

# JAMES COHAN GALLERY

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## INTERVIEW WITH BEATRIZ MILHAZES

WITH BEATRIZ MILHAZES IN PARIS



Beatriz Milhazes, Paris

Our interview with the Rio de Janeiro-based artist Beatriz Milhazes (\*1960) in Paris was the result of a long correspondence. The vivid exchange, which started with Márcia de Moraes of Galeria Fortes Vilaça—Milhazes' representative in Brazil—, continued with the artist's assistant Tereza Lyrio.

We would like to thank both for their interest and support.

The interview which we had initially planned to conduct in Brazil—as this would have given us an opportunity to see the artist's solo exhibition in Galeria Fortes Vilaça and retrospective in Estação Pinacoteca, São Paulo—eventually took place at an apartment in Paris that belonged to a French diplomat couple. On January 18, we met in the living room of this flat, with a French balcony facing a bright courtyard. The

first impression we had during our meeting with Beatriz Milhazes was that she was as bright, cheerful, and positive as her paintings. During the three-hour interview, Milhazes answered our questions in all her sincerity, giving us detailed information about her life and art. RES wishes the artist all the best for her upcoming exhibition to be held in February 2009 at Fondation Cartier pour l'Art Contemporain in Paris and her future projects.

We also asked Milhazes who spends part of her time in Paris every year if she paints there, too. 'No. I need to be at home and see the brightness in my garden to be able to paint,' she answered.

**RES** Let's start from the very beginning. How and when did you start your career?

**BEATRIZ MILHAZES** I started at a very young age. My mother was an art historian and taught at the university. So it was quite normal that I wanted to get a degree in something other than art. That was the reason why I first wanted to be a journalist. But in my sophomore year at the university, I realized that journalism was not my thing. It turned out to be something I didn't like. And since my mother had always been involved in the art world, she asked me why I wouldn't try art school. Now, in those times, we had this one academy of art. But it was a very academic and conservative institution. And there was this free school of art. It was the best option if you were young and wanted to make art. So I enrolled in this art school when I was 20 years old and I really felt that this was in fact what I wanted to do. After studying at the school for about three years I left it when I was 23 and I opened my studio.

**RES** That was in 1982?



**BM** Yes, in Rio de Janeiro.

**RES** What is your relationship with music, and cinema? How do you connect yourself with rhythm in general?

**BM** I grew up with music at home because my father was a big fan of especially Brazilian and pop music. I had a very good art education at home. Even though my father was a lawyer, my parents were both deeply involved in art. Needless to say, thanks to my mother's focus on art due to her profession, I had an immense formation. But since I started my own work, I've never had any connection with music. Music is never used directly in my work. Only after 2000, I started using rhythm in my work more.

**RES** We guess it is now a bit of a cliché to comment that underlying your work are the effects of Brazilian folk art.

**BM** True. At the beginning, my work was neither directly interested in nor connected to it, but it certainly bore the effects of the Brazilian folk culture in a plastic way, on the visual result. It took some time before I arrived at the things I actually wanted to make. When I was at school, I wanted to establish a link between my culture and what I had always been and the painting. I think that was the greatest challenge, because painting is a serious undertaking; and back then, to be a serious painter, the work always had to be associated with meaning originating from Europe, and later on, from the United States, but not from Brazil. Yet for me, Brazil was a zone of meanings, of captions. These did not necessarily have a connection with the outside world. So in my case, I wanted to establish a connection to my work, because in reality, my life and my culture have nothing to do with painting. But how could I connect it in an interesting way? And thus the carnival became a part of it. Because I have always loved the way Brazilian people live it. In Brazil, the carnival develops differently in every state, every place. In reality the carnival is something magnificent. I am not really into carnival; I don't go out on the street and dance. But I have always been a really huge admirer of the way they develop the carnivals and of this freedom they enjoy. They mix completely different things. They always have teams of samba from every school each year.



Beatriz Milhazes, *Duro Branco*, 2006  
Mixed collage on paper, 61.2 x 58.4 in / 155.5 x 148.5cm

Collection: Helga Alvar, Madrid  
© Fausto Flory

**RES** Frankly, we were a bit hesitant to ask you this question, as many people must be making the same connection. Many times, this may not be true either.



Beatriz Milhazes, *Dancing*, 2007  
Acrylic on canvas, 97.2 x 137.7 in / 247 x 350 cm

Collection: Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo  
© Fausto Fleury

**BM** In my case, they really matter. In my art, I use many things that have historically been found pejorative for a serious work of art—things that are folk art in general such as manifestations of folk in Brazilian culture and also in American culture. I should also not forget the costumes. I am interested in decorative design, all aspects of design in general, particularly fashion and furniture design. I also use that in my work. On the other hand, I love structure in painting. Rather than using culture directly, I love the way it combines with my work. Also, I'm a woman. Many women work with decorative art. Most of the time, the results are awful. So I have drawn a very delicate border.

**RES** What we think of as clichés, such as the carnival, samba, and Brazilian football are all associated with rhythm. To give an example, in Germany football is geometric while it swings in Brazil. Automatically, one arrives at the concept of rhythm. Other than these, what else nurtures your art?

**BM** I am talking about the combination of so many sides. For that, I have always felt like an abstract painter. Abstraction has always been my reference. European and, later on, Brazilian modernism might both be references for my work. Brazilian modernism really developed theoretically. Especially one painter, Tarsila do Amaral, was very influential. She started in Brazil and mixed all knowledge she acquired in Europe with her culture in Brazil. It was also what she did: first the real link was color. It is as if it is color what makes everything happen. I could not be geometric in the way of using cubes, squares, rectangles or triangles, my work cannot think only in terms of geometry and geometric shapes. I needed elements that I could develop and use like the shape of a flower representing some motif. But the shape of this flower is less important than its color; even if I had a good, beautiful shape of a flower, it would never work unless I had chosen the perfect color.

**RES** You emphasize your identity as a woman. Indeed, there is such a distinction in art: the notion of women's art. We had not thought of this regarding you.

**BM** Before all else, you are a woman painter. Of course, you need to be stronger to be respected, since painting is a very man thing. Nobody thinks about it. I am also talking about respect on a professional level. I believe that it is completely a men's area. It is said about my work that it had touched what was considered as low/love art. And on top of it, I am a woman. So that is really something, like a distinctive thing. That is how I made it.

**RES** In your early period paintings, motifs were represented in a realistic manner. Abstraction followed later.

**BM** True. I used to make motifs more recognizable, more figurative in the past.

**RES** And the rose motif appears everywhere. Does the rose have a specific meaning?





Beatriz Milhazes, *Figoca Moderna*, 2005  
Acrylic on canvas, 86.4 x 43.1 in / 219.5 x 109.5 cm

Collection: Marcel Briant, Paris  
© Fausto Fleury



Beatriz Milhazes, *Nega Maluca*, 2005  
Acrylic on canvas, 58.2 x 58.5 in / 249 x 250.5 cm

Collection: Douglas Andrews, Italy  
© Fausto Fleury



Beatriz Milhazes, *O popular*, 1999  
Acrylic on canvas, 70 x 70.8 in / 178 x 180 cm

Private Collection  
© Fausto Fleury

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**BM** Color has been very important for me since my first works. There was a samba school in Brazil where men were more interested. But the color of the school resembled the color of a rose. What a very weird combination, a very kitsch combination! It has been a strong reference for me since the very beginning, because I had always wanted to use such strong color combinations. Also, I did not want to use more elegant colors like red or black. I think the flower motif contains so many feelings, connections. Humans have always liked something about it. And nature... I really like nature. I realized after a long time that I needed nature around me when I'm painting. I know many artists just go traveling and they have a studio elsewhere; they open a studio and then they start working. I am not like that. I need to have my studio set in the way I like. My studio looks more like a house, like a home. I do not simply enter a room and start painting. Impossible!

**RES** So you need to be at home and not homesick?

**BM** Exactly. I like the feeling of being at home. And I feel this in Brazil. Of course, I can have the same thing in a different country, but I need to make it happen. It is not just about coming somewhere and starting to paint there. I know many artists who are able to do that very well but it's not my style. And also, for many years, flowers entered my work from decorative art and pop art, not from nature. Then, more recently, I started to look to nature. Before, I used to observe flowers and shapes of the flowers from the design itself, not from nature. So nature became evident in my work rather in the 2000s. And I find this very interesting because my work became more and more abstract and the flowers in it less recognizable as I started to observe nature directly. That is maybe so because I'm more impressed with the atmosphere and less with the shape. For me it's an inspiration to look at it. In the past, I used to try to make a drawing of it, now I'm not all that interested in this.



**RES** It was a rather figurative transition to more abstraction. It is very interesting that when you take the object from nature, it becomes more abstract than before.

**BM** Exactly. That is interesting, and I don't know why and how it happens.

**RES** How do you set up your paintings? Do you have a sketch or plan in mind? Once you said that you don't plan the painting, you don't know the end.

**BM** I think abstract art itself is an important reference to me. The basic motifs I use in my work come from abstract art. For example, Sonia Delaunay used it. Kandinsky started using it. It's rather the motif that represents abstract art. So also these are references for me. In terms of the work, I always try to introduce new problems to the world, because my work is not local. Some people are very surprised when I say that. On the other hand, it is about the process. I don't know exactly how the painting will look like at the end of the day but I have a plan in mind, just in the mind. I don't make any sketches, I don't draw anything, I go straight to the canvas.

**RES** Abstraction is very important, but so is construction. You don't make any plans or sketches yet there is a geometric structure in the background. The painting develops as elements are placed on the canvas. So do you have a sense of construction in mind then? Because you put down the elements and construct the painting from the background.

**BM** Yes. Like these two [Nega Maluca, 2006, and O Popular, 1999]. I have the idea of having a big circle at the center of the composition as the main element. It's one way for me to start. Another way is having an image, an open image, in my mind. It's not totally clear but I have some sort of a composition that I would like to develop. Sometimes I only have a single color that I want to develop in terms of my painting. For many years, I had white as my main reference; I wanted to make a white painting. Of course I never did a white canvas, but I had this kind of white on my mind. Sometimes, just to start, I need to put down one color; many times this is the color on the surface. From this point on, an excitement emerges in me to develop it. Sometimes I put one motif here and another there after which I start to make the entire level between these two points. And then it goes one by one. That is how it develops, so I need time for my work. It seldom develops faster. It takes up to a month to finish a painting. So I work with four pieces at the same time because of the technique I use. I don't paint directly onto the canvas; I have a transfer technique, which takes longer to make.

**RES** There is this saying, "An artist interested in color must enter the same bed with Matisse."

**BM** I had Matisse as my first and permanent reference. There are also Hélio Oiticica, Bridget Riley, and of course, Piet Mondrian.

**RES** There are always corrections on Matisse's paintings: he progressed as he painted. Therefore, he constantly corrected what he did, so there is no finished preliminary work. Also in his oil paintings, he first painted, put down the color, and then he covered it with another color. As in your works, he put down an element, which created a situation. Then he tried to resolve this situation with another element.

**BM** I did not know that he also had this technique.



Beatriz Millhazes, *Panamericano*, 2004  
Acrylic on canvas, 77.3 x 70.4 in / 198 x 179 cm

Collection: Claudio e Joy Khalifeh, São Paulo  
© Fausta Fleury

**RES** For instance, in his paper cutouts, the works are riddled with holes because they were pinned up all the time. He always looked for the right place.

**BM** Sometimes I also make changes, but the technique I use does not make it necessary to destroy so many things since I have the motif on my hand; on the plastic sheet. So I can clearly see what will happen.

**RES** So, before transferring the motif onto the canvas, you can see whether it is in the right place. Your technique allows you to do it in a perfect way at the same time?

**BM** Yes. It allows me to do different things. It also helps me make it super professional. At the end of the day, technique is very important in the context of my work. Because of it I can have a lot of super-position. I can make several things, try and see if that works or not, and then superpose it. I need to go and make the motif on the canvas, then see if it works or not. It would be very hard for me to keep this quality of layers if I had used any other technique.

**RES** Before coming to your technique, we would like to touch on Bridget Riley. You mentioned that Bridget Riley is important to your work. Riley uses geometrical motifs in a very different way. You don't have the sense of rectangles or squares.

**BM** One thing that I work with is op art. I want to have optical movements, disturbing things; such visions that your eyes would be disturbed when you see them. You don't have the real center of the composition, and your eyes are always moving. It's rather disturbing, even vertigo. That way, I feel like you have a communication with the entire world.

**RES** Regarding your technique, there are two distinct narratives. The first one is where you paint over plastic sheets and then you fix them onto the canvas, and it's also mentioned that you use glass sheets. You color them and then just strip off the paint and fix them onto the canvas. Could you please tell us about the technique you use in your paintings in your own words?

**BM** No, I have never worked with glass. That's mainly because as some artists use the monotype technique people think that I also work on glass and make the shape there. It would also be possible for me to use it as it allows me to peel it off. But I just use plastic sheets. With plastic sheets it is thick enough for me to glue, so I paint on the plastic sheet, for example I have a circle, I color the circle. It's only reverse. It should be a thicker film at the end of the day like four to five layers of paint would make





Beatriz Milhazes, *Bala de Leite*, 2005 Mixed collage on paper, 62 x 58 in / 157.5 x 147.5 cm

Collection: Frederico Ceretti, London  
© Fausto Fleury

it thicker. After I finish all this, I glue it onto the canvas and then leave it to dry, which takes a night—around ten to twelve hours. I glue it and then I leave my studio; I come back the next day to work more on it. When it dries the image I painted appears as it sticks to the canvas. It's not exactly an easy technique.

**RES** You also work directly on the canvas.

**BM** Not that much. Yes and no. Sometimes I do the volume directly on canvas. I also have some outlines, like here, because I had all these images. Sometimes I realize that they need some outline. So I keep doing it myself directly, sometimes I also play with the colors. But most of the time nothing is painted directly, it's all transferred. This technique is fantastic because I could even transfer the dust from the floor if I wanted to. These plastic sheets have been with me since I started ten, fifteen years ago. They have strong memories for me. So I still keep using them.

**RES** At this point, we'd like to quote Jeff Koons: "My belief in art includes a moral duty. When I make a work of art, I try to convey a sense of trust to the viewer through the quality of the craftsmanship." That is, the quality in the craftsmanship mediates the formation of trust between the painting and the viewer. What does craftsmanship mean to Beatriz?

**BM** I like hand-made things. And I like folk art, not folk in the real sense but primitive art. So I had my kind of spontaneity that handiwork has. I do love to see the hand on work. I think that is my main thing about hand-made objects. And paintings have always been very connected to the hand. But more recently, some painters started using other techniques. They allow their assistants to make most of the work. My assistant can also paint, and I have a reputation so I wouldn't have any problems with my assistant doing it. But this is not my way of doing things. I have a system, which requires me to produce the work myself. On the other hand, my painting has a very plastic quality. So it's not at all print quality, it's very painterly. When I paint on the plastic, the paint surface becomes thicker on the plastic; it is filtered by the plastic sheet. So normally brush strokes leave different kind of levels on the paintings.

**RES** So handcraft is a very important element in your work.

**BM** Yes, it is very important to my work.

**RES** Do you agree then with Jeff Koons: is it a kind of mediator of creating trust between the artwork and the viewer?

**BM** Yes, I could agree with this to a degree. But I think that it depends so much on the work. You can get the same kind of trust without using the hand. And also, if I hire you as one of my assistants and when you do a motif, like this motif, I repeat it hundreds of times. So sometimes it's the same motif but it just changes color. So if I have the motif and if I am the one who selects the color, my assistant could go further. It's hand-made but not in the real sense. So why should that inspire trust in the viewer?

**RES** But here, by hand we do not refer to that of the artist. There is an emphasis on the quality of the hand.





Beatriz Milhazes, Pacaembu, 2004  
Acrylic on canvas, 105.7 x 135 in / 268.5 x 343 cm

Collection: Federico Eretti, London  
© Fausto Fleury

**BM** Yes, but this quality of the hand should have a hand behind it. So it's hard to separate it. Most of the time a hand's quality refers to the hand behind. You think in a more metaphorical way. Most of the time, you lose this quality. I would not use the word hand, but rather the artist behind the whole thing. In general, I don't think that hand is all that important. Now, I think of the idea of the artist in general, that is the artist as a whole. So in works made with a computer, I can't see any connection to the hand; it completely involves an idea, a project.

**RES** A great rigor and cleanness is observed in the works of artists who were born in 1960s, such as Sarah Morris or Tobias Rehberger. When we saw your work for the first time, it confused us and it felt not very smooth. We needed time to love it. Ernst Gombrich says on Raphael that "Raphael's perfection is also his imperfection." When we view the works of Beatriz, we think her perfection is also her imperfection. For the painting obtains an aura particularly due to the collages. Would you like to say anything particularly about the artists of your own generation, Ackermann, Rehberger, Morris?

**BM** I think that the painters of my generation have strong connections with the electronic, pop, graphic design, mechanics, etc. Everyone has built up and created their own images but these images provoke a kind of a distance to the spectator. Even a work like mine which is very hand-made, the technique I use denies you the possibility to touch the hand signs of the painter. The organism of the construction of my paintings is subverted by the smooth and quite equal texture of it.

**RES** Would you like to comment on your interest in color?

**BM** I don't know if it makes any sense, but the only thing that comes to my mind is that I like the fact that color is the main thing in my work. One could ask specifically: "Why don't you just make colors if the color is the most important thing? Without colors your work will just fail. So why don't you just use colors?" So, that's the thing, I could not just use colors even in a minimalist way, even in a very geometric traditional way, even on a simple pattern. I need to use elements. I need to use some elements that don't really come from the painting world; they don't specifically come from there or they don't inhabit it. I need to have all these elements and put them together. They are in some sort of a conflict that will never really end up anywhere. These are not peaceful surfaces. There should be some struggle on the surface and then create some activities for your eyes. I like Yves Klein. Unfortunately he died very young. People asked him "Why do you only have squares? Why the same color and the same shape?" He said exactly the opposite because he did not want any conflict in his work. When you have more than one color, you start a conflict. It is endless. He was against it. He did not want this conflict. He wanted you to enter to the room and not get disturbed. I only agree with him on the shapes. People sometimes ask me why I don't do robust/rebound canvases. That's because I don't want these kind of disturbing squares and rectangles. It's as if you are not thinking that this is a square or this is a rectangle. You don't pick out anything with your eyes. If you do a circle, you need a good reason to do it. The circle will catch your attention regardless of what you have made and painted. It is rather disturbing, I agree with Klein. He was one of references for me in the way he talks about colors. Because I wanted to do exactly the opposite of what he did.

**RES** Yves Klein strived not to create any conflict, worked monochrome in order to cleanse himself of conflict while you are trying to create it. On the other hand, Yves Klein came from a much different context, didn't he? An artist who pursued karate and art simultaneously, indeed one who cared about his success in the former more than his achievements in the latter.



**BM** Exactly. He was into kung fu. And so he had a very different perspective. He was also a religious person, a Christian.

**RES** He was the first artist to open an exhibition without putting anything into the gallery space. It is a way of finding and returning to your self. There are no problems; there is nothing.

**BM** Also he did one more very interesting thing, in music. He did a performance where you shared the room with an orchestra. In the room, the musicians were on the same level with the public. They just played a single tone for 20 minutes. That is interesting, because you enter into that atmosphere. He creates a single tone space. His idea was very sharp and the result was very clear and very sharp.

**RES** In your paintings, you continuously create conflicts and progress as you resolve those conflicts.

**BM** It should be a healthy conflict. It's not a conflict that aims to produce any winners or losers. It's rather a healthy one where nobody wins or loses. Tension is a good way to describe this. It needs to be well-finished. It's a kind of tension that doesn't really finish. It's a matter of asymmetry and symmetry.

**RES** Another feeling your paintings inspire is a desire to transcend the borders of the canvas, expand and spread.

**BM** I think that's because of the beauty, harmony. Yet, this is not an easy beauty. As you also said in the beginning, you need time when you look at my work. At first glance, a wrong idea might come to your mind about the work. You need really time to see all the things that happen on the canvas. Christian Lacroix made an interview with me a couple of years ago for a catalogue. I think it was a very interesting interview. He is a fashion designer who is interested in art. And I'm rather interested in fashion; I use the reference of fashion a lot. He was very surprised when he met me. Because he thought I would be like a very carnival person, an irrational person. He thought my work had a lot of expression, explosion. He said, "How can you control yourself when making all these things happen on painting?" For me it's nothing about expression or explosion. It's rather an interesting or different way of seeing things.



Beatriz Milhazes, "Peace and Love" Road Station Project  
Platform for Art London Underground, London, UK, 2005  
Vinyl adhesive on aluminum - 19 arcs, 196.8 x 78.7 in / 500 x 250 cm each

© Daisy Hutchison and Stephen White, London

**RES** How do you interpret and explain the concepts of process and time in your paintings?

**BM** The first thing is that I need time. I could not be on the road doing my work. Every medium has different possibilities of time and that's why I wanted to separate my studios. Because collage, painting, computer... they have completely different working schedules. For painting I really need time to make it happen. It's happening in a good, peaceful, slow way. Introducing new things... Listening to the work... All these require time. Because you need to listen to the canvas, too. You cannot just impose things on



Beatriz Milhazes, "Guanabara", Tate Modern Restaurant Project.  
Tate Modern, London, UK, 2005  
Vinyl adhesive on wall.  
Panel 1: 682.5 x 145.2 in / 17.34 x 3.69 m, panel 2: 453.5 x 145.2 in / 11.52 x 3.69 m

© Marcus Leight & Andrew Dunkley, London

the work. The work asks you questions, too. But to listen to it, you need to have time. The collages have a different time schedule because of the materials you use; they have a life of their own. In paintings I create everything. In collages, I have the materials. The materials have their own information. So I need to work with that. There is one aspect: it is much more playful, joyful for me. Because painting is always a kind of suffering: even if you enjoy the work, you have these difficult moments. It's hard to leave the studio thinking, "Should I go further or not." With collage, it's different. Because collage is more about shadows. You cut papers, play with the materials. And I need to have my assistant with me all the time while working on collages. Collage is really hard in that sense. It is a lot of work cutting papers, preparing all that stuff. In that sense, my assistant does much of the work for me. And I make the drawing, the composition. For prints, I work with Jean-Paul Russell of Durham Press in Pennsylvania. Prints are completely a result of this collaboration. I couldn't really do what I have in my mind without him. I depend on him because he is the guy who knows the technique and it's all about the conversation between us.

**RES** You once said that you "paint the nature of the nature; in this context, I am not interested in Kandinsky but Klimt." It reminds us of a quote from Cezanne: "I am not painting the nature, I paint parallel to the nature." Can you comment on this?

**BM** Nobody paints nature. I paint with nature. Nature is always with me at the studio.

**RES** Gary Hume likes to refer to himself as a "beauty terrorist." Would you personally agree with this statement regarding yourself?



**BH** Many people say "Wow, it's beautiful," but on the other hand, it's not a comfortable beauty. Going to an exhibition and looking at a canvas that I understand is one thing. But if you take one of these paintings and put it into your room, that's another thing. You start to live with it, which is, in my opinion, more difficult. It's hard to look at my work, with other artists' works. Because it takes too much attention in a way. It's hard to combine it with other artists.

**RES** David Reed says "I want to be a bedroom artist." We saw in a magazine that one of your paintings is hung on a wall in Max Hetzler's bedroom. Do you see yourself as a bedroom artist?

**BH** Yes, he has one. But I cannot have my work at home. I don't like the feeling of living in a studio.

**RES** Now, finally, after all these insights: who is Beatriz Milhazes?

**BH** If you know, tell me. I think I'm all of these together and something more, of course! ■

Beatriz Milhazes

All images Courtesy Galeria Fortes Vilaça, São Paulo

