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Brazil's top modern artist, geometric abstractionist Beatriz Milhazes, gets Rio homecoming



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RIO DE JANEIRO — She's the toast of New York and beloved in Paris and London, but Beatriz Milhazes thinks there's no place like home.

More than a decade after her last show in her native Rio de Janeiro, Brazil's highest-paid artist is gearing up for a homecoming of sorts, a major retrospective spanning most of her 30-year career. The exhibition, opening Thursday at the Paco Imperial Cultural Center in downtown Rio, brings together more than five dozen paintings, silk screens and collages covered in Milhazes' signature riot of saturated color, concentric circles, upbeat flowers and meandering arabesques.

"I've shown in places that are obviously very exciting for any artist, but in a way showing in your city — I was born here and still live and work here — kind of grabs you more, excites you more, stirs you up more," Milhazes told The Associated Press in a Friday interview as she supervised the installation of the exhibit, entitled "Meu Bem," Portuguese for "My Dear." "It's being able to say, 'Mom, look what I've done.'"

Milhazes has plenty to show off. The 53-year-old has exhibited in the Venice Biennial, had a solo show at Paris' Fondation Cartier and has works in the Reina Sofia National Museum in Spain and New York's Guggenheim and Museum of Modern Art.

In 2008, her painting "O Magico," or "The Magician," sold for more than \$1 million, or around four times what was expected, at a New York auction, making her Brazil's highest-paid living artist. She broke the record again last year when her "Meu Limao," or "My Lemon," went for \$2.1 million at another auction in New York.

Though she once quipped it took her 25 years to become an overnight success, Milhazes said her slow path to international fame helped her cope with the spotlight.

"The first decade of my career, in the 1980s, was very local. It was only in the 1990s that I started showing work outside of Brazil, first in Latin America, Mexico, Venezuela, and then in New York. Then came Europe and Japan, but all very gradually, little by little," said Milhazes, running her fingers through curly locks that recall the wavy patterns of her work. "During that process, sometimes I would leave for a bit and spend time in these other countries. But I never cut my ties with Rio. And that was an important decision. I need to feel that link with home, that understanding of what home is."

Rio, a chaotic, coastal metropolis of 6 million, has informed Milhazes' work from the beginning. Early collages featured snippets of fabrics culled from the costumes worn in the city's world-famous Carnival celebrations, and her work still bursts with the swirly paisleys

and arabesques that recall the its exuberant vegetation. There's also something very Rio in her eye-popping palette, with its fiery oranges and yellows that evoke the city's fierce summer sun, the blue of its limpid skies, the pinks and purples of ipe trees in lavish bloom.

So alive with colors and shapes, Milhazes' work seems to vibrate off the wall. "Havana," a large 2003-2004 acrylic that's part of the Rio exhibit, keeps viewers' eyes busy as they jump from the kaleidoscopic flower burst at the center to the peace sign camouflaged amid a patchwork of bright hues to the flitting butterflies, sagging bunches of grapes, droopy roses or piles of tropical fruit.

"Ilha de Capri," or "Capri Island," from 2002, explodes with superimposed flower burst and hypnotic bull's eyes of concentric circles against a background of vertical stripes. Tentacles unfurl from the red-hot core of the 2006 collage "Ginger Candy," made in part from the flattened wrappers of Chinese sweets.

Though she rejects the word "style," Milhazes defines her approach to art as geometric abstraction.

"I was always trying to bring together 'high art' painting with elements from my own culture here in Brazil. They are two very different worlds," she said. "To be a proper painter you obviously have to look at the tradition that comes from Europe but at the same time, I didn't want to stray from my life here in Brazil."

Instead of painting directly onto the canvas, Milhazes developed a technique in which she uses acrylics to paint shapes onto plastic and then transfer them onto canvas, building palimpsests of intricate layers.

In reproductions, her work can look so perfect it appears computer-generated. But up close, it's alive with little imperfections that make it even more irresistible to the eye. The paintings' resined surfaces are strewn with scraps of paint, and traces of lines and smudges of color are still visible beneath layer after superimposed layer.

Frederic Paul, curator of the Rio show, said that despite its festive appearance, Milhazes' work is fundamentally inscrutable.

The Washington Post

“When you look at the paintings from up close, you don’t understand them at all,” he said.
“You will never really know Beatriz’ work. You will always discover it.”

“Meu Bem” runs at Rio de Janeiro’s Centro Cultural Paco Imperial from Aug. 29-Oct. 27.

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