

Medium
Date
Event
Web address

Web
16.September.2022

Publication
Author

The New York Times
Robin Pogrebin

<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/16/arts/design/beatriz-milhazes-pace-gallery-brazil.html>



The New York Times



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Beatriz Milhazes Breaks the Circle

In her first show with Pace gallery in Manhattan, the Brazilian artist both experiments and returns to figuration.



By **Robin Pogrebin**

Published Sept. 16, 2022 Updated Sept. 18, 2022



Beatriz Milhazes at Pace gallery for her first show in New York in nearly a decade.
Victor Llorente for The New York Times

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[Beatriz Milhazes](#) used to be fearful of diagonals.

“They were disturbing,” she said, “pushing you out of the canvas.”

Over the last two years, however, the Rio-based Brazilian artist has been exploring those angular lines in her paintings and found that they actually gave her signature circles a three-dimensional quality — making them into globes, evoking the natural world and the planet, which she had increasingly come to appreciate during the pandemic.

The results are now on view at Pace in Manhattan’s Chelsea neighborhood, Milhazes’s first solo exhibition since she joined the gallery in 2020 and her first show in New York in nearly a decade.

“I feel like a scientist. It’s about experimenting with new things and challenging yourself,” Milhazes, 62, said in a recent interview at the gallery, where her paintings had just been installed. “I needed this kind of a provocation — to introduce something that you fear is a good thing to do. And diagonals are something I always feared, the unbalancing they create. That’s why I found I needed to face it.”

“It’s such an important moment for us to talk about the human,” she continued. “We really need peace and love. The spirituality, the sensibility the poetry — all these possibilities of renewing things.”

The exhibition, “Mistura Sagrada” (“Holy Mix”), includes 10 large-scale paintings, as well as an expansive mobile sculpture. These works are immediately identifiable for the vibrant colors and kinesthetic geometry that have long marked Milhazes’ oeuvre. But something else is also at work.

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"Roda Coração III" ("Heart Wheel"), 2021, acrylic on linen. Beatriz Milhazes, via Pace Gallery

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“A spinning circular energy has taken over the whole picture,” said Marc Glimcher, the president and chief executive of Pace. “They’re way more muralistic. It feels a lot more like the history of Latin American muralism.”

Glimcher said Milhazes has been a pivotal figure in her own right, melding the “rigorous Modernist history of Brazilian art with this personal history and embrace of celebration.

“She created a new language,” he added.

A warm, earthy presence, with frizzy hair and a tentative smile, Milhazes said she has several sources of inspiration, in particular what she calls her “triangle of references”: Matisse, Mondrian and [Tarsila do Amaral](#) (1886-1973), who was influenced by Paris as well as her native São Paulo.

Milhazes’ work also brings to mind Brazilian artists of the 20th century, including [Lygia Clark](#) and [Ubi Bava](#) as well as the Swedish artist Hilma af Klint.

“She’s trying to stabilize the wildness of the Brazilian landscape and to make it have a kind of order to it,” said Richard Armstrong, the outgoing director of the Guggenheim in New York. “She’s not able to present Brazil in all of its flaming glory; she cools it down, just the way Hilma af Klint warmed up that Nordic sensibility.”

While there is a playful, explosive exuberance to her work, Milhazes said all of her choices are highly conscious and deliberate. She is using a mathematical precision. “I’m a very rational person,” she said. “I develop a kind of a system. I need the structure very rigid.” Every color, shape or image “that you see in the canvas is based on a strong decision,” she added. “It’s not there by chance.”

Born in Rio de Janeiro in 1960 under the former military dictatorship in Brazil, Milhazes said her mother taught art history at a university and her father was a lawyer. “Very intellectual people,” she said.

Milhazes started out studying journalism at Hélio Alonso University. But it didn’t feel right, and her mother suggested she transfer to Parque Lage Visual Art School.

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“When I entered the art school, it was like I received a mission,” Milhazes said. “I didn’t have any doubt that that is what I wanted for my life.”

In the 1990s, she developed a collaging technique whereby she paints on a transparent sheet of plastic that she then sticks to the canvas and peels off, imprinting the design.

The Brazilian curator and critic Paulo Herkenhoff brought Americans to visit Milhazes’s studio, including Armstrong, then a curator at the Carnegie Museum in Pittsburgh.

“It was just astonishing,” Armstrong said. “The delicacy of her technique, the vibrancy of her color — the pictures sang the moment I looked at them. They had a unique vitality.”

Her first major museum exhibition at Ikon Gallery in Birmingham, England in 2001 traveled to the Birmingham Museum of Art in Alabama. Milhazes’ work was included in the São Paulo Biennial in 1998 and 2004. In 2003 she represented Brazil at the Venice Biennale and in 2009 had a retrospective at the Cartier Foundation in Paris.

She has had public art projects in New York; Manchester, England; and Inujima and Naoshima Islands in Japan.

Milhazes’ work is very much influenced by her powerful connection to Brazil — the botanical gardens and the Tijuca forest; the Rio Carnival; Bossa Nova musical movements; the ocean.

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“A lot of her collages are made with source material that she has found in favelas around Rio — old candy wrappers, discarded items from local consumer culture,” said Adam Sheffer, a dealer who is friends with — and collects — Milhazes and brought her to Pace when he was working at the gallery. “Also her technique by which she is using these rubbed stencils allows it to have a grittiness.”

Having spent 16 years with James Cohan gallery, Milhazes said she was ready for a change, “to keep moving, otherwise you get stuck.”

“There was something very traditional about her approach to art making,” Cohan said. “To celebrate beauty and culture through abstraction when the world was moving towards identity politics — she was kind of defiant in her position, and I have great respect for that.”



“Festa Na Floresta” (“Party in the Forest”), 2021, acrylic on canvas. Beatriz Milhazes, via Pace Gallery

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With her new body of work, Milhazes said she has returned to figuration, in particular to flowers. “I wanted to introduce again some elements in terms of things that I was missing,” she said. “Flowers have been an element that is with me since my very beginning, and it’s evolved.

“It’s about nature — colors, possibilities, life and death rituals,” she continued. “I wanted to paint it again. When you really look at a flower, you see how many details and colors there are inside it. I wanted to have this practice again. If I can bring some life to people, I am pleased.”

Robin Pogrebin is a reporter on the Culture desk, where she covers cultural institutions, the art world, architecture and other subjects. She is also the co-author of “The Education of Brett Kavanaugh: An Investigation.” [More about Robin Pogrebin](#)

A version of this article appears in print on Sept. 19, 2022, Section C, Page 1 of the New York edition with the headline: Beatriz Milhazes Breaks the Circle. [Order Reprints](#) | [Today's Paper](#) | [Subscribe](#)