

frieze

Garden of Earthly Delights

Beatriz Milhazes

Vivid and at times gaudy swathes of paint are stretched across the canvas like skin covering a skeleton; like most people's skin, it meanders between a silky un-sunned perfection and a tiredness so tangible it seems to be on the verge of peeling off and floating away. Milhazes' paintings may employ run of the mill psychedelia - kaleidoscopic waves of colour, flowers, love hearts, beads and swirls - yet look closely and her imagery has the brightness of a garden which has grown too quickly beneath a blazing sun and whose colours have begun to rot and fade. This evocation of abundant decay is an integral part of the paintings' attraction - it's difficult not to feel buoyed up by such exuberance in the face of obsolescence. Milhazes seems all too aware that every flow is followed by another ebb but it's no cause for gloom. It's a vivacity often hoped for yet rarely embraced.

Born in Rio de Janeiro, Milhazes still lives in Brazil where she designs sets for her sister's dance company. She grew up listening to Brazilian music which, along with dance, is as necessary to her as paint in the creation of her images - and it shows in her spirited partnering of pigment and canvas. (Milhazes has mentioned how samba has coloured the creation of her 'wild carnival imagery', and later this year is publishing an artist's book of screenprints accompanied by the lyrics of a selection of 12 Brazilian songs.) Like music, her paintings engage with abstraction to great visceral and allusional effect, and, despite their look of trippy spontaneity, it is the spontaneity of a tightly choreographed performance; there is method in her Technicolor madness. Spores of colour pulsate with seeming abandon across the surface of *Meu Miúdo* (*My Tiny One*, 2001), for example; however, if you 'read' the image from left to right it begins to resemble a kind of musical score, building to a cosmic climax with satisfying rhythm and logic.

Such an initially misleading appearance of easy doodling takes time to perfect. Milhazes' approach to her medium is elaborate: she makes her pictures by first applying paint onto sheets of plastic or glass which she then peels off and transfers onto a canvas which she has prepared with background colour and compositional sketches. There's a playful archaeology at work: such a preoccupation with the origins of the mark that the paintings often appear to have been begun more than once. In *Minhas Crianças* (*My Children*, 1999), every sweep and line of colour seems so closely observed and worked upon that the paint seems at

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moments to wither beneath such intense scrutiny before bouncing back with an unalloyed optimism.

Milhazes has written that the titles she employs - Urubu (Black Vulture, 2001), A Lenda (The Legend, 2001-2) and A Seda (The Silk, 2000), for example - 'have their own life' and that there is no connection between the paintings and the words she employs to differentiate them. Of course, once a painting is titled (especially with such evocative references) it becomes impossible to separate the words from the image - in the same way that a snippet of a conversation might float into your head and influence the way you look at a picture when you're in a gallery. Yet it makes sense, given the lushness of her subject matter, that meanings bloom, wither and bloom again in the constantly mutating space that exists between the word and the object it belongs to. Like the best song titles, a couple of well-placed words can indicate a lexicon of meaning and feeling that shift with time and place. The oblique connection between these ornamented, intensely textured surfaces and enigmatic, disconnected titles creates the kind of disjunction you feel when faintly graffitied wallpaper is uncovered in the process of a building's demolition - you have no access to the graffiti's original meaning, but you are linked to it by its sheer physicality and evocation of common humanity.

That Milhazes' painted surfaces also evoke heady cross-cultural references to other times and places is obvious, yet certain periods and influences spring more readily to mind than others. That the word 'baroque' is most likely a derivation of the Portuguese word for a 'misshapen pearl' makes it, in Milhazes' case, a more than usually appropriate adjective. Here, however, its trademark capriciousness and theatricality collide with the syncopated rhythms of Piet Mondrian and the figuration of early Brazilian Modernism, exemplified in the bright, semi-Surreal paintings of Tarila do Amaral. The neo-Concretism of Hélio Oiticica is also particularly relevant here: as an artist who responded with uninhibited sensuality to the geometric abstraction which flourished in 1950s Brazil, and attempted to invoke altered states of perception via colour and music, his spirit can be felt less in the look of Milhazes' images than in her restless juggling of references to life beyond the picture plane.

Her pictures are saturated with the kind of assumptions you might have about Brazil when you've never been there: jostling, intense colours; sub-tropical atmosphere and near-physical urgency - the feeling that you would never need to wander far to find the music. Yet although all of these elements are present and accounted for, Milhazes plays cultural cliché and tropicalist kitsch against the unyielding rationalism of hard lines, surrounding chaos with cool areas of unfettered colour. It's an approach which lends her paintings a tension and dynamism that steers familiar iconography into less obviously charted territory. Geometric abstraction lurks behind flourishes of an unfettered brightness like a sturdy garden shed hides behind an explosion of hybrid flowers - or a smooth gold ring embraces the wrinkles on an ancient finger.

Jennifer Higgie