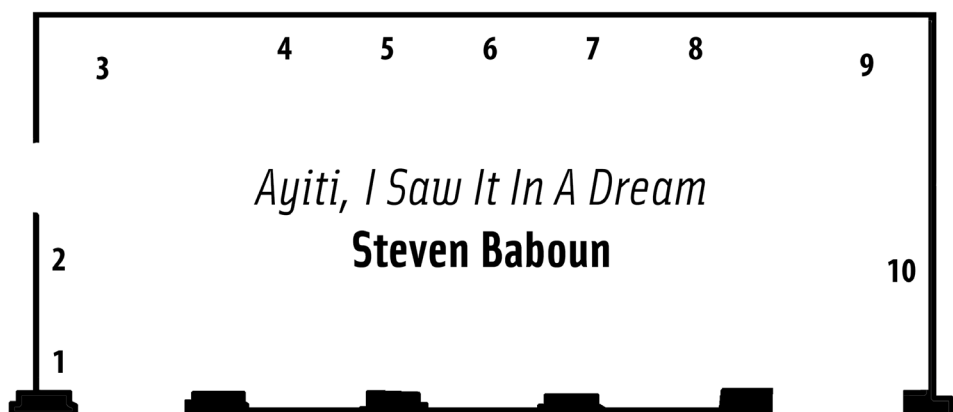
Throughout the exhibition, Baboun constructs a space where people enter not as an outsider looking in, but as an invited guest, a neighbor, or a friend— approaching realities unknown to them and entering our collective state of dreaming.

About the Real Art Awards

Baboun is a recipient of a 2022 Real Art Award. The Real Art Awards are a juried competition open at no cost to emerging artists from the six New England states, New York and New Jersey. The 2022 Real Art Awards were juried by multidisciplinary artist Carlos Motta, curator and creative strategist Yona Backer, and Real Art Ways Executive Director Will K. Wilkins. In addition to a cash prize and a solo exhibition, each artist receives logistical and curatorial support throughout the exhibition process. This project is supported in part by awards from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Edward C. and Ann T. Roberts Foundation.

About the Artist

Steven Baboun is an artist, photographer, and creative director from Port-au-Prince, Haiti, based in New York City. He holds a Bachelor's degree in Film and Media Arts and a minor in Education Studies from American University, as well as a Master of Fine Arts in Photography from Parsons School of Design. Baboun works in photography, video, performance, textile + multimedia installation, and design. Currently, Baboun is the founder and creative director of Studio Baboun, a creative house based in Brooklyn, New York. on Mexican embroidery at Arquetopia (2017), in Oaxaca, Mexico. She participated in the Artists in Residence program at Textile Arts Center (2018-2019) and she was granted a residency at Gasworks ceramic studio (2019), both in New York City.



1. NICK DLO
2022

2. RANTRE
2018

3. BARIKAD RÈV MWEN
2023

4. RIVA AK DANBALA
2023

5. Grandmother in the Dreams Garden
2019

6. Pa Bliye M, Si W Bliye M
2019

7. YOLÈN
2022

8. The Haitian Gaze: Source of Power
2020

9. BARIKAD RÈV FRED A K LASIREN
2023

10. ROSETTE, OFRANN
2019

*For purchase inquiries, please contact:
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An Altar (within) An Altar

A Haitian-Syrian-Palestinian Photographers aspirations for Home



Framed between two towering pillars composed of brilliant, colorful textured fabrics draped, twisted, pinned, and knotted together are five central portraits, each representing a figure that played an essential role in Steven Baboun's life—an altar within an altar, where life and death are in dialogue. Steven Baboun is a queer interdisciplinary artist working within film, photography, and textile site-specific installations from Port-au-Prince, Haiti, based in New York City, with roots in Syria by way of their mother and Palestine by way of their father. Giving credit to their grandmother, who migrated from Syria to Haiti for their cultural hybridity, *Ayiti, I Saw It In A Dream* at Real Art Ways, Hartford, Connecticut, centers on migration patterns, marginalized identities, spirituality, and shared community. Collectively, the works tell a story of nurtured love and compassion. The coordination of neon color fabrics carefully draped in a painterly fashion that creates the two pillars on

opposite ends also appears as adornments within the photographs, producing a harmonious synergy. Taken between Haiti, Syria, New York, and Miami, these photographs become autobiographical, speaking to Baboun's family migration patterns and transcultural identity. Baboun's existence unveils the intricacies of Haitian culture, propelling us to question our preconceived notions of Haiti. *Ayiti, I Saw It In A Dream* reinforces Haiti's position as a cultural hub of endless creative possibilities, which counters the Western gaze and celebrates Haitian's existence, turning them into monuments.

Ayiti, I Saw It In A Dream, has a predominant feminine and maternal spirit. Six of the seven portraits are of women near and dear to the artist, including their maternal grandmother. Forced by societal expectations of women of her time, Baboun's grandmother employed her domestic space as her canvas. Her preferred form of expression was sewing, adorning her environment with hand-made curtains and couch covers. She used striking, expressive fabrics, combining various textures and colors, such as lace, neon greens, and gold tones, fabricating a fantasy within her reality. Her desire for a bright future for Haiti and Syria influenced her to produce "bright things that made her feel good." Baboun's body of work becomes a reflection of childhood memories and surroundings. Their textile installations subconsciously draw from their Syrian grandmother, becoming a physical embodiment of the dream she was pressured to give up because of restricting traditional gender roles. Additionally, Baboun immortalized her in *Grandmother in the Dream Garden*, 2019. She poses while holding a peach in her right hand from her garden in Syria while the artist's mother's disembodied hands gracefully emerge behind a pink backdrop holding lace in assorted colors.

With the invention of the daguerreotype by the Frenchman Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre in 1839, portraits of enslaved Black men and women that defended scientific-racist beliefs of Black inferiority emerged. Centered around Afrophobic sentiments: "Black women posed for this arduous process, both voluntarily and forcibly."¹ Although, as Audre Lorde notes, "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house," BIPOC photographers such as Baboun have discovered alternative ways to utilize such tools to their advantage,

1 Willis, Deborah. *Enduring Women: Miniatures & Daguerreotypes of Black Women in the Nineteenth Century*. Yale University Press New Haven and London, 2023. P56.

telling new narratives that subvert the earlier notions that objectified and dehumanized Black bodies.² In contrast, the Black women in Baboun's photographs are joyful, defiant, and headstrong, trapping us in their powerful presence. For example, the portrait of Haitian singer Riva Nyri Précil posing with a serpent and sporting a white headdress embellished with cowrie shells reads optimistic. While in *Pa Bliye M, Si W Bliye M, 2019* speaks to the defiant and rebellious spirit of Haiti via the glare of the eye of a disembodied face emerging from deep purple and green fabrics, as if the viewer is peeking through a portal, where the subject representing Haiti becomes the light at the end of the tunnel (see Figure 3). These intimate portraiture speak of belonging and chosen family, becoming a reclamation of heritage and identity.

The video performance *Rantre, 2018* draws on parallel themes. This time through a frustrated and exhausted Baboun utilizing repetition as a chant, stating "I am Haitian, I am Haitian, I am Haitian," in numerous landscapes where they experience rejection and isolation because of their queer and transcultural identity.





Through film, photography, and textile site-specific installations, Steven Baboun's body of work enables us to access and indulge in the beauty that circulates Haitian culture, of worlds seen and unseen, the physical and the spiritual realms. Baboun approaches Vodou esthetics with honor and respect, as evident in *Rosette, Ofrann*, 2019, an intimate portrait of a Haitian woman Baboun identifies as their second mother who often offers spiritual guidance. Through their work, Baboun becomes an educator challenging the ingrained negative stigma associated with Haitian-Vodou. Having been forcibly uprooted, different ethnic and linguistic groups of enslaved Africans in colonial Saint Domingue mended together a new definition of family, sewn via the collective goal of achieving freedom. Vodou and the lwas (spirits) define the Haitian Revolution and its nation-building project, cemented during the Bois Caïman ceremony of 1791, where the lwa Ezili Dantor (The Mother of Haiti) is born. Haitian-Vodou "beliefs have frequently been dismissed by outsiders as primitive if not inherently evil," with early Hollywood's unfavorable depictions of Vodou equating it to witchcraft and Black Magic.³

Vodou visual influences also appear within Baboun's textile site-specific installations. *Barikad Rèv Mwen*, 2023 and *Barikad Rèv Freda Ak Lasirèn*, 2023 textile installations draw from Haitian-Vodou altars, combining bright fabrics that allude to specific lwas (spirits) in the Haitian pantheon. Representing the Gede Family, of death and fertility, *Barikad Rèv Mwen*, 2023 brings together fabrics in dark hues, burgundy, deep purples, and greens. At the top right corner, a pair of blue denim belonging to Baboun's grandmother indicates fertility. Directly underneath the blue denim, partially hidden, a photograph of two figures with veiled faces becomes visible. The two figures are Baboun's Haitian-Syrian cousins, back in Syria under a hibiscus tree, says Baboun "as if Haiti is watching over them".

On the opposite end of the room stands *Barikad Rèv Freda Ak Lasirèn*, 2023, portraying the Ezili Family and conveying love in bright blue, yellow, and pink. The inclusion of these two textile installations address the circle of life and



death, "life starts in death, death starts in life."⁴ As an artistic medium, textiles' gendered tenures disregard it as "women's work," which, as a queer Haitian man, Baboun's usage of textiles within their installations and photographs is layered and provides new meaning to the visual language they are assembling.



Collectively, the film, photographs, and textile site-specific installations that form part of the visual makeup of *Ayiti, I Saw It In A Dream*, operate as an altar for Haiti and its diaspora. This altar asks the lwas (spirits) for a bright future regarding Haiti and the entities within the frame whom Baboun desires to keep and care for. Like a dream, this exhibition is not straightforward;

it is opaque and read as a conscious gesture of protection of Vodou and Haiti. It reveals parts of itself while keeping others hidden. Dreams can allude to a greater goal or aspirations for something not yet attainable. *Ayiti, I Saw It In A Dream* is Steven Baboun's aspirations for their home as an absent Haitian of Syrian and Palestinian ancestry, living in the diaspora, but still very much present through their labor of love for Haiti. Although a dream, Baboun hopes to "wake people up" to see the first free Black republic of the "New World" through the

-Yelaine Rodriguez

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Real Art Ways is a contemporary arts organization with a record of linking artists, innovation and community. Programs include visual arts, with exhibitions, public art projects, and artist presentations; cinema, with independent and international films; music; performance; literary events; community and educational programming.



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Support for Real Art Ways Visual Arts Programs provided by:

The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, The New England Foundation for the Arts through the New England Arts Resilience Fund, the Department of Economic and Community Development Office of the Arts, the Greater Hartford Arts Council's United Arts Campaign, Hartford Foundation for Public Giving, Travelers Foundation, J. Walton Bissell Foundation, Sandy and Howard Fromson, and Real Art Ways' members.