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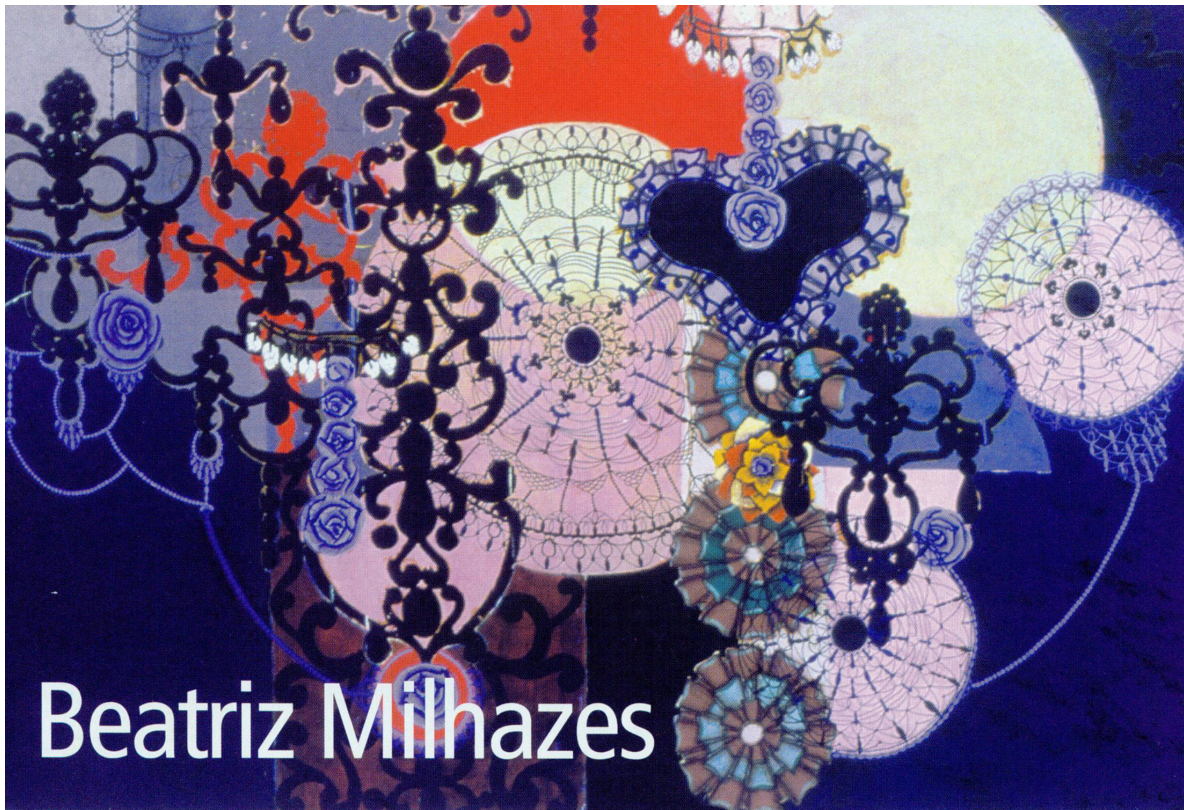


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In White, 1995. Acrylic on canvas. 77 1/2 x 120 in. (198 x 305 cm.). Collection the Bohen Foundation, NY. Photo: Fausto Fleury. *

In the Sway of the *Bossas*: "Waves"

Music, dancing, and popular celebrations, especially Carnival allegories, have always been present in Beatriz Milhazes's work. But it is since the 1990s that these expressions exercise a decisive influence and motivate a turn in the artist's compositions.

JOSÉ AUGUSTO RIBEIRO

It is not in vain that art critics associate the work of Beatriz Milhazes to a trunk or a chest,¹ a box for saving memorabilia, or an elaborate glossary in progress,² in order to catalog the themes and motifs that continue to emerge in her painting. Both kinds of analysis attempt to account for the rainbow of colors, figures, forms, and tradition—from various territories and historical provenances—that project themselves into the pictorial space in search of a "convulsive" beauty, one that will be "erotically veiled, explo-

sively fixed, circumstantially magical, or it won't be beauty."³

Among the references that appear, disappear, and reappear in the Rio de Janeiro artist's canvases we find the baroque, art deco, geometric abstraction and Op Art; arabesques, garlands and mandalas; embroidery patterns of tablecloths and wallpapers from Minas Gerais; Miriam Haskell's jewelry and Emilio Pucci's textiles; the exuberance of nature in the tropics, the beaches of Rio de Janeiro, and Burle Marx's landscapes; the Carnival, the Bossa Nova, psychedelia and *tropicalia*; Matisse, Tarsila do Amaral, Guignard, and Bridget Riley.

Her paintings are accumulations of these periods of time and of "style" in fine layers of ink, in successive "backgrounds" and fields of color that erase all distinction between high and low culture; national and international culture; *Old Master* art, modern art, and contemporary art. This principle coincides, partially, with Italian critic Achille Bonito Oliva's theory of the *transavantgarde*.

Milhazes appeared on the Brazilian art scene in the midst of what was known as "the return of painting" in the 1980s, shortly after Bonito Oliva coined that term in reference to a kind of painting unrelated to the evo-

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lutionary idea of "linguistic Darwinism," arranged in an "inconstant attitude or reversibility of all languages of the past."⁴

In common with the *transavantgarde*, the Brazilian artist dispenses with "single-meaning genealogy." Unlike the *transavantgarde*, she avoids the strategies of parody or pastiche in the incorporation of "ancestors." Abolishing the anchors that bind the plastic and applied arts, Milhazes chooses to make each one of her images and patterns autonomous—although later juxtaposed—instead of using the eclecticism that defines the notion of "art as catastrophe."⁵ If Bonito Oliva's *transavantgarde* is, in the end, the "first postmodern painting,"⁶ with the sense of improvement that the prefix implies, Milhazes creates a hyper-modern kind of painting that returns to issues present in Modernism, with contemporary phrases and vocabularies.

The time and the skins of painting

The isolation of figures and ornaments in the work of this artist assumes the flat character of the canvas and, as the operation progresses, unveils the markings and stages of the working process. Since the 1990s, Milhazes has used an "epidermic" technique based on monotype and collage to compose her works. The artist paints her motifs (targets, flowers, circles, fruits, peace symbols, etc.) on translucent plastic sheets that work as films for the reproduction of the images in her paintings. The molds are stretched on the canvas until the point when the image is reproduced, and then they are quickly retired; this makes it possible for them to be reused but also creates the risk of having incomplete images or, simply, damaged matrices. These films have a life of more than ten years and consequently, the images are repeated in different pieces, pressing into each application a time from a prior use.

This slow and laborious process is reflected in the title of a 1990 painting, *Estive feliz de saber que você está bem* (I was glad to know you are well). The formula combines past



I was Glad to Know You Are Well, 1990. Acrylic on canvas. 66 ⁴/₅ x 70 ³/₄ in. (170 x 180 cm.).

Rio de Janeiro, 31-04-1910, 1993-1994. Acrylic on canvas. 70 ³/₄ x 70 ³/₄ in. (180 x 180 cm.).



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perfect and present perfect verb tenses in order to express that there was an interval and that something happened between the moments of "gladness" and of "well-being." A passage that can be analogous to the wear and tear of the matrix between one transfer and another—sometimes within the same painting—for the creation of spatial depth and, later, of the decorative surface.

Estive feliz is structured around the triangular composition of major roses and their surrounding field, formed by blue circles. The buds and leaves of minor roses disperse throughout the painting, and behind them we differentiate horizontal bands or stripes in a lighter shade of blue, as well as scattered arabesques that are covered by vertical ink drippings. A shapeless white field in the center-top portion—from which pink ink drips—allows us to glimpse previous layers of color, now covered. These accumulations include defects or indeterminations that confer a certain age to the piece.

The same occurs in *Rio de Janeiro, 31.04.1910* (1993–1994). In this acrylic on canvas, which has areas for resting and breathing that do not exit in *Estive feliz*, the surface painting seems to have been made on top of the symmetric decorations of a colonial piece of furniture, taking advantage of and retouching some ornaments, which resemble jewelry designs that could be from the same period but are now represented in much livelier colors. Could it be then that the date and location in the title refer to a previous painting, or to an episode that would help explain the compositions?.

Questions like this one, where the viewer attempts to establish relationships between a painting's title and its content, are ignominious to objectivity. Words, expressions, and phrases selected as titles for the paintings suggest, almost always, poetic meanings unattached to the object (or are they another collage, another "skin" for the work?). Such choices inspire stories or

narratives, and allude to scenes or events to which Milhazes' paintings perhaps could be articulated as a stage.

These titles can be proper names of people or places, book or song titles, or names of objects; they can refer to traditional art genres and to famous works, without establishing a parallelism between the image and their reference. One exception is *Paz e Amor* (1995–1996), which presents at its center the peace symbol so dear to the hippie generation, surrounded by daisy petals, bead necklaces, rosebuds, targets, weather vanes, etc.

Latin blood

A contrary example is *The man you met here at my loft who I traveled some with in Egypt* (1993), in which figures (roses, ruffles, fruits, birds, necklaces) may be related to both the impressions about "the man you met" and to an encounter in "my loft," as well as an allegory of "travel in Egypt." The title is a complete image, one that possesses a life of its own outside the piece but which adheres to the painting like glue, a sign that would work in any other context but whose meanings begin to belong to the universe of that specific work.

Despite its English-language title, this work belongs to what we can call Beatriz Milhazes's "hispanic period," when she used iconography taken from Iberian references, both European and from the Americas. While the title is misleading, the year of its execution confirms it: 1993 marks the moment when the artist started exhibiting in galleries and museums of Latin America as well as Brazil. "My notebooks of that time are filled with Catholic iconography and drawings of religious architecture details. . . very heavy," says the artist in an interview with Jonathan Watkins, published in the catalog of the show *"Mares do Sul."*

In general, her works of 1993–1997 are indeed heavily charged, dark, and even figurative, if we take into account the profusion of jewels, ornaments, lace and lace edgings, roses, and ruffles in some of these works. The main image in the surface

Voyage to the Center of the Earth, 1993. Acrylic on canvas, 66 3/4 x 70 3/4 in. (170 x 180 cm.).



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Peace and Love. Paix et Amour. Paz y Amore, 1995-1996, Acrylic on canvas. 30 x 77 ¹/₂ in. (76 x 198 cm.).

of *Macho e fêmea* (Male and Female, 1995), for instance, is built on the basis of a daisy drawn in a childlike style, from which strings of lace flow and tied together by bead necklaces. Orbiting around this figure are small circles connected to one another—and to the nuclear image—through more necklaces and more lace. The canvas is formed against a dark-blue background that covers three vertical rows of circles at the sides and the center of the painting.

In *In Albis* (In White, 1995-1996), Milhazes's jewelry designs are modified and take over the painting's upper left corner. A piece of lace against a light two-colored background occupies the central portion, with a vertical series of ruffles covering part of the figure. To the right, two more pieces of lace are joined together with a necklace, thus forming a group of elements that refer to female clothing (gloves, rings, and necklaces), perhaps that of a Catholic lady from Portugal, Spain, or Mexico.

These features are more clearly in evidence in *Viagem ao centro da terra* (Voyage to the Center of the Earth, 1993), whose concentric repetition of green and blue ruffles—with flowers on their edges—refer to the several linings of a flamenco dancer's skirt. To complete this imaginary performance, the rose the dancer might carry in her mouth, for the public's delight, is in the stripes on her skirt: *Olé!*

Carnival, Bossa Nova, and other bossas—"waves"

Music, dancing, and popular celebrations, especially Carnival allegories, have always been present in Beatriz Milhazes's work. But it is since the 1990s that these expressions exercise a decisive influence and motivate a turn in the artist's compositions. Despite continuing to include figurative elements such as stars, suns, or hearts, her painting becomes more abstract and starts to include stripes, rays, and lines that give the vision a synchronized rhythm. Circular movements similar to those of a system of gears, characteristic of *The man you met here* and also of *Menino Pescando* (Boy Fishing, 1997), free themselves from a closed system in order to unwind like a spool, or to become the explosions of light seen in a fireworks display, governed by centrifugal forces.

Perhaps the piece that best synthesizes this period is *Tempo de verão* (Summer Time, 1999). This painting's "vibrations" expand from the circular shapes of three targets at the center of the canvas, and radiate: towards the upper left sector in a profusion of stars like those used in comic books to represent a strong clash; towards the right side, with the swaying movements of a wave; towards the lower left, in the incidence of warm-color rays; and towards the lower right, through mostly cold tentacles

with spiral tips. Amidst such formal and chromatic agitation flowers, a couple of birds, fruits, and a heart are scattered; these are figurative elements that become color and form, less than the representation of a tree, a rose, or some pigeons.

The tropical splendor of *Tempo de Verão* contrasts with the bossa-nova-like melancholy of *O cravo e a rosa* (The Carnation and the Rose, 2000). In this work more concentrated nuclei of images, some of them about to disintegrate, are formed. Almost the whole background is covered by blue vertical stripes. A pattern of lace is attached behind the stripes, on the painting's right side, and another lace edging, to the left, occupies a "sfumato" ink area, as if about to be covered.

Almost at the center of the piece, a flower with rows of petals in ever-larger sizes and ever-darker shades of blue, produces an optical effect that magnetizes the viewer's gaze. To the side, superimposed, the white lace and red ruffle lose the integrity of their forms, exhausted after years of using the same films. What is left, then, in the canvas's lower part, is a small bunch of flowers and fruits that, thanks to their impeccable color and definition, are revealed as parts of a collage, a decal, or sticker.

Parallel to the organization of these formal nuclei, it is interesting to note in later works the way in which the

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Tides, 2002-2003. Acrylic on canvas. 118 x 105 in. (300 x 267 cm.).

formation of chromatic chords—to use a musical term, in reference to the grouping of colors in the pictorial space—relates to the advancing geometrization in Milhazes's painting.

Geometry and color, harmony and rhythm

In *Maresias* (*Tides*, 2002–2003), for instance, circular forms almost take over the painting in its entirety, dividing the sides of the piece's lower half with squares and rectangles insinuated in different shades of red. All the figures among these circles, targets, balls, and daisies, are formed in an expansive manner, in frank dilation. The fluidity of the subsequence of the curves and turns and arches produces labyrinthine movements that are sinuous to the point of troubling observation.

However, if one pays attention it is easy to identify the area where, for instance, blue shades are concentrated; the surface where warm colors are concentrated; the side occupied by fluorescent inks; or another one where whites, ashen tones, and blacks predominate; and so forth. And, again, like a musical composition, chromatic chords establish the painting's harmonic structure and the circular shapes mark its rhythm.

In recent works shown in May and June of this year at her individual exhibition in the São Paulo gallery, Fortes Vilaça, the artist signals new goals in her work. She takes on collage (on paper) as a technique, polygons as structuring spatial elements (both in painting and collage), and incorporates (only in collage) an ico-

nography of motifs that are industrially printed on paper.

Gamadinho and the works in the series "*Leblon*" (2004) are organized around the geometry of chocolate packaging, on which colored-paper flowers are pasted. In a perverse way, they join the persuasive character of candy wrappings to the childish contours of the trimmed flowers. Desire builds in this series through the insistent repetition of logos and seductive images and colors. And, "remember that there is nothing more metaphysic in the world, other than chocolate," as Fernando Pessoa would put it.⁷

The Portuguese poet's verses continue: "Eat chocolate, little girl; . . . eat, dirty little girl, eat! I wish I could eat chocolate as fast as you! / But I think, and after taking away the silver paper, which is made of tin, / I throw everything to the floor, as my life has been thrown." A psychoanalytic reading of this fragment is that full satisfaction demands innocence, "absence of guilt." Dirty little girl, Beatriz Milhazes's painting believes in beauty and, despite Christianity, eats at will, to the point of convulsion.

NOTES

1. Paulo Herkenhoff, "Beatriz Milhazes, el tesoro brasileño." *Beatriz Milhazes*, Birmingham, Ikon Gallery, 2001.
2. Adriano Pedrosa, "Brillo," *Beatriz Milhazes*. São Paulo, Camargo Vilaça Gallery, 1996 and "Brillo Expandido," *Mares do Sul, Mares del Sur*, Rio de Janeiro, Banco do Brasil Cultural Center, 2003.
3. André Breton, *L'Amour fou*, Paris, Gallimard, 1937.
4. Achille Bonito Oliva, "The Italian Trans-avantgarde," *Flash Art*, October/November, 1979.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Renato De Fusco, *Storia dell'arte contemporanea*, Roma, Laterza & Figli Spa, 1983.
7. Fernando Pessoa, "Tabacaria", *Obra poética de Fernando Pessoa: poesias de Álvaro de Campos*, Lisboa, Europa-América, 1986.

* All images illustrating this article are courtesy of Galeria Fortes Vilaça, São Paulo.

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