



ART REVIEW: A Rough and Ravishing Beatriz Milhazes Garden Grows in Miami

October 15, 2014

by Elisa Turner

Lavish license pervades this Brazilian garden. Overlapping layers of eye-popping blooms seem to sing with sexy rhythms from the famed Carnival festival in Rio de Janeiro. Visitors may find themselves swaying to musical forms pulsing through “Beatriz Milhazes: Jardim Botânico” at Pérez Art Museum Miami, on view through January 11, 2015.

Billed as the first major U.S. survey of work by Milhazes, PAMM’s “Botanical Garden” (the exhibit’s title in English) is both garden and festival of painting. It adds new luster to the distinctive hanging gardens ornamenting the exterior of the museum’s acclaimed architecture. Inside, the exhibit features more than 50 large-scale paintings, collages, and prints. They reveal the artist’s passionate love affair with mingling canvas, color, and form to create bold textures via her signature collage and printing techniques. Those textures are at once rough and ravishing. The gathering, PAMM curator Tobias Ostrander said during an exhibit tour, “allows us to see a huge trajectory of her work.”



“Beatriz Milhazes: Jardim Botânico” Installation view. Pérez Art Museum Miami.
Photo: Oriol Tarridas Photography.

That trajectory begins with the artist’s early determination to embrace the intricate, tactile pleasures of so-called “women’s work.” She suffuses her compositions with the rhythmic forms and delicate patterns found in embroidery, lace doilies, and beadwork. These often tiny treasures can now loom large as their circular shapes are magnified with the colorful intensity of a painting like *Chora, menino*. A kaleidoscopic bouquet of circular forms in this painting cascades along decisive diagonal lines, contrasting a smaller gold-colored field with a larger mass of lapis lazuli bloom-like shapes.

“When I started developing my own language in painting,” Milhazes recalled in a recent interview at PAMM, “I wanted to take not only the things that come from my culture and environment, but also some personal interests in applied, decorative arts.” Thus she imaginatively weds what in a less open-minded era might be called high and low art.



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Even as they recall lace doilies, so many circles in her paintings further testify to her thorough grounding in the elastic virtues of geometric abstraction. It’s a tribute to both some of the traditions of Brazilian modernism and to her growing up as the daughter of an art historian and a lawyer. “Both my parents were very interested in culture,” she said.

Revisits Creative Legacies of Brazil

Milhazes is part of a generation of artists in Brazil who began attracting attention in the mid-1980s, after the country’s isolating period of dictatorship and military rule ended. At that time Brazilian artists were finding ways to revisit celebrated creative legacies, such as 1960s music Bossa Nova and Tropicalismo, as well as the Neo-Concrete art of Lygia Clark, whose geometric sculpture manipulates perceptions of depth in innovative ways.

During the 1920s, a significant figure shaping Brazilian modernism was Tarsila do Amaral (1886-1973). Milhazes admired Tarsila, as she is known in Brazil, for traveling to Europe and studying with Fernand Léger while at the same time committing to the idea that her art must evolve its own voice by re-inventing European modernism with an up-close understanding of Brazilian history and culture.

Tarsila visited Brazil’s interior state of Minas Gerais, intrigued by Baroque churches built there during the 18th Century gold rush. She absorbed the vibrant colors and forms enlivening the country’s popular secular and religious festivals, particularly Carnival.



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Like Tarsila, Milhazes was taken with the dense visual language of Brazil’s traditions and Carnival, and early in her career her work showed the influence of Brazilian and Mexican colonial baroque painting. Her treatment of the circle, when placed at the center of the canvas, can recall, as label text for her painting *Viagem ao Centro da Terra* notes, “the shape of traditional Catholic representations of the Virgin Mary surrounded by gold lines and halos.”

In *Santo Antonio, Albuquerque*, Milhazes employs a lighter palette than in *Chora, menino*. Here, she endows overlapping circles with buoyant, almost bubbling charm. Additionally, she’s introduced another favorite motif, the curly and calligraphic arabesque form. It, too, has roots in decorative art,

adapted from the lacy styles of iron grilles used for balconies and gates.



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Mariposa is considered one of several paintings nodding to *samba* singer and film star Carmen Miranda (1909-1955). Miranda’s stylized flamboyance and signature “fruit hat” brought her international fame as the “Brazilian Bombshell.” Denigrated later in life for contributing to stereotypes misreading the diversity of Latin America, she is nevertheless remembered as a forerunner of Tropicalismo, a late 1960s movement in Brazilian culture encompassing various art forms, though it now generally signifies music fusing Brazilian and African rhythms with rock and roll. Curiously, *Mariposa* reads as one of Milhazes’s compositions less imbued with Miranda’s trademark excess.

In 1989, Milhazes developed a process for mixing collage and printing techniques with painting, giving her canvases an almost “distressed” surface. That surface suggests the passage of time while also evoking city buildings scuffed by layers of graffiti and posters papered over with more posters. It complements the insistent rhythms that distinguish her compositions.



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In this process, she paints particular forms for a painting onto clear plastic sheets. Next, she positions the sheets on the canvas, covering them with clear acrylic glue. After the glue dries, she pulls the sheets off the canvas, leaving a less-than-exact record of the painted form on the canvas.

In reproductions of her paintings, it’s hard to see these rough textures, overshadowed as they are by the artist’s vibrant palette. “Some people who have followed my work have not really seen it in the flesh,” she said while walking through the PAMM exhibit. “It’s very much the result of a hand-made process. You can only see it when you see it.”

A Garden of Her Own

What is clearly visible are the ingenious variations Milhazes brings to the presence of this garden growing in Miami. Impossible to miss are its delightful multitude of colors, textures, and abstract shapes recalling decorative forms. Throughout are allusions to admired artists from Tarsila to

Matisse to Bridget Riley to Roberto Burle Marx.



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As visitors move through the galleries, her paintings often seem ever more kinetic. Some compositions fairly leap backward and forward into the viewer’s space. In *Feijoada*, Milhazes orchestrates overlapping circles with arabesque shapes. She adds curvilinear forms recalling ocean waves and undulating mosaic sidewalks on Copacabana Beach created by Burle Marx, Brazil’s famed landscape artist and painter.

The graphic density vibrating through *Flores e Arvores* transports the kinetic artistic style of Jesús Rafael Soto into a realm only Milhazes could paint. It’s a garden of her own, sure to ravish Miami.

BASIC FACTS: “Beatriz Milhazes: Jardim Botanico” continues through January 11, 2015. The exhibition is located at Pérez Art Museum Miami, 1103 Biscayne Blvd., Miami, FL 33132. www.pamm.org.

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