

# Gelsy Verna's Pleading Monument

Verna's work joins the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art's collection.

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"Mother, Father, Please Help Me." This entreaty, written by artist Gelsy Verna, serves as both the title of her monumental drawing and her current exhibition at the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art.

The exhibition is comprised of a single artwork, an all-over composition which brings together gestural abstraction, collage, figuration, text, systemic drawing, culture and religion. Deeply imagined, Verna's hand communicates an authentic vulnerability.

Verna was born and raised in Haiti. Her family then moved to Congo before immigrating to Montréal in 1968. She ultimately moved to the United States where she resided as a professor of art at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Her studies began in microbiology, but migrated over time into the cosmic depths of creative practice. Her drawings and paintings also evolved, ultimately becoming the urgent, brutally honest rendering of her mature period. Verna died suddenly in her sleep in March of 2008. She was forty-six years old.



Gelsy Verna, "Mother, Father, Please Help Me." Graphite, acrylic, tempera, gouache, colored pencil, pen on rag, found and photocopied paper; collage elements made of cut, folded inset shapes, (51.25 x 108.75 in.) Collection of the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art/Photo courtesy of The Gelsy Verna Estate and Harkawik New York

In the top right corner, Verna draws a monument. A female torso in a crown grows into a snake. On either side appear to be tree trunks with "Mom" and "Dad" inscribed within hearts. Below this grouping is written, "Mother, Father, please help me in all that I would do with my sweetheart." The snake figure is reminiscent of Ayida Wedo, the Haitian-African spirit.

The drawing stretches nine feet across, and was created in collaboration with artist David Dunlap. The verso side of the drawing contains additional drawing, marking and glyphs. The back of the drawing was photographed and printed on a nearby wall. The wonderful choice to display both sides of the work shows the viewer the fundamentals of the drawing's construction, including ephemeral marks and tape and phrases such as "Who are these people?" and "People whose bodies are not their own." In observing both sides of the artwork, I imagine the drawing suspended so that viewers could physically interact with both sides of the drawing.

The museum's director Paul Baker Prindle remarked that this artwork is among the "strongest and most significant works available" from the artist's estate. Prindle also discussed sharing a studio wall with Verna at the University of Wisconsin-Madison twenty years ago, and the emotional experience of introducing this artwork to the public in a way that matched its significance.

"Mother, Father, Please Help Me" is a single artwork, but a palimpsest of approach, material and meaning that also stands as a memorial. The haunted, monumental experience of moving through its layers is both mythical and magical.

"Gelsy Verna: Mother, Father, Please Help Me" is on view at the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art, 227 State Street, Madison, Wisconsin, through September 27, 2026.