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 limoncello is the sphere, often figured as a tropical flower. But she explodes the curves into fragmented anemones 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 shimmers, close up, subtle shifts of tone and texture inject a vigorous, carved vitality.

Today, her oeuvre has garnered worldwide recognition, with works residing in New York’s Guggenheim Museum and MoMA. In 2012, her painting My Love 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 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 Botánico is at the Pérez Art Museum Miami (pam.org), September 19 to January 11, 2015. For tickets: The St. Regis Bal Harbour Resort
Carnival of Color

Miller, 2008

The fantastic complexity of Miller's gives the eye nowhere to rest. Sinking together an endless multitude of shapes and rectangles, ovals, serpentine ovals, abstract grids and spheres and a myriad of other forms, the painting would tip into

manipulated by visual balances of proportion and capacity to balance color. In fact, these disparate motifs are inspired by drawings Miller 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.
Art

O lajo, 1993 (above)

In contrast with the smooth, mechanical contours that prevail in many works, the intimate, uneven character of the patterns in this painting highlights the work of the artist's hand. Millan describes it as “a strong example of composition I would do in the mid-1990s that were based on a tree structure. It features a central core and straight but fragile forms, which hold but uncurl off other nodes from that point.” It is telling that the artist naturally expresses her visions through a paradox - the act of building but unbuilding - as if she is simultaneously constructing and deconstructing an image. That tension is the key to her sense of structure, which always flies with collapse. Here, her circular iconography refines 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 bar of steel. The painting’s title, which means “The Kiss,” adds another layer of possibility.

Casa Linda I, 2001 (right)

For all her celebration of color, Millan is not trying to reduce us with a harmonious illusion in the manner of Matisse, to whom she is sometimes compared. Here, she intersperses her opulent mosaic of gold, red, terracotta and pink with cold cobalt and black. Their harsh counterpoint serves to brighten the painting’s formal qualities, which draw on Millan’s fascination with textiles. So she paints it. “In the 1990s, I developed a circular surface using line and PCB 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.”
A Carnival of Color

Phoebe, 2004 (above)
The eccentric dramaturgy of Phoebe is reminiscent of the radiant, saturated surfaces of the Fauvist movement in early 20th-century France. A kinesis 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 edge between ripe and rotten. So compelling are these blossoming curves that it's easy to overlook the grid of squares and rectangles that anchor them into order. Milhano traces these subtle angles back to her practice of making paper collages. "Phoebe is the first time I decided to work on a painting based on a previous collage work. It allowed me to assess the squares into my paintings' compositions," she explains.

Poppy, 2007-8 (left)
The text, spilling rhythm of Poppy remind us that the unusual, syncopated beat of samba -- the traditional dance of Brazil's Carnival -- has been an inspiration for Milhano. Although, she says, she does not go dancing herself, she loses to watch the professional samba practitioners for their breathtaking recipe of discipline and liberty. In Poppy, she juggles perfect, intricate shifts in color with crisp, tight engravings, as if mapping the quixotic 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 Milhano's 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 modern theories of abstraction."