

CONCEPTUAL CARNAVALESCA

Beatriz Milhazes:
Children Made a Snowman,
1993-94, acrylic
on canvas, 60
by 63 1/2 inches.
Private collection.

Images in this article
courtesy James
Cohan Gallery,
New York and
Shanghai.

Abstraction and popular culture cavort in high-spirited paintings by Beatriz Milhazes, whose first U.S. museum survey was recently on view in Miami.

by David Ebony

BEATRIZ MILHAZES'S brilliantly colored abstract paintings certainly please the eye. The Rio de Janeiro-based artist favors intricate arrangements of mandala-like shapes, rosettes and arabesques, along with painted details of jewelry, ribbons, swags of fabric borrowed from colonial-period Brazilian clothing and elements from Carnival costumes. Her layers of circular shapes give the flat surface of the canvas a sense of sensual, rhythmic movement that alludes to dance. The forms seem to spin and pulsate in centralized compositions set against bright, near-monochrome grounds of contrasting hues.

These optical extravaganzas, however, are not merely decorative; they encompass a subtle and rigorous critique of Brazilian history and culture, as they touch upon the country's colonial legacy, feminist issues and other social concerns. Clearly invested in the precepts of modernist abstraction, Milhazes's work also often reflects the unique relationship of Brazilian contemporary art to international postwar trends.

Born in Rio in 1960 to a lawyer father and an art historian mother, Milhazes earned a degree in journalism in 1981. The following year, she turned her attention to fine art and enrolled in Rio's Escola de Artes Visuais do Parque Lage, an experimental institution founded in 1980. There, she studied with Scottish-born, Rio-based artist and theorist Charles Watson, who also mentored Adriana Varejão a few years later.

Milhazes has been showing internationally since 1993, and since then a number of museum shows in Latin America and Europe have been devoted to her work. She also gained notice in Brazil for the set designs she created, beginning in the mid-1990s,

for the Rio-based dance company, Márcia Milhazes Companhia de Dança, directed by her sister, a prominent choreographer.

THE FIRST U.S. MUSEUM survey of Milhazes's paintings appeared recently at the Pérez Art Museum Miami. Organized by the museum's chief curator, Tobias Ostrander, "Beatriz Milhazes: Jardim Botânico" encompassed 51 works—mostly large-scale canvases, and two examples of her artist books displayed in vitrines. The show's title refers to the area around her studio in Horto, a district of Rio de Janeiro located between the Botanical Garden and Tijuca Forest, a now-preserved mountainous rainforest that was once occupied by vast sugar and coffee plantations. Milhazes has noted in press statements that she was attracted to the urban/natural hybrid feel of the neighborhood, and this environment may motivate the blend of organic forms and graphic elements borrowed from industrial design in her work.

Spanning over two decades, the Miami exhibition was arranged more or less chronologically. At times, the nuanced, Baroque-inspired compositions seemed to fight the Herzog & de Meuron-designed museum's stark modernist spaces. The show opened with a series of large canvases from 1993, including *Crianças fizeram um boneco de neve* (Children Made a Snowman). Here, a bright turquoise ground hosts a cluster of overlapping circles in tans and browns. The circles are each embellished with painted folds, flowers and lacework, resembling the doilies common in upper-class homes during the colonial period in Brazil, especially in the 18th and early 19th centuries. Looping down toward the right of the canvas is a curvilinear network of bold



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In Albis, 1996, acrylic on canvas, 72½ by 117¼ inches. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

black forms that suggest details of a fancy chandelier, perhaps, or a silhouette of filigree necklaces or earrings. Milhazes's rendering of such elements is often illusionistic, but the overall works have a frontal feel and a rather shallow pictorial space.

Some of the motifs in these early works recall adornments on formal evening gowns worn by the colonial aristocracy, such as frilly lace collars, medallions and floral trim. They also recall the flowing ribbons and gathered lace used to decorate sacred statues for special religious processions. *San Antonio Albuquerque* (1994), for instance, features a conglomeration of circular pieces of dark blue and deep red lace, gold disks and large rosettes set against a pink and blue ground. One could imagine these as ingredients used to embellish a statue of a saint with a halo and elaborate clothing.

At the same time, Milhazes references in her work the outlandish costumes and extravagant colors worn by *carnavalescos*, or carnival participants—performers on floats and the dancers and musicians from samba schools that fill the streets during the Carnival parade in Rio. More than two million Carioca (Rio residents) participate in Carnival, usually held in late February or early March. Creating elaborate—and often revealing and erotic—costumes for thematic floats and street dances, participants offer a freewheeling celebration of life in the days just before Lent, a time of prayer and atonement in the Catholic calendar. For Brazilians, Carnival is a great equalizer, a community effort spanning all neighborhoods and economic strata, a kind of unifying force in which, at least for a moment, social hierarchies dissolve.

"I would say that the Carnival parade of Rio is an event that motivates me to be an artist," Milhazes explained in an interview in the Pérez show's catalogue. "Its wildness and freedom—it's fascinating! Each year, each samba school has to develop a theme through costumes, cars, decorations, and so on. But I'm actually a conceptual *carnavalesca*."

In other statements, Milhazes points out that some of the elements she uses, especially the flowers, allude to various rituals, particularly weddings and funerals, which are central to Brazilian social life. In addition, she has noted that the ribbons, lace and jewelry in the paintings are intentional references to femininity. By using accouter-

ments that are so closely identified with girls and women, Milhazes from the outset aimed to create a kind of gender-specific abstraction.

Her paintings' surfaces are richly textured, and each picture has a weathered look, resulting from a technique that the artist adopted early on. Instead of working directly on the canvas, she paints her motifs in acrylic applied to transparent sheets of plastic. She peels the elements off the plastic when dry and organizes them on the canvas, eventually fixing them to the surface with transparent glue. She makes final touches with a paintbrush. Allowing the imperfections and scratches that occur in the transfer process to remain, she cultivates a distressed surface quality, mimicking the appearance of old art and artifacts of the colonial era. The overall technique is closely related to collage, which has become increasingly significant to Milhazes's practice.

IN 1993, MILHAZES traveled extensively in Latin America, visiting Mexico, Colombia, Venezuela and Puerto Rico, specifically to study Hispanic Baroque art and architecture. Following this trip, her work acquired a new level of refinement, and she seemed more confident working on a large scale. *In Albis* (1996) is a sprawling, tightly packed canvas. Blue and white circular forms of various sizes have delicate markings that resemble lace doilies. These are overlain with columns of blue roses and black arabesques recalling the elaborate wrought-iron railings, wall sconces and other features of grand, colonial-era private residences and public buildings throughout Latin America. Set against a midnight blue background, large, partly obscured orbs in orange and pale yellow at the top of the canvas appear to glow like lanterns at a nighttime street party.

By the late 1990s, Milhazes took a greater interest in Brazilian modern and contemporary art and the situation of her own work within these historical developments. Her focus shifted away from colonial-period motifs to those of Brazilian avant-garde happenings of the 1960s, such as Neo-Concretism and Tropicália, the latter a Rio-based movement of musicians, artists and writers opposed to the repressive military regime at the time. The work of these artists (Hélio Oiticica and Lygia



Potato Dreaming, 2013, acrylic on canvas, 118 by 78¾ inches.

Following spread, view of the exhibition "Beatriz Milhazes: Jardim Botânico," 2014-15, at the Pérez Art Museum Miami. Photo: Oriol Tarridas Photography.

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Lampião, 2013-14, acrylic on canvas, 81½ by 47¼ inches.

Clark, among others) had a direct correspondence to Pop art, experimental performance, installation art and other international trends. They also embraced folk art and homegrown icons like movie star Carmen Miranda, modernist painter Tarsila do Amaral, plus popular dances, such as the samba.

The Brazilian vernacular, especially that of Rio and its environs, manifested itself in Milhazes's work in terms of heightened color, hard-edge graphics and a more playful sensibility, as in her ongoing series of collages featuring found materials like used candy wrappers. An almost Day-Glo palette began to predominate in her paintings. *Tempo de Verão* (Summertime), 1999, features a diagonal composition with sun- and starburst motifs in high-pitched tones of pink, blue, yellow and orange. Echoing the spirit of *Tropicália*, the work has the psychedelic feel of imagery from the Summer of Love, complete with a plush blue heart and a pair of lovebirds at center left, seemingly borrowed from '60s antiwar posters. The intensity of the patterns and colors feels just barely under control.

MILHAZES'S INTERNATIONAL reputation grew through the 2000s, thanks to several important European exhibitions, and a well-received show at the Venice Biennale in 2003, when she represented Brazil. A pivotal event for her in the new millennium was the 2000 Dia retrospective of British Op artist Bridget Riley, which she saw during a visit to New York. Furthering her own aims toward creating what might be termed feminist abstraction, Milhazes absorbed the work of modernists like Sophie Taeuber-Arp and Sonia Delaunay, whose achievements had been underrecognized until relatively recently.

The Riley exhibition led Milhazes to introduce into her work a new set of motifs, compositional devices, color relationships and

optical experiments, such as undulating bands and moiré effects from overlapping geometric patterns. The simple grounds and organic shapes prevalent in earlier works yielded to stripes and angular forms. In *O Leme* (2002), for instance, her usual circle motifs pulsate against a background of pink, yellow and red vertical stripes. The configuration of circles suggests regular mechanical movement, like watch gears ticking off the seconds.

In most of her works throughout the 2000s, the reverberating circular forms seem to battle the rigidity of underlying geometric structures. *Avenida Brasil* (2003-04) is a vast canvas that imparts an intense discord among the principal elements. The playful array of circles and arabesques scattered horizontally across the surface is partly obscured in places by multicolored vertical bands that confine and constrict the implied movement of the curvilinear shapes.

Milhazes also experimented with installation pieces. In 2005, she was commissioned by London's Art Underground program to create enormous temporary murals for the Gloucester Road Station. For her exhibition at the Fondation Cartier pour l'Art Contemporain in Paris, in 2009, she made a series of "stained glass" windows. Using a technique similar to that of the Gloucester Road Station murals, she covered the windows with hard-edge shapes in translucent vinyl that filled the Jean Nouvel-designed gallery with prismatic color.

Her earliest forays into installation were her set designs for Márcia Milhazes Companhia de Dança. These included hanging mobiles of colorful disks and painted flowers, suspended from the ceiling on long strings or strands of beads. In 2011, she included a related 3-D work, *Gamba*, in her exhibition at the Beyeler Foundation in Basel. This large piece features a dense arrangement of vertical stacks of disks and abstracted floral shapes on long strands attached to a metal armature fixed to the ceiling. Unfortunately, examples of Milhazes's 3-D works were absent from the Pérez survey.

The exhibition did, however, conclude with a number of spectacular paintings, such as *Potato Dreaming* (2013). Gone are the flowers and other images associated with femininity. Characteristic of Milhazes's most recent works, *Potato Dreaming* features solid colors and crisp lines and shapes with little or no modulation. The colors are rather subdued and the emphasis seems to be on the ambiguous spaces created by the complex interweaving of overlapping circles, rectangles and striated bands.

The paintings created specifically for this exhibition, including *Lampião* (2013-14) and *São Cosme e Damiano* (Saints Cosmas and Damian), 2014, are packed with optical games and may be regarded as homages to the pioneering Venezuelan artists Jesús Rafael Soto and Carlos Cruz-Diez, whose work explored the boundaries of visual perception and the aesthetics of color relationships.

São Cosme e Damiano, whose title refers to the martyred twins known as patrons of physicians and, especially in Brazil, as protectors of children, represents a Milhazes retrospective unto itself. On the lower left a network of floral shapes and arabesques in pink, black and yellow—like those in the artist's earlier works—presses toward the hyperactive geometric shapes of spinning wheels and thick undulating lines on the right, similar to those prominent in her recent paintings. Hardly a nostalgic summing up, this work suggests the inexhaustible possibilities for abstract painting that Milhazes surely imagines. ○

*Beatriz Milhazes: "Jardim Botânico" was on view at the Pérez Art Museum Miami, Sept. 19, 2014-Jan. 11, 2015.



Saints Cosmas and Damian, 2014, acrylic on canvas, 87½ by 98½ inches. Private collection.