

# **Projects 70 : Jim Hodges, Beatriz Milhazes, Faith Ringgold : the Museum of Modern Art, New York, May 1-October 31, 2000**

[Fereshteh Daftari]

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70

jim hodges

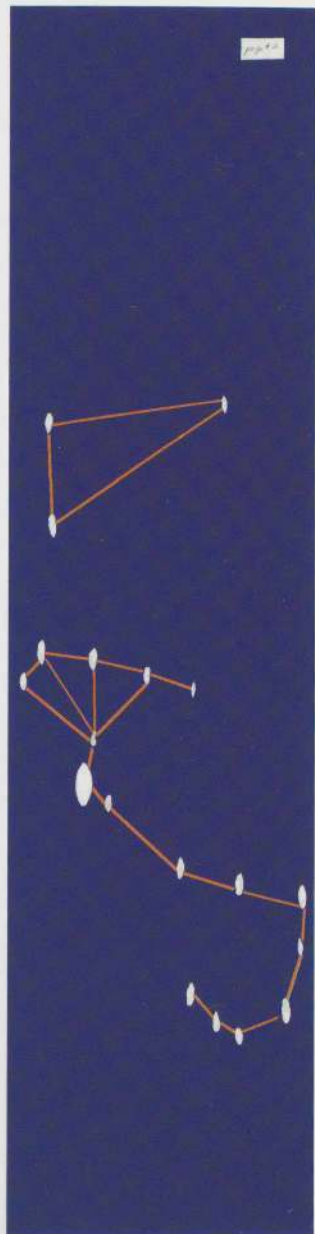
beatriz milhazes

faith ringgold

projects

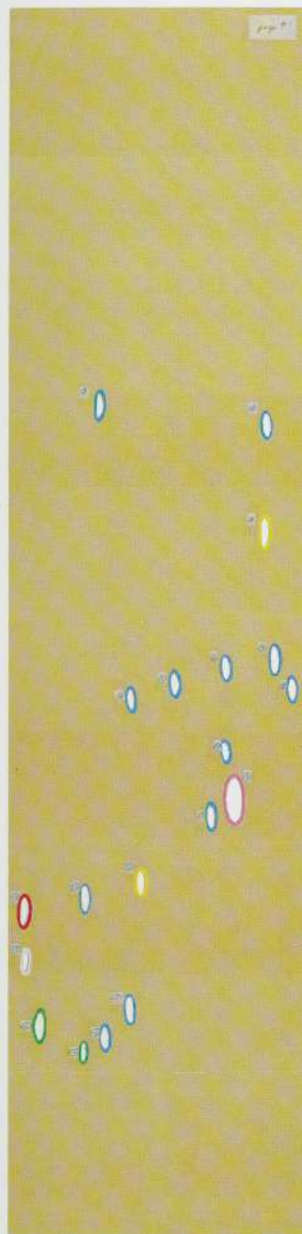
The Museum of Modern Art, New York  
May 1–October 31, 2000

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Since the fall of 1999 banners created by artists have flown above the Museum's entrance. The printed word brought together Shirin Neshat, Simon Patterson, and Xu Bing, the artists of the first series of banners. Craft binds **Jim Hodges**, **Beatriz Milhazes**, and **Faith Ringgold**, the artists in the current series. Pedestrians on Fifty-third Street, again, look up!

Weaving and sewing for Hodges, quilting for Ringgold, Milhazes's idiosyncratic layering technique, and the interest of all three in decoration mark these artists' commitment to a type of work traditionally equated with the "feminine." Believed to lack intellectual content, these areas of activities were ignored. In the 1970s, however, craft and ornament, considered kitsch by modernists, were upgraded to the status of fine art through the militant efforts of feminists. The removal of the stigma opened the way for artists of both genders, and what had been repressed now resurfaced. Thus, Hodges and other male artists, such as Mike Kelley, have taken up what was conventionally categorized as handicraft or minor art, and female artists, such as Ringgold and Elaine Reichek, have infused their quilts and samplers with a political drive. It should be kept in mind, however, that craft and decoration have always been highly



valued by the respective heritage of African American artist Ringgold and Brazilian painter Milhazes.

Life as a fleeting moment is the stuff of **Jim Hodges's** work. His paper napkins bear the visual traces of daydreams. His wall drawings, in which he demarcates the heights of viewers in their favorite color, simultaneously record presence and absence. His curtains of artificial flowers celebrate the here and now and mark a passage to the beyond. In his mosaic-like mirrors, reflections dissolve presence. Running the gamut of colors, his light pieces evoke the seasons. And his spiderwebs, those ephemeral sites, depend on a flood of light to become visible. With these and many more objects, Jim Hodges casts a shadow on permanence and the certitude of being, and places existence within the perspective of fugitive time.

Attentive to the ordinary and the modest, Hodges gathers humble materials such as paper napkins, Pantone color samples, and plastic flowers. A poet, he transforms them into vehicles of emotion. In his hands, even a banner, a common object in the urban landscape, turns into a memento of great beauty and far-reaching meaning. It extends the artist's meditation on transience into a moving testimony.

Banners of such huge dimensions must be pierced with holes to allow air to circulate. Hodges takes advantage

of this necessity and gives it resonance by sewing chimes in the wind passages. Thus his contribution to this banner project is not merely conceptual—a series of instructions according to which the flag is fabricated—but also manual and even musical. Twice before, in Venice and then in Boston, Hodges placed chimes in trees. For him, sounds act as surrogates for missing people. The wistful association comes from a personal experience: Helping a friend plant a tree, as a memorial to his deceased mother, they heard a door open to the sound of chimes, a door to the backyard the mother would often use.<sup>1</sup>

On one side of the banner, traced in the deep blue of the sky, are the constellations that correspond to Libra and Scorpio, the zodiacal signs of the artist and his partner in life. In the geometric configuration of the stars the two lovers' signs dwell in close proximity to each other. From the perspective of fate, they link in the astronomical chart and form a couple in life, on earth. On the reverse is a golden field, another celestial space, interrupted only by the sound of wind chimes. Hodges pursues love's trajectory from its astronomical beginnings to the eternity on the other side.



As with his friend, the late artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres, whose billboards of empty beds sprung up throughout New York City in 1992, this banner, a medium for public announcements, carries the personal into the public domain. Hodges, however, transcends such earthly sites and takes his message into higher spheres. *Two Sides of Heaven*, as he titles his banner, provides the origin and destination of his romantic union. Locating his relationship in the celestial and the gold perfection of the divine, and thus tracing birth to life beyond death, Hodges moves from the transitory and the ephemeral into the eternal.

The passage from Hodges's banner to the next by **Beatriz Milhazes** is one of reverie to Dionysian dance. To go from his to hers snaps us out of a pensive mood and rushes us into the heated sensuality of a blooming and dilating ornament whose tendrils stretch out in a field of glittering sun. The beauty of Milhazes's banner reveals itself in blazing colors and curvaceous forms. The sexual and the "feminine" always prevail in this painter's work. Her abstractions barely veil their origin. Seductive layers of ruffles and lace, pearls and flowers, garters and hosts of other intimate paraphernalia adorn the surface of her canvases. The imagery is often allied with examples of "women's work" such as crocheting, which the artist often saw her grandmother doing in Rio de Janeiro's countryside, where she grew up.

Firmly grounded in her native Brazil, Milhazes claims Tarsila do Amaral (1886–1973)—a painter prominent in the 1920s who infused her modernism with a nationalist interest in her local culture—as a powerful influence.<sup>2</sup> Like do Amaral, Milhazes mines the country and its intoxicating color contrasts for her art. For this exhibition, lasting through spring and summer, Milhazes based her palette on the color spectrum of these two seasons: from budding greens to the overheated, sweltering red and gold.

With Milhazes, allusions to tropical flora melt and mix with others derived from real life as well as Brazil's colonial past. Excavating her sources—an archaeological search into the various layers of Brazilian culture—you find folk art and craft, jewelry, textile patterns, furniture decoration, crocheted doilies, frivolities of a seductress, the colors of Carnaval, curvaceous Baroque architectural ornaments, all the way down to nature and its exuberant vegetation.

Milhazes's technique is also layered. In her paintings she follows a laborious process. She applies the paint on a plastic surface. She then glues it paint side down onto the canvas and peels off the plastic. Like a print, the image reveals itself in reverse. For the banner, she chose appliqué, another layered technique, to echo her incremental approach to color.

As in the work of Henri Matisse, the decorative profusely blooms and occupies center stage in Milhazes's work. Matisse's decorative motifs are invested with formal functions such as flattening a pictorial space. Or, as in his Nice period, such patternings set the stage for the female presence. The animate and the inanimate, at times indistinguishable, join forces to entertain the male spectator. In Milhazes's paintings, the patterns instead seem to emerge from a procreative center. Fecundly self-duplicating they break away from flat abstractions and mutate into symbols of fertility.

For the banner, which is defined by a vertical format, Milhazes turned to an elongated arabesque. Her inspiration comes from ornaments found in local Baroque churches,<sup>3</sup> but the iconic frontality of the motif carries associations with naive painting, widespread during the colonial epoch, and also relates to the art of Djanira (1914–1979), a Brazilian folk painter much admired by Milhazes.<sup>4</sup>



right: Beatriz Milhazes. *The White Ball*. 2000. Maquette for banner





On a fuchsia background, lavish gold and veins of deep blue color flow out of a central disk the artist compares to the gradation of light at sunrise—organic in origin but also classifiable as an inanimate object, perhaps a magnified brooch on an ornate uniform inherited from the treasures of some pompous viceroy. Multiple genealogies transparently conflate in this flamboyant gesture.

"I had a dream,"<sup>5</sup> is how **Faith Ringgold's** story begins. The dream is about the dead members of her family gathering in Matisse's Chapel in Vence, France. Among them is Willi Posey Jones, Ringgold's mother, a fashion designer in Harlem in the 1950s and 1960s, who in the artist's own words "inspired my new medium: the quilt."<sup>6</sup> In 1980, a year before Jones died, they collaborated for the first and last time on a quilt made for an exhibition titled *The Artist and the Quilt*. Ten years later, in 1990, Ringgold traveled to France, whose couturiers her mother had visited in the 1960s. The purpose, she recounts, was "to create the most ambitious of all my tributes to Mother—*The French Collection*, a twelve-part, painted story-quilt series." Ringgold's banner is a manipulated detail from *Matisse's Chapel, The French Collection, Part I: #6* (1991).

For the series, Ringgold created a character, Willa Marie Simone, who represents her alter ego. This constructed character embodies Ringgold's dream of being a successful African American woman artist in France, a force at the center of the avant-garde. At the same time Ringgold's stylistic appropriations of the great masters of European painting are inextricably linked with her marginalized position as a woman and an African American. With *Matisse's Chapel* she honors both.

Ringgold pieces, stuffs, quilts, and paints her dream in the center of a space conceived by Matisse and all that this name conjures for the canon. The chapel at Vence was the last great project of the aging artist. The craft<sup>7</sup> and radical simplification of the stained glass windows, the up-tilted floor, the figures drawn in the style of untutored artists—all considered breakthroughs in modernism—are claimed in Ringgold's quilt and her banner as a personal tradition related to her own particularities. Ringgold's strategy is a conscious attempt not only to appropriate the art of a European master, but to intimate at the sources of that master.

For the quilt on which the banner is based, Ringgold reconfigured the architecture of the chapel and chose the "Virgin and Child," an image of maternal kinship, to preside over the dream about her own relatives. For the banner she focuses on "The Tree of Life" windows, which provide the backdrop for her own family tree, a genealogy traced back to slavery.

The dead have come back to life. They populate the pristine white arena of religion, art, and race. The text framing the original quilt relates the dream. The extended family listens to the quoted voices telling about slavery, about "the shackled bodies of men, women and children packed together on the deck of the slave ship," about "the human cargo from Africa," and about the scent that was "pure shit."<sup>8</sup> The story concludes, "God don't love ugly. That white man got to live his own story and we got to live ours."<sup>9</sup>

Ringgold's banner pictures three figures: her mother, seated, holding her son Ralph who died at age two, and Ringgold's sister Barbara who died in 1982. The women are dressed in wedding gowns—Ringgold explains that when the dead return, one never knows what they might be wearing. The scene provides a poignant contrast between memories of happy days, the dark side of history, and the white side of art history.

Love, beauty, craft, and ornament, conventionally believed to be attributes of a mythology called the "feminine," take on a symphonic magnitude in





the three banners greeting visitors to the Museum. While Milhazes capitalizes on the myth and extends its ramifications into both nature and culture, Hodges and Ringgold, alternately poetic and political, weave into it their own facts and fictions.

Fereshteh Daftari

## biographies

### Jim Hodges

Born in 1957, Spokane, Washington. Lives in New York

1998 CRG Gallery, New York

1999 *Regarding Beauty*, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington D.C. Exh. cat. with texts by Neal Benezra and Olga M. Viso

*Every Way*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; traveled to the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston. Exh. cat. with text by Amada Cruz

### Beatriz Milhazes

Born in 1960, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Lives in Rio de Janeiro

1994 *Beatriz Milhazes*, Galeria Ramis Barquet, Monterrey, Mexico. Exh. cat. with text by Paulo Herkenhoff

1997 Edward Thorp Gallery, New York

1998 *Bienal Internacional de São Paulo*

### Faith Ringgold

Born in 1930, New York. Lives in Englewood, New Jersey, and La Jolla, California

1998 *Dancing at the Louvre: Faith Ringgold's French Collection and Other Story Quilts*. Traveling exhibition (ACA Gallery, New York). Exh. cat. with texts by Dan Cameron et al.

1999 *Beyond the Veil: The Arts of African American Artists at Centuries End*, Cornell Fine Arts Museum, Winter Park, Florida

## notes

<sup>1</sup> Conversation with the artist.

<sup>2</sup> Conversation with the artist.

<sup>3</sup> Conversation with the artist.

<sup>4</sup> Letter from the artist.

<sup>5</sup> Faith Ringgold, *We Flew over the Bridge: The Memoirs of Faith Ringgold* (Boston and London: Little, Brown and Company, 1995), p. 273.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

<sup>7</sup> It should be noted that Ringgold, aside from painted quilts, has intimately engaged in making dolls, tankas, and masks, to name a few categories requiring manual craft.

<sup>8</sup> Ringgold, p. 273.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 274.

## acknowledgments

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The banners are in the collections of the artists.

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