

art



Beatriz Milhazes
painting *Phet*
2004, acrylic on ca-
vas. See Resource

Beatriz Milhazes

In her kaleidoscopic paintings, the rising
Brazilian artist creates a highly disciplined chaos of beauty

By David Colman

It is often tempting, while perusing much of the archly self-conscious works of art decking many gallery walls, to update that age-old protest about what constitutes great art—you know the one about “my three-year-old son could do that!” Today’s artist upstarts seem, far from striving for any childlike effect, to be desperate to be taken as grown-ups. Armed with a large-format camera and a jaded smirk, these artists present sweeping vistas of civilization—beaches, factories, airports, stock exchanges, suburban streets—as the modern answer to the panoramas of yesteryear. But somehow, despite the photographic disinterest of such works, they still manage to brim over with irony and judgment. And if you think your cynical, world-weary teenage daughter could do it (in between applying too much Goth eyeliner and mauling off to the math teacher), you’re probably right.

It’s a movement: Call it Banalism. And while you’re at it, write the book, publish it, and shelve it. Beatriz Milhazes, for one, might be happy if you did. “What interests me is making something you can’t find in the real world,” says Milhazes. “I don’t need to go to my studio and make something I can see by going around the corner.”

So while other artists are offering views of consumer wastelands, Milhazes is interested only in her own viewpoint—and a very colorful one it is. “The word decorative is normally pejorative when it’s applied to art,” says Milhazes. “I don’t have any fear about beauty.”

But don’t mistake the Brazilian artist for some swirly, New Age bohemian. Her canvases pop up on your retina as candy-colored, sensual delights, yet her approach to painting is detailed and rigorous. As riotously joyous and active as her work appears—explosions of

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color blasting away, barely contained by the picture plane—its careful composition comes into focus slowly. "I think my paintings are a bit claustrophobic," the 46-year-old artist says with a laugh. "They're not relaxing—so many beautiful things, one on top of another." They suggest an overgrown garden whose vines, roots, flowers, and tendrils are running amok. Nature is a source of inspiration for Milhazes, especially Brazilian nature, which, vine for vine, is the world's most exuberant.

Yet nothing gets out of hand. "What I like about painting is having this blank plane that belongs to me, and squeezing a lot of layers onto it," Milhazes says. "It's very rational. Every small detail is there because it needs to be there."

As a result, there's a spring-wound tension underlying her canvases, from her early experiments in geometry in the late 1980s and early '90s, to more recent pieces like a 2003 series in which candy wrappers made a guest appearance. And as impromptu and organic as the works can feel—she's not a conceptual painter who plans out the painting beforehand—there's careful thought nonetheless, and the finished product shows barely a

brushstroke. Part of the reason is that the paintings are literally collages of paint: In many cases, Milhazes paints shapes onto a piece of plastic, then peels them off and glues them onto a canvas, so that colors and motifs leap off of the surface like flowers or fireworks or insects or windup toys. While the effect is a subtle one, it magnifies the subliminal sensation of a three-dimensional artwork.

For Milhazes, who happily rattles off a motley crew of inspirations, including Mondrian, Matisse, Sonia Delaunay, Bridget Riley, and Frank Stella, part of the appeal, even within her most geometrically exacting constructions, is a kind of scraping back (a favorite Matisse technique) to further suggest not just layering but the passage of time, not unlike a painted wall abraded by weather.

It's almost as if, by carefully assembling her layers, she's slowly adding page upon transparent page to an idealized Milhazes art history omnibus. It would make sense: In an ideal world, we are the sum of everything we love. Still, few artists are as bold as Milhazes in synthesizing their idols or have as much confidence that the end result will turn out to be novel and fresh. But then, if you're trying to avoid Banalism, you're already ahead of the game. ■



Clockwise from far left: Beatriz Milhazes in her studio in Rio de Janeiro. *Férias de Verão*, 2005. *Serpentina (Serpentine)*, 2004. *Joá*, 2004–2005. *Havai (Hawaii)*, 2004. See Resources.