

*Beatriz Milhazes*

BARRY SCHWABSKY

# From Painting to the Book

That Beatriz Milhazes has an affinity with Matisse has always been patent. “My first and permanent reference,” she once called him.<sup>1)</sup> Each, more than other painters of either of their times, chose what Matisse, in a 1947 statement, called “the path of color.”<sup>2)</sup> I am almost tempted to retranslate it: the tao of color. As with Matisse, Milhazes’ color is referential but not mimetic; “it is enough,” as the Frenchman put it, “to invent signs.”<sup>3)</sup> It has the power to point to reality while creating an alternative world. For both artists, painting, in its highest manifestation, best fulfills, rather than denies, one of its most mundane objectives, namely decoration. (“One could write the history of humanity through the decorative arts,” Milhazes reminds us.)<sup>4)</sup> It is evident how this tropism toward the decorative led both painters toward the scale of the mural—in the case of Milhazes,

I can think of her 2005 projects in London for the Gloucester Road tube station and the restaurant of the Tate Modern—but one might not realize how the same impulse also led toward the book, or more specifically, the *livre d’artiste*, where intimacy and sensuality can be combined with a kind of grandeur. In book format, color, line, and materials can work with a text in much the same way that, on the larger scale of a mural, they tend to work with architecture.

“I do not distinguish between the construction of a book and that of a painting,” wrote Matisse, and “I always proceed from the simple to the complex, yet I am always ready to reconceive in simplicity.”<sup>5)</sup> This path, from the simple to the complex and above all back again, is likewise that of Milhazes. Looking back over reproductions of her paintings from the time when I first saw them in the mid-nineties—already a decade after she first began exhibiting in Brazil—I am struck by how much more abstract her paintings have become, how much more concise, even blunt, they are now, and perhaps less seductive as well. And

---

BARRY SCHWABSKY is an American art critic and poet living in London. His new collection of poems is *Book Left Open in the Rain* (Black Square Editions/The Brooklyn Rail).



BEATRIZ MILHAZES, *PEACE AND LOVE*, 2005, Gloucester Road Station Project Platform for  
*Art Underground, London / Friede und Liebe, Projekt für eine U-Bahn-Station.*

this is notwithstanding the fact that the paintings always seemed to be essentially abstract from the beginning, despite their references to the ruffles and lace that spread like vines through the portraiture of the Baroque era. Somehow, the paintings' bright colors looked slightly dingy with time, like the walls in a tropical city a little past its prime. The historical resonances in Milhazes' work of the mid-nineties seemed to derive more from Mexico than from her own Brazilian heritage. By the beginning of the present decade her forms had become less detailed and more pared down—although “pared down,” by Mil-

hazes' standards, might seem robustly immoderate to many other painters. The effect, in any case, was crisper, the colors more Pop; one was less likely to think of *retablos* and the Baroque than of Pucci and Lichtenstein. More recently, the paintings have grown even denser. Their swirling and whirling circular forms, which once encountered no other rectilinear resistance other than the frame's edge, are now counterpointed by a matrix of grids and bars. While the stripes are often wavy, their fundamentally straight paths are never in question. The resulting tautness and tension updates that of Cubism (more

*Beatriz Milhazes*

BEATRIZ MILHAZES, *Meu Bem, My Darling / Mein Schatz*, 2008.



that of Léger, with his overt monumentality, than of Picasso and Braque).

For many painters who also make prints and printed books on the side, there can be a discrepancy between their primary techniques as painters and those involved in printing; this is especially true when the painter's work depends on the immediacy and freshness of the mark. And often it is precisely to this tension that the success of their printed works is owed—when they are successful. Undoubtedly, many a failed effort can be ascribed to that same tension when it is not productively exploited. There are other painters, however, who enjoy a creative impulse that allows for easier movement from painting to printing. Their approach to painting is fundamentally indirect and mediated, just as it must be in the print medium. Jasper Johns would be the salient example of this; for more than fifty years, his painting oeuvre has been based on his ability to find one “oblique strategy” (I

borrow the phrase from Brian Eno) after another.<sup>6)</sup> The same kind of indirectness that characterizes the printing process in general seems to be built into his paintings, enabling him to move between the two mediums with extraordinary fluency. Milhazes may have little else in common with Johns, but her technique as a painter likewise involves indirection. She rarely paints directly on the canvas. Instead, she paints her forms onto sheets of plastic; after they dry, she transfers them to the canvas, peeling the plastic backing off the paint once they are affixed. Thus the motif is reversed; the back becomes the front much like *Hinterglasbilder*, the German folk art of painting behind glass, which Kandinsky practiced, as has the British painter Simon Periton. This reversal entails a contradiction that the artist herself has pointed out: “Even [in] a work like mine, which is very hand-made, the technique I used denies you the possibility to touch the hand signs of the painter. The organism”—she

Beatriz Milhazes



of her work and open it up to possibilities as yet unelaborated in her paintings. *Coisa Linda* (Something Beautiful) was published in 2002 by The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Its text consists of a dozen lyrics by three generations of Brazilian songwriters—the bossa nova of the late-fifties and early-sixties, the *Tropicália* of the late-sixties and early-seventies, and finally a third generation, closer to the painter's own, which is given no official name. As with any good *livre d'artiste*, what the artist has done here is neither a presentation of the text nor an illustration of it, but an interpretation of it—one might almost say a performance or perhaps an orchestration of it. And if it seems strange to accord to pop song lyrics the kind of



BEATRIZ MILHAZES, *Meu Bem, My Darling / Mein Schatz*, 2008.

means the organic quality—“of the construction of my paintings is subverted by the smooth and quite equal texture of it.”<sup>7)</sup> The sense of immediacy goes hand in hand with a sense of removal, of distancing. “I have a compulsive need for physical contact with my paintings,”<sup>8)</sup> Milhazes says, and the paintings at once infect the viewer with this urgent need and satisfy it, but always in a mediated way.

The two *livres d'artiste* that Milhazes has produced in this decade at once encapsulate the development

treatment that the French tradition reserved for important poets, a reading of the book itself will serve as a corrective: the words of Vinícius de Moraes, Antônio Carlos Jobim, Caetano Veloso and the rest (the originals here accompanied by fine English translations, signed by Clifford E. Landers) are of striking literary quality; divested of their melodies, they lose little of their appeal. Knowing this, Milhazes has exercised much restraint in her visual accompaniment to them; her tender, sinuous drawing might even seem

## *Beatriz Milhazes*

like marginal decoration, but the power of her draftsmanship is such that with a few fresh yet intricate arabesques she's able to evoke a tangible and resonant space for her chosen texts to inhabit. These pages are the sparsest work Milhazes has ever presented. They are interspersed with other pages that, even without any text at all, somehow remain rich with form (those concentric, spiraling, often floral or lace-like shapes familiar from her paintings) and color (often metallic). The flourishes somehow correspond, not to the songs themselves, but rather to their aftereffects—to the longing a song can leave at work, spiraling into you, as it were, after it's ended. A few pages, however, are quite atypical of Milhazes' other work: One spread shows rose-like lavender flowers hanging from vines and other flowers against the shadows of other vines. As these pages of the book indicate, the songs have inspired in Milhazes her most poignant lyricism.

More recently, Milhazes has published another significant *livre d'artiste*, *Meu Bem* (My Darling, 2008), produced with Book Works in London and published by Ridinghouse and the Thomas Dane Gallery. This is a book as dense and opulent as *Coisa Linda* is spare and discreet. In contrast to the earlier book, it has hardly any text. There are merely a few scattered phrases written in a mix of Portuguese and English on two spreads, which read as quick notations: "SNOW FLOWERS. O LAGO NU CUBISTA. BELEZA PURA. THE DREAM." In fact, it turns out, they are titles of paintings. And like many titles, which do not necessarily control the interpretation of a painting but give it a final touch, these few words are just enough to bring out more strongly what otherwise might have remained a quiet undertone, the artist's romanticism: Who else today could get away with citing "pure beauty" without a hint of irony? The book functions as a collage revealing the artist's love for the texture, color, and heft of all kinds of paper, both refined and mundane. Especially notable are the multitude of foil paper wrappers from all kinds of sweets that have found their way into the pages. And it is all the more astonishing that each wrapper is, in fact, a minutely detailed reproduction, right down to

the tiniest folds and wrinkles. Comparing the book to her paintings, Milhazes has called it "a visual story without end,"<sup>9)</sup> and the story seems to be one about travel, about journeying away from and returning to Rio de Janeiro. Juxtaposing a snapshot of Rio's Copacabana district, with its iconic wave-patterned mosaic walkways, to a collage of sumptuous papers printed in both straight and wavy vertical stripes, Milhazes reminds us that nearly every visual form in her work can be related to things she has seen in her home city, even when their sources seem rather far-flung. Just as the songs in *Coisa Linda* tell intimate tales of love and loss against a background of another sort of love affair—the love for a city—*Meu Bem* seems to address a place that is always there in the background, even when it is distant. Just as Jobim's bossa nova makes me nostalgic for Rio even though I've never been there, Milhazes seems nostalgic for it even while totally immersed in it. Not only a home, it would seem for her to be a place in the imagination that is never entirely in one's grasp.

*Something Beautiful, My Darling*—Milhazes has given her books pet names, phrases one would coo to a lover. One suspects that in them she has taken things she can avow publicly but guardedly in her paintings and whispered them in the ear of someone who can understand. Perhaps that someone is a city.

1) "Interview with Beatriz Milhazes," *RES Art World/World Art*, no. 2 (May 2008), p. 7.

2) Henri Matisse, *Matisse on Art*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p. 177.

3) *Ibid.*, p. 178.

4) "Christian Lacroix in Conversation with Beatriz Milhazes," *Beatriz Milhazes*, Domaine de Kerguéhennec, 2004, p. 71.

5) Matisse (see note 2), p. 168.

6) "Oblique strategy" refers to a deck of cards titled *Oblique Strategies* created by Brian Eno and Peter Schmidt in 1975 in an edition of 500. The deck presented over one-hundred dilemmas. Multiple editions have since been produced.

7) "Interview with Beatriz Milhazes" (see note 1), p. 12.

8) "Christian Lacroix in Conversation with Beatriz Milhazes" (see note 4), p. 66.

9) From the press release, "Beatriz Milhazes *Meu Bem*," Thomas Dane Gallery (October 17 – November 15, 2008).



BEATRIZ MILHAZES, *Meu Bem, My Darling / Mein Schatz*, 2008.

## On MEU BEM

BARRY SCHWABSKY

Part of what struck me about *Meu Bem* was how the technical virtuosity with which it was made added to the book's aesthetic impact. I decided to ask the book's designer, Rob Hadrill of Book Works, to explain what was involved. Here's some of what he told me:

"Obviously the original collages are interesting in themselves, but in approaching them as a printmaker, one always wants to bring something else to it. To a degree, you want to iron out some of the little faults that appear in the hand process but to also bring a little bit more to it. I took, for instance, an entirely collaged page of alternating straight-edged and undulating stripes, marbled paper, paper with colored

dots stuck to it, some brightly colored foils, strips of holographic foils, candy wrappers, and so on, and translated it into something that was more than just a reproduction, while retaining its three-dimensional quality. We developed some of the processes we used especially for this book; on one page, where the collage consisted of foil wrappers, the first thing we laid down was an area of gold foil, which was then screen printed over the top with a varnish to give it some texture and create the illusion that the wrapper had literally been folded and unfolded. In another area, we wanted to get the base color to come through, so we degraded the foil before we built the surface up by screen printing, a process called *giclée* (collaging of separate pieces that were dye-cut and screen printed), and then screen printing a second clear film. Of course, it is important to build up the image in the correct order. A lot of the difficulties we faced had to do with matching the right textures of the base papers—finding just the right combinations of smooth and matte surfaces."