

2014

Art



CARNIVAL OF COLOR

Words by Rachel Spence

THE SWIRLING RHYTHMS, FLORAL MOTIFS AND INTOXICATING
COLORS OF BEATRIZ MILHAZES' PAINTINGS HAVE MADE HER LATIN
AMERICA'S MOST SOUGHT-AFTER LIVING ARTIST

Once seen, a Beatriz Milhazes canvas is never forgotten. The 54-year-old Brazilian's palette races through tangy citrus, raspberry, blueberry, coral, mint, scarlet and sky-blue. Sharpened here and there by linear shapes, the leitmotif is the sphere, often figured as a tropical flower. But she explodes the curves into fragmented arabesques that swirl and spiral across the canvas.

Rather than working directly on canvas, Milhazes paints on sheets of plastic which she then lays on to her surface and peels away. From a distance, her paintings possess flawless, graphic sheen; close up, subtle shifts of tone and texture inject a vigorous, carnal vitality.

Today, her oeuvre has garnered worldwide recognition, with works residing in New York's Guggenheim Museum and MoMA. In 2012, her painting *My Lemon* sold at Sotheby's for \$2.1 million, making her Brazil's most expensive living artist at the time.

Last year the Paço Imperial cultural center hosted her first retrospective for ten years in

Rio de Janeiro, her native city. For Milhazes, the experience was thrilling. "The pulse of this city is incredible right now," she tells me at her studio in Rio. But it was nerve-racking, too. "People say, 'I love your work', but many have only ever seen it in books."

This year, her sights are set on her first major U.S. retrospective, at the Pérez Art Museum Miami. Milhazes is keen to make her mark on a city she views as "a bridge between North and South America." She is also enthused by the museum's spectacular new building, whose glass walls are framed by a pergola of hanging gardens.

"I love the way that nature is integrated with the space," she says, adding that the rapport with flora mirrors the tension in her own work, which thrives on the clash of landscapes. "I love to be surrounded by the city and yet also by nature. That's why I love Rio and Miami."

Jardim Botânico is at the Pérez Art Museum Miami (pamm.org) September 19 to January 11, 2015.
Your address: The St. Regis Bal Harbour Resort

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Mulatinho, 2008

The fantastic complexity of *Mulatinho* gives the eye nowhere to rest. Yoking together an airless huddle of squares and rectangles, ornate, rococo swirls, abstract planes and spheres and a proudly graphic flower, the painting would tip into anarchy were it not for Milluzes' sense of proportion and capacity to balance color. In fact, those disparate motifs are inspired by drawings Milluzes has made for site-specific projects in museums and public spaces over the past decade. "The paintings [from that time] absorbed some aspects of their design, such as pure colors occupying their own space," she says.

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O beijo, 1995 (above)

In contrast with the smooth, mechanical contours that prevail in many works, the tentative, uneven character of the patterns in this painting highlights the work of the artist's hand. Milhazes describes it as "a strong example of compositions I would do in the mid-1990s that were based on a tree structure. It features a central base and straight but fragile form, which hold but untangle all other motifs from that point." It is telling that the artist naturally expresses her vision through a paradox – the act of holding but untangling – as if she is simultaneously constructing and deconstructing an image. That tension is the key to her sense of structure, which always flirts with collapse. Here, her circular iconography refuses any single meaning, unfolding instead through a series of associations from the cross-section of a tree trunk to the spokes of a wheel and a lace doily. The painting's title, which means "The Kiss", adds another layer of possibility.

Coisa Linda I, 2001 (right)

For all her celebration of color, Milhazes is not trying to seduce us with a harmonious chromatism in the manner of Matisse, to whom she is sometimes compared. Here, she interrupts her opulent mosaic of gold, red, terracotta and pink with cold cobalt and black. Their harsh counterpoint serves to heighten the painting's formal qualities, which draw on Milhazes's fascination with textiles. As she puts it, "In the 1990s, I developed a circular surface using lace and pearls as a reference. In the early 2000s, these circles grew in size and I started to juxtapose them in a spiral rhythm. This juxtaposition would also construct the color."

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65

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66

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Phebo, 2004 (above)

The ecstatic chromatism of *Phebo* is reminiscent of the radiant, saturated surfaces of the Fauvism movement in early 20th-century France. A luscious fantasy of crushed raspberry, strawberry, blackcurrant, blood orange and sorbet-pink, it plunges the spectator into a tropical orchard where fruits and flowers hover on the cusp between ripe and rotten. So compelling are those blossoming curves that it's easy to overlook the grid of squares and rectangles that anchor them into order. Milhazes traces those subtle angles back to her practice of making paper collages. "*Phebo* is the first time I decided to work on a painting based on a previous collage work. It allowed me to assume the squares into my paintings' compositions," she explains.

Popeye, 2007-8 (left)

The taut, spiralling rhythms of *Popeye* remind us that the sensual, syncopated beat of samba – the traditional dance of Brazil's Carnival – has been an inspiration for Milhazes. Although, she says, she does not go dancing herself, she loves to watch the professional samba practitioners for their bittersweet recipe of discipline and liberty. In *Popeye*, she juggles potent, staccato shifts in color with crisp, tight arabesques, as if mapping the quicksilver jiggling hips of a samba star. The painting resulted, she explains, from "a long process of building up a composition without any clear plan. I really opened the space for some expression to come along." One aspect of Milhazes' work that is often eclipsed by the overwhelming impact of her colors is that she is a highly intellectual painter, committed to extending and exploring modernist theories of abstraction.