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BEATRIZ MILHAZES'S EXUBERANT, KALEIDOSCOPIC PAINTINGS ARE DEEPLY ROOTED IN HER NATIVE RIO DE JANEIRO—AND ENTHRALLING A GLOBAL AUDIENCE. BY DODIE KAZANJIAN.

CARNIVAL



OF COLOR

FULL SPECTRUM
"Rio is nature in a very intense way," says Milhazes, "which stimulates me to go to the studio." *Insolent: Folha de Figo*, 2013, and *Chiclete com banana*, 2011–2012.

Brazil, long known as a Third World country poised to become a First World powerhouse, has recently come up on the radar of the international art world. Sotheby's and Christie's are in hot pursuit of the nation's high-rolling art collectors, new art fairs in São Paulo and Rio are heavily attended, and several Brazilian artists have established global reputations and critical acclaim—none more so than Beatriz Milhazes, the Rio de Janeiro painter of complex and lushly colorful abstractions whose first U.S. retrospective opens this month at Miami's Pérez Art Museum. "Beatriz is one of the few living women artists who have broken the million-dollar mark in a public sale," says Amy Cappellazzo, the former head of contemporary art at Christie's. "It's a pretty exclusive club, of about fifteen artists." Or, as Beatriz puts it, "After 25 years, I've become an overnight sensation."

A lifelong Carioca—as Rio's natives like to be called—Beatriz arrives exactly on time to meet me for dinner at the famous old Copacabana Palace hotel. Except for her punctuality, she's what you'd expect a Carioca to be—effervescent, dark-haired, and confident, wearing a floral-print dress and a cardigan with a button sewed in a very odd place on the back. ("It's covering up a hole," she explains with her slightly raucous laugh. "I cover it because otherwise I couldn't wear it anymore.") Beatriz is a small person with a very large presence. She wears gold rings on five of her fingers—two on the right hand, three on the left. She moves quickly, and her frequent smile has a mischievous edge.

She easily persuades the headwaiter, in Portuguese, to give us a better table. Her English is serviceable, if not eloquent—she has an English lesson every Wednesday morning. "The best thing to do in Rio is just to be in Rio," she tells me. "It's not the same in São Paulo, because there you must always have something to do. My colleagues in art school all wanted to travel, to study somewhere else. I never did. It's funny, because I'm the one who became the international artist."

Her Miami show, which will be on view when the wildly popular Art Basel Miami Beach comes to town in December, features more than 40 large-scale paintings, collages, and screen prints spanning 25 years of her self-invented collage-transfer technique. The result is an exuberantly colorful, richly layered, and sometimes emotionally dark marriage of geometric and decorative elements, bound together in precisely ordered compositions that respond to and echo the pulsing spirit of Rio. Looking at them, you're right there—following the arabesques of Roberto Burle Marx's beachfront sidewalks, moving to the beats of samba and bossa nova, marveling at the Carnavalesque mix of cultures and personalities on display, feeling the proliferation of tropical nature. The show is called "Jardim Botânico," after the world-famous botanical garden near Beatriz's studio.

"Everything about Beatriz's work comes from the direct experience of her environment," says her good friend and fellow artist Vik Muniz, who grew up in São Paulo and now divides his time between Brooklyn and Rio. "The first time I saw a cashew in a contemporary painting, it was by Beatriz Milhazes. A cashew has the symbolic power of a parrot or Carmen Miranda with her fruit hat. Most intellectuals in Brazil run from such stereotypes, but Beatriz completely assimilated all that. She shamelessly absorbed and paraded this Brazilian feeling."

Beatriz's studio is on a leafy street of two-story row houses, built in the nineteenth century for factory workers. Opposite, a dozen or more boys are kicking a soccer ball in a fenced-in courtyard. It's a "*futebol* academy," Beatriz tells me, a school for soccer in a country where *futebol* is a form of religion. (Brazil was in the grip of World Cup fever when I visited.) She came to the building in 1987, along with three other former art students, and together they bought a floor in one of the run-down houses and split the \$1,000 price. She eventually bought the others out, and now, having acquired two more houses on the same block, she paints in one and will use the other, when it's renovated, as a collage studio and office. A ground-floor room in the studio house has high ceilings and a long wall where she hangs new works to decide if they're finished or not. There are two here now—one very large, with a totem-like shape running down the middle, and a smaller one with bolder, more vibrant colors. "I'm thinking these are finished—maybe," she says. "I'm still looking. But every day it's getting stronger."

Beatriz doesn't live in her studio, and never has. Three years ago, she moved into an apartment in Leblon, Rio's most affluent neighborhood. Her apartment is a block from the beach, where she walks almost every morning. She swims at a pool on Friday nights, and works out twice a week with a personal trainer. "I'm not a social person," she says. Although she's held on to several friends from her art-school days, and she took me to dinner at the home of Mara and Márcio Fainzilber, important contemporary-art collectors in Rio who own a lot of her work (Mara was once a student of hers), she rarely goes out in the evening. "Painting—it's so concentrated. After being in the studio all day, I love to walk on the beach, move my body in a different way, go back home and be alone, completely, in silence."

In many ways, the studio is her real home. "I love this neighborhood," she says. The open windows of her second-floor painting studio let in the shouts of the footballers. Under the windows are shelves piled high with acrylic-paint tubes and brushes, the usual artist clutter. There's no air-conditioning, although the outside temperature is approaching 90. "When I'm working, I need air," says Beatriz, "I need open windows, nature and natural light." A large canvas in its early stages is on the main wall. It already teems with overlapping images—two beach ball-size white circles; a rush of generic flower shapes in red, hot pink, orange, and black; swirling flesh-colored circles within circles. "What always fascinated me about painting was that I have this white canvas," she tells me, "this world that belongs all to me. I can develop my own rules, my own structure—create my own order."

Beatriz was born in March 1960, around the time Rio lost its role as Brazil's capital to the newly built city of Brasília. Four years later, a military coup brought in a dictatorship that lasted 21 years. Her father, a lawyer with liberal sympathies, lost his job when the newspaper he worked for was shut down. He eventually set up his own practice, and Beatriz and her sister, Marcia, one year younger, grew up in relatively comfortable circumstances in Rio's Copacabana district. The parents of most of their middle-class friends supported the regime, and the sisters often felt they were a different species. In spite of a government that stifled dissent and creative thinking, she tells me she had "a happy childhood on the beach." She went to public school and entered the private Hélio Alonso University in Rio with the vague idea of becoming a journalist. In

her second year, her disappointment with the program there prompted her mother, who taught art history at a state university, to suggest that she go to art school—“because my mother always wanted me and my sister to be artists.” The only good art school in the city then—and now—was the Escola de Artes Visuais do Parque Lage, a nondegree institution where courses were free. Beatriz took the summer program there, and immediately knew that “this is the place I wanted to be.”

She stayed on at Hélio Alonso, graduating with a degree in journalism and communication, and continued in the Parque Lage painting program, where her most important teacher was a demanding Scot named Charles Watson, who introduced his students to European modernism, which was

The dictatorship ended in 1985, but its grip had been loosening, and in 1984 a group of art critics organized a massive exhibition of 120 young Brazilian painters, most of them from São Paulo and Rio—the generation of the eighties—at the Parque Lage. Beatriz was one of them. Her work was cited as a highlight, and this led a year later to her first solo show, at one of Rio’s very few galleries. By this time, she was living with Francisco Cunha, a fellow art student, who went on to become an architect and sculptor. They went to Paris together in 1985, her first trip outside Brazil, and stayed for three months. This was when she saw her first live Matisse, “which for me was a shock,” she says, “a turning point.” Seeing Matisse’s work confirmed her natural inclinations,



poorly represented in the museums that her parents used to take her and Marcia to as children.

All through her college years, she supported herself by teaching, first mathematics at a Montessori school and, later, painting at Parque Lage, working closely with Watson. “I never liked the idea of asking a father or a husband for money,” she says. “That’s the destiny of most women here—get married, raise a family. Even as a child, I wanted to do something different, although I didn’t know what. But one thing was clear: I wanted my own money.” We are sitting at her kitchen table, where double doors open onto a small but luxuriant garden. There are no screens. A hummingbird hovers a few feet from us. A mosquito breezes in, looking for a bare ankle; Beatriz covers hers with spray deterrent and hands me the can. She tells me that a spider monkey occasionally drops in.

by showing that serious painting could include the decorative arts and revel in luscious, eye-pleasing colors.

Back in Rio, having digested Matisse, Mondrian, Tarsila do Amaral (a Brazilian surrealist whose main subject was Brazil), and Frank Stella, she was on the way to developing her own visual language when she encountered “a big crisis.” The abstract grids that then characterized her paintings began to seem too restrictive. “I didn’t know how to move forward. I felt like I was in jail myself.” Searching for a way out of this impasse, she started experimenting with plastic sheets, painting images on them in acrylics, and transferring them to canvas—like monotypes. Her breakthrough came when she discovered that

FLOWER POWER

FROM LEFT: A self-portrait collage by Milhazes for *Vogue*, with photography by Vik Muniz. *O Idiota*, a new work from the artist’s studio, 2014.

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instead of transferring the images wet, she could wait until they were dry, glue them face down to the canvas, let them set overnight, and then peel away the plastic. The acrylic paint itself becomes a collage element, which she could put down in multiple layers on the canvas. The result is a complex build-up of images in which Beatriz's hand, or touch, is nowhere to be seen. "I don't like anything personal in my work," she tells me. "I like a kind of distance between the artist and the work. This technique opened a gigantic door for me."

Her other big break was connecting with Marcantonio Vilaça, a charismatic São Paulo collector and art dealer who introduced her work to an international audience. She joined the Edward Thorp Gallery in New York, and the Museum of Modern Art bought a painting from her first show there in 1996. Roberta Smith praised this "singularly impressive solo debut" in *The New York Times*, writing, "Simultaneously festive, tawdry, and melancholy, Ms. Milhazes's elaborately patterned paintings have a strange faded glory and a sure intelligence, with a layering of references, forms, and colors that keeps the mind in constant motion."

"Now I was competing with the whole world," Beatriz recalls, "not just with other Brazilians." Since 2003, her New York dealer has been the James Cohan Gallery. She showed in Amsterdam, Madrid, Paris, and London; she was in the Carnegie International, the São Paulo Bienal, and the Venice Biennale. Along the way, she parted company with Francisco Cunha, whom she had been with for ten years; they remain close friends—he's her all-purpose architect. ("We never married on paper, but in Brazil, if you live together for five years, it's called marriage.") Beatriz never wanted to have children. She adores her thirteen-year-old nephew, Thomaz, Marcia's son, and had bought tickets for two

World Cup matches that she would take him to, but "being a mother is something different," she says. "Every time I thought about being in the studio, and a child waiting for me at home, I thought, No, not for me."

Marcia, who is happily married to a doctor, is a choreographer with her own company, and Beatriz designs the sets for all her productions. Beatriz's work is increasingly recognized around the world. Taschen, the art-book publisher, is currently preparing one of its giant volumes on her in a series that includes Jeff Koons, Ai Weiwei, Christopher Wool, Neo Rauch, and Albert Oehlen—another exclusive club. Although she has traveled widely and now spends the Brazilian summer months (January and February) in Paris, Rio is the lodestone of her life and work. "The beauty of Rio is something you never get tired of," she tells me. We're in the botanical garden now, strolling on one of the broad dirt walkways that wander through its 340 acres of tropical greenery. "I'm an urban person. I like cities, but I need to have nature close to me." We come to one of her favorite spots, a pagoda in the middle of a pond. Rio's 98-foot-tall statue of Christ the Redeemer is just visible, high above the palm trees. The giant lily pads in the blackish-green water are so strong that you could stand on them, she says. "Rio is not a flower place. What we have is green from nature and blue from the sky. It's nature in a very intense and exuberant way, which stimulates me to go to the studio and make something. I used to think I could not make art outside of Rio, but what I've realized is that my work doesn't need Rio; I need Rio. I need to be in my city to make these works." □