

Brazilian Artist Beatriz Milhazes Takes Center Stage in the U.S.

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By

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The Works of Beatriz Milhazes



Brazilian painter Beatriz Milhazes's explosive botanical scenes will be on display in her first solo museum show in the U.S. at the Pérez Art Museum Miami. Above, 'São Cosme e Damião,' (Saints Cosmas and Damian), 2014 *Beatriz Milhazes/James Cohan Gallery, NY*

Beatriz Milhazes's explosive botanical scenes have been coveted for years by collectors throughout South America and Europe, but on Sept. 19, the Brazilian painter will open her first solo museum show in the U.S. at the Pérez Art Museum Miami.

The exhibit amounts to an official debut for the museum, the former Miami Art Museum that gained a new name when it moved into a sleek Herzog & de Meuron-designed building last year. PAMM

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has since held several group shows, but Ms. Milhazes's "Botânica Garden" represents its first retrospective, organized by its chief curator Tobias Ostrander.

Mr. Ostrander said he chose Ms. Milhazes because her Spirograph-like paintings of overlapping blossoms, stripes and unfurling leaves will likely resonate with audiences in Miami's climate—particularly the city's growing Brazilian diaspora.

The 50-work show also comes at a time when the artist appears to be moving away from her signature bouquets toward compositions that feature more geometric shapes and straight lines. "Beatriz's art was always sensual and dizzying, just sensory overload," Mr. Ostrander said. "She's moving more and more toward purely geometric forms."

From a market standpoint, her decision could be a risk. Over the past decade, major collectors have gravitated toward her more-is-more arrangements—in part because the cheeriness of her canvases seemed to match Brazil's economic rise. In May 2008, Buenos Aires collector Eduardo Costantini paid Sotheby's \$1 million for her rainbow-hued "Magic" from 2001, tripling its high estimate. That painting will be part of the PAMM show, along with flowery pieces lent by heavyweights like German publisher Benedikt Taschen, Austrian philanthropist Francesca von Habsburg and Washington lobbyist Tony Podesta.

Ms. Milhazes, speaking from her studio in Rio de Janeiro, said her shift toward abstraction is actually her artistic equivalent of coming home—because the story of 20th century Brazil hinges heavily on geometry. Ms. Milhazes, who grew up in Brazil during an era of dictatorship, said her peers rarely got to see much contemporary art. But her mother was an art-history professor, so she learned about Brazil's latest art trends. Her family revered the Brazilian modernist painters of the 1930s, but the local art scene in the 1960s was all about the Neo-Concrete, a movement that prized art made using principles of geometry or movement rather than covering canvases in brushstrokes. Neo-Concrete stars included Lygia Clark, who cut shards of aluminum to make origami-like sculptures, and Lygia Pape, who strung rows of gold thread to create obstacle course-like installations.

She knew about these Neo-Concrete artists, but she yearned to paint. Her first artist crush was Henri Matisse. In college, she studied journalism by day but took art classes at night and reveled in making collages from bits of fabric and colored paper. She attended Rio's carnivals and parades and took inspiration from the effusion of ruffles and undulation. With her parents' blessing, she started painting flowers with lacy curlicues in hot, Fauvist hues—but "I always felt like an outsider," she said.

Her painting methods also stood apart. In 1989, she began experimenting with how to create a painting that could ape the stacked look of a paper collage, with some elements hidden behind others. Her eureka moment hit when she used acrylic to paint on a clear sheet of plastic, then used glue and

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pressure to transfer her designs onto canvas. Sometimes the design flaked, but she liked the decayed look such "mistakes" produced, she said. Nobody in Brazil was applying this decal-like process to fine art, and it became her breakthrough.

She has built a glossary of motifs to lay and overlay, and the PAMM exhibition charts their evolution. In the early 1990s, her works contain tribal references and Baroque designs like ruffles, beads, and flowers; later, she adds Pop elements like hearts, peace signs and fruity headdress shapes that nod to her compatriot Carmen Miranda. The market tends to favor the "exploding circles" series that followed in the next decade, where works like "The Son of London" revolve around blossoming dahlia-like forms.

Two of the three new works in the Miami exhibit hint at where Ms. Milhazes could be headed, led by "Flowers and Trees." Gone are the frills and fruit, this canvas evokes a forest comprised almost entirely of circles. Ms. Milhazes, a former math teacher, said "there's always been structure" to her paintings; her new works simply reveal more of the scaffolding.