

Artists Interview Fairs USA

Beatriz Milhazes: 'There is nothing simple about what I'm doing'

Miami hosts Brazilian artist's first solo museum show in the US

By Claire Rigby. From Art Basel Miami Beach daily edition
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Beatriz Milhazes commands some of the highest prices of any living Brazilian artist. In 2012, *Meu Limão*, 2000, went for \$2m at Sotheby's New York, and this May, *Palmolive*, 2004, sold for \$1.68m at Christie's New York. It is perhaps surprising, then, that "Jardim Botânico", which opened at the Pérez Art Museum Miami in September, is the carioca artist's first solo show in a US museum during her 30-year career. Imbued with a complex, colourful geometry, Milhazes's vividly layered paintings are made using a technique she refers to as "monotransfer", in which she paints forms onto thin, transparent sheets of plastic and then applies them to the canvas using glue. In her studio—one in a row of three, soon-to-be-four houses—in the verdant Rio neighbourhood of Jardim Botânico, Milhazes told us about abstract art, prices and the problems of working with green.



The painter Beatriz Milhazes. Photo: Vicente de Paulo

The Art Newspaper: Your paintings have names like *The Idiot*, *The Blue Elephant* and *Cry, Boy*—how do you come up with them?

Beatriz Milhazes: I like to give my paintings names, but they don't have any direct relationship with the work. It's hard to explain. They're not completely random; they come from my universe, just like the work. I don't like them to be too literal, because I think that limits the viewer's reading of a painting. Art is visual and it should be understood visually. We live in a world of words, but looking at art is a chance to develop a kind of visual intelligence that will stimulate you in other ways. People aren't given many opportunities to do that.

You have said that all painting is abstract.

I think it is. This canvas, this space, is a space that does not exist anywhere in the world, in any real place. To do a good job, you have to forget the real world; and if you forget the real world, you're working with abstraction. Of course there are figures, and you have a kind of representation, but it's all developed through an abstract reasoning. Throughout history, the only painters who have done really important work are those who worked from an abstract reasoning. Painting is always colour, shape, structure, composition. Always.

With your paintings, it sometimes feels as though the viewer can get the idea at first glance. But the more you observe, the more complex it seems to become.

I think the fact that I use elements of decorative art, and colour, and the fact of being a woman [laughs]—it can cause some confusion. It doesn't bother me; I've had a good response to my work, and many critics have been able to see its importance. But there is nothing simple about what I'm doing. It's not superficial—a woman painting colourful things. I think there is an aspect where people look and say, "Oh, that's lovely," but they don't really want to put in the time to observe what is being developed there; to move on from the first glance, which may be an easier kind of communication, and see that there is something very complex that makes the whole thing work.

In Rio, and especially here in Jardim Botânico, where you have your studio, lush green is everywhere. But although you paint flowers and flowerlike colours, it is hard to find much green in your work.

I did one group of paintings in which I used a lot of green, but not especially because of that influence. When it comes to plants, I love green more than anything—but it's such a difficult colour to work with. It's a colour that artists try to avoid, or at least painters do; I don't know why exactly. It's not as hard as pink [laughs]. Pink is almost impossible. But green sits between worlds; it's in the category of cool colours, but can get quite hot. Blue is trickier: it rarely gets hot, but it has this heavenly aspect, and it can give depth.

A lot of geometric art from Brazil and elsewhere appears almost afraid to use colour. Why do you think that is?

I think people associate Latin America as a whole, and especially Brazil, thanks to Carnival and the exuberance of nature, with colour, including in art. But it's not true: our art has no colour. When people ask about my influences, in that respect, I don't have many references in Brazilian art—perhaps in European art. You'll always find colour, of course, in folk art, hence my interest in that. I love the conflict in colour. For me, it provides solutions and helps me to resolve some issues of composition. You find more colour in the Modernists, but Tarsila [do Amaral] used colour, Surrealism and all, because she too used popular art as a reference. That is where you see this interest in colour beginning to be developed. I like the colour in the work of Yolanda Mohalyi, an Expressionist painter. Ione Saldanha also works in colour, and that's why she is a reference in my work.

The painters you mention are all women.

That's curious. Women play an extremely important role in the history of Brazilian art, and that's not something you can say about the US or Europe, where art is still mainly a male domain. In terms of painting, you have trouble finding women who are respected. But here in Brazil, you have Lygia Clark, Lygia Pape, Mira Schendel, Tarsila. It's not that there are thousands, but they're extremely important in Brazilian art history, and that's the big difference.

Some of your works have fetched stratospheric prices. Why is that, do you think?

It's very difficult to say. It's not as though anyone planned it; it would be impossible, anyway. If we knew how these things happened, a lot of people would do it. I suppose painting will always be more prone to this because in the end, the market is conservative. But I think, too, that my work may have a power of communication that is wider. And then, my production is small and always has been—it's slow, but there are lots of people interested in it, so I think that has an effect. What I think is interesting is that, in terms of Brazilian art, I haven't been alone in this—there are other artists who have also achieved high prices. This is the first time in the history of Brazilian art that an artist has been introduced to this auction market at that level of price. It means that we're finally playing a part in the international art scene, and that's a great thing.

Galerie Max Hetzler

The Art Newspaper

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Milhazes returns to collage for Hong Kong debut with White Cube

The artist is due to show a series of new collages from March to May 2015 at White Cube in Hong Kong. The exhibition, which will be her first project with White Cube (L9), is a practical way, she says, of showing her work in Asia without necessarily needing to negotiate local gallery representation there. Milhazes is already represented by four major galleries worldwide (Fortes Vilaça, São Paulo; James Cohan, New York; Stephen Friedman Gallery, London; Galerie Max Hetzler, Berlin).

This will be Milhazes's first show in Hong Kong, although she has exhibited in China before, having taken part in the Shanghai Biennial in 2006. The works, in which Milhazes incorporates new elements into her collage practice in the form of printed gift papers, also feature more familiar elements, such as chocolate and sweet wrappers, and a noticeable, repeated leaf motif, as well as the development of a tree-trunk form she has used in previous collages, which has now evolved into a vertical line, dividing the paper. The collages also include a large amount of "leftover" materials and papers. A rare black-and-white collage, one of three Milhazes has made, will be included, as will one painting, "to help provide a dialogue with my other work", she says.

With a style of painting reminiscent of the collage process (in that she fits pre-painted, decal-like "monotransfers" onto her canvases using glue), true collage has also been a part of Milhazes's practice throughout her career, and has, at times, been mixed in with her paintings. Nevertheless, it is three years since Milhazes last worked exclusively in the medium. The main part of her original studio in Rio de Janeiro is now given over to collage—the rest of the building is where her administrative staff have their desks—and her painting studio is now in another house she owns, two doors down.