

## Beatriz Milhazes: Birmingham Museum of Art, Birmingham, AL

Philip Auslander

Beatriz Milhazes's acrylic paintings have the surging, breathtaking rhythm of a good fireworks display. Explosions of intense color combine and overlap without losing their own distinctive character. The efflorescence of hue in each painting is dramatic; it builds and develops. A small bouquet of flowers at the bottom of *O Cravo e a Rosa* (The clove and the rose), 2000, becomes the base of a vertical composition built of ever-larger petaled shapes, culminating in an ethereal, silvery blue cloudlike pattern that occupies nearly a third of the canvas. Milhazes captures that paradoxical moment when succession becomes indistinguishable from simultaneity, as in the finale of the pyrotechnic show--a series of bursts, each more spectacular than the last, that follow one another in time yet also hang together in the air for just an instant. This recent exhibition of paintings and screen prints, coorganized with the Ikon Gallery in Birmingham, England, was the Brazilian artist's first museum show in the United States.

Milhazes's particular sense of temporality may be an effect of her distinctive technique. Though she generally applies background colors and compositional sketches directly to the canvas, many of the central motifs are first painted on sheets of plastic that are then pressed to the canvas, transferring the images. The accretion of elements behind and beneath one another constitutes both an archaeological record of the painting's development over time and the complex final image. One might think Milhazes's brushless technique would make for cool and inexpressive painting but this is not the case: Each motif looks distinctly handmade. The artist's touch evident, and repeated elements are never identical, since the process of pressing the images onto the canvas is imperfect; often they do not transfer evenly or smoothly. Milhazes also leaves behind traces of her compositional drawings. The surfaces of her canvases are rich palimpsests of over images, some fully present, some masked, some only ghosts of abandoned possibilities. Milhazes has said that her technique is intended to give painting some of the qualities of modernist collage. The uneven surface that results equally creates the impression of decollage, of images revealed when others are peeled away.

The sense of suspended temporality Milhazes's work is deepened by her use a vocabulary of decorative forms from the past, frequently reminiscent of antique wallpaper, greeting cards, and posters. Flowers abound, as do elegant strands of beads, arrangements of concentric circles, and sweeping arabesques. The elegiac *In Albis*, 1995-96, is stately yet energetic: Against a dark ground, lacy mandala-like circles are juxtaposed with a dark blue heart, ribbons, blue and white roses, circles, beads, and vertical filigree shapes suggestive of chapiers. *A Infanta*, 1996, in contrast, combines lace and ribbon images with flowers and delicate peace symbols that evoke the psychedelic poster art of the '60s. Milhazes braces motifs that might become kitschy or corny in less adroit hands. She exhibits the same fearlessness with respect to cultural stereotypes. *O Guitarrista*, 2000, offers a dazzling helical strand of exotic wavers against an ochre ground; the image seems self-consciously "tropical." But Milhazes makes it simultaneously a carnivalesque celebration of her Brazilian identity and an acknowledgment of how that identity has sometimes been packaged for the rest of the world. Her work suggests that she neither presumes her imagery to be innocent nor feels the need to subject it to withering irony, preferring to maintain an attitude of knowing generosity.

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