CONCEPTUAL CARNAVALESCA

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 tempera slabs of bold, often biblical figures, and the daydreams of sheikhs in capes and turbans. The subject of this year’s survey at the Museu de Arte Contemporânea in Niterói, Brazil, Milhazes’s work also reflects the unique relationship of Brazilian contemporary art to international postwar trends.

Born in Rio in 1960 to a licensed fiber and an art historian mother, Milhazes studied at the Escola de Arte Visuais do Parque Lage, an experimental institution founded in 1959. She then studied with Scottish-born, Rio-based artist and Beatrice Charles Watson, who also mentored Adriana Varejão, five years her senior.

Milhazes has been working internationally since 1993, and since then a number of museums in Latin America and Europe have been devoted to her work. She also gained notice in Brazil for the art designs she created, beginning in the mid-1990s, for the Rio-based dance company, Maria 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 Perez Art Museum Miami, organized by the museum’s chief curator, Tobias Oviedo. “Beatriz Milhazes: Jardins Ilustrados” encompassed 11 works—mostly large-scale canvases, and two examples of her artist’s books displayed in vitrines. The show’s title refers to the aura around her studio in Flora, a distant of Rio de Janeiro located between the Botanical Gardens and Tijuca Forest, a nature preserve of mountainous streams that was once occupied by sugarcane and coffee plantations. Milhazes has noted to press statements that she was attracted to the culture’s cultural hybrid of the neighborhood and the environment of nature that surrounds her.

Spending two decades, the Miami exhibition was arranged more or less chronologically. At times, the mosaics, paintings, and compositions seemed to fight the history of Brazilian art, with specific themes and figures of the past and future, and Brazilian nature, with the mix of nature and culture that surrounds her work. The show opened with a series of large canvases from 1993, including ‘Gatos famintos no banho de areia’ (Children Made a House), then, bright marqueses and rocks of overlapping circles in taxa and brown. The colors are each established with painted bricks, at play, and lace, resembling the chinos connoisseur in upper-class homes at the colonial period in Brazil, especially in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Looping down toward the right of the canvas is a carriageway network of bold
black forms that suggest details of a fancy charade or, perhaps, a silhouette of a figure smoking or satirizing. Milhazes’s rendering of such elements is often illustrative, but the overall works have a frontal but a rather shadowy pictorial space.

Some of the motifs in these early works recall hallucinations or fantastic images in the colonial imagery such as full-

face collars, ruffles and floral trim. They also recall the flowing robes and garments that have been associated with special religious processes. See, for instance, Almeida’s Masso (1996), for which Milhazes studied the cornucopia of circular pieces of dark blue and deep red clay, gold dust and large Rosaries 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 ceramic clothing.

At the same time, Milhazes references in her work the witchish costumes and imaginative color schemes by visual artists, in a particular—perhaps—on themes and the dancers and musicians from local school that fill the streets during the Carnaval each year. This was a typical Carnaval in the city that Milhazes's parents were born in. For Carnaval, Milhazes created a new costume, a costume that would be worn on the day before Carnaval. The costumes of these Carnavals—those of the artists and musicians from local school that fill the streets on Carnaval—remained a constant feature of her art.

A typical Carnaval costume was an element that motivated me to be an artist,” Milhazes explained in an interview with the Press (1996). “But we were not…”

In other interviews, Milhazes points out that the work of the artist is to be understood within the context of the social and cultural milieu in which it is created. In addition, she has noted that the use of black as a symbol of the colonizer and of the artist in the paintings are intentional references to linocut prints. By using abstracted

images that are so closely identified with girls and women, Milhazes focuses on the outer anatomy 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 pools the elements of 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 textures and structures that occur in the transfer process to remain, she cultivates a dimensioned surface quality, emphasizing the appearance of old art and artifacts of the colonial era. The overall technique is closely related to collage, which has become increasingly important in Milhazes’s practice.

In 1993, Milhazes showed extensively in Latin America, visiting Mexico, Colombia, Venezuela, and Puerto Rico, specifically to study Hispanic, Hispanic art and architecture. Following this trip, her work acquired a new level of refinement, and the second more coherent working on a large scale. In 1996 (1996), a new working, tightly packed curves, Blue and white circular forms of various sizes have a distinctive quality that resembles lace doilies. These are overlaid with a pattern of blue rose and black ink forming the elaborate webpage’s own paintings on canvas, oil and watercolor of good, colonial-era private residences and public buildings throughout Latin America. On a small white background, large, partly abstracted oval is enameled and polished yellow at the top of the canvas and appear to glow like lamps in a nighttime street scene.

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 past traditions to those of Brazilian avant-garde happenings of the 1980s, such as New Concretism and Técnica, the latter a Brazilian movement of musicians, artists and writers opposed to the oppressive military regime at the time. The work of these artists (Eldete Orsini and Loga...
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March 2015

Clerk, among others, had a close correspondence to Pop art, experimental performance, installation art and other international trends. They also introduced folk and regional concerns, mostly by visual artist Carmen Miranda, renowned painter Tanaquil de Menil, and popular dancers, such as in the movies.

In the late 1960s, especially with the use of Rio and its culture, and in the end, transformed itself in the 1970s into a museum of Brazilian culture, hard-edge graphics, and modernist sculpture, as in her ongoing series of reliefs featuring found materials like wood and canvas. His most famous work, the 1970s painting of a woman in a dress, is a modernist masterpiece. "The colors of the pattern and color felt just barely under control."

MILHAZES'S INTERNATIONAL repertory 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 was the new exhibition in 2005, which has since been recognized as one of the most important shows of the year. In 2006, she was invited to participate in the Sao Paulo Bienale, where her work was displayed alongside other international artists. Since then, she has exhibited in several important galleries and museums around the world.

The Riley exhibition led Milhares to introduce into her work a new set of motifs, compositional devices, color relationships and optical experiments, such as oscillating bands and model effects from overlapping geometric patterns. The simple geometric and organic shapes provided in earlier works yielded to stripes and angular forms. In 2004, for instance, her works include horizontal and vertical stripes painted against a background of pink, yellow and red vertical stripes. The configuration of circles suggests regular mechanical movement, like words going ticking off the seconds.

In most of her works throughout the 2000s, the intertwining circular forms seem to balance the rigidity of geometric structures. "Amelia Reis: 2009-10" is an example that suggests an intense tension among the principal elements. The mobile array of circles and subsequent movement horizontally across the surface is partly obscured in plans by multicolored vertical bands that contrast and constitute the implied movement of the circular shapes. Milhares also experimented with installation pieces. In 2003, she was commissioned by Louisiana Art Fund to create a monumental temporary work for the Glencoe Road Station. For her installation at the Fondazione Prada in 2006, she made a series of "stained glas" windows. Using a technique similar to that of the Glencoe Road Station mural, she covered the windows with hard-edge shapes in translucent vinyl that filled the June. Nough-stained gallery with plastic color.

Her earliest forms into installations were her set designs for "Marte: Milhares's Carnavalesque: Drama," which included hanging mobiles of colored dishes and painted flowers, suspended from the ceiling on long strings or ropes of beads. In 2011, she included a series of 3-D works, "Gorizia," in her exhibition at the Blower Foundation in Brazil.

This large piece features a dense arrangement of vertical strips of dishes and abstracted floral shapes on long strings attached to a metal armature fixed to the ceiling. Unfortunately, examples of Milhares's 3-D works were about four feet away from the elevator.

The exhibition did, however, conclude with a number of spectacular paintings, such as "Praia Dourada" (2013), which uses the flowers as the central element associated with fantasy. Characteristic of Milhares's recent mural works, "Praia Dourada" features a grid of circular and oval forms and shapes with little or no modulation. The colors are rather subdued and the emphasis is on the ambiguous space created by the complex interweaving of overlapping circles, rectangles and stained beads.

The paintings received particularly for this exhibition, including "Laputa" (2014) and "Dia Castro's Carnaval (St Inline Cevon and Obivon)," 2014, are pulled with optical glasses and easily regarded as homage to the pioneering Varensian artists Joon Reid Snod and Carlos Casta, whose works utilized the foundation of visual perception and the aesthetics of color relationships.

Sil Corvo / Diana: whose title refers to the mythological twin known as twin sisters of physicians and, especially in Brazil, its protection of children, represents a Milhares retrospective came into itself. On the lower left a network of floral shapes and abstractions in pink, black and yellow-like those in the artist's earlier works—press toward the hyperactive geometric shapes of spinning wheels and black modulating lines on the right, similar to those prominent in her recent paintings. Hardly a nostalgic surveying up, this work suggests the need for feasibility for abstract painting that Milhares's worthy imagery.