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FAITH RINGGOLD

PRESS PACK

GOINGS ON

FAITH RINGGOLD'S MESSAGE OF HOPE

Also: Rachel Syme on shopping like it's 1925, and a New Yorker anniversary quiz.

February 14, 2025

Hilton Als
Staff writer

You're reading the Goings On newsletter, a guide to what we're watching, listening to, and doing this week. ***Sign up to receive it in your inbox.***

In 1971, the painter, quilter, and children's-book author **Faith Ringgold** went to prison. She was not incarcerated; she went as an artist and an activist, to create a work for the Women's House of Detention (as it was then called) on Rikers Island. Commissioned with a grant from the New York State Council on the Arts to devise a piece for a public institution in New York, Ringgold chose a women's prison. Eventually, she made a painting. Titled "For the Women's House," the brightly colored work is divided into eight sections, and depicts women in professional roles that were then largely unavailable to them—politician, sports figure, construction worker. Hope was in the making, Ringgold's work seemed to say. If you could dream it, you could be it.

Faith Ringgold unveils "For the Women's House," in January, 1972. Photograph by Jan Van Raay / Courtesy Aubin Pictures

But then, after more than twenty years at Rikers, the painting disappeared. In 1988, the Women's House of Detention was relocated to a new building. Ringgold's painting was not. It was Barbara Drummond, a correctional officer and a former volunteer at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, who eventually tracked down "For the Women's House," in a staff kitchen in the old building. It had been painted over. Once it was found, Drummond launched a campaign to get the work restored—and it was, but then it was improperly hung. This "lost" work acts as a metaphor for the incarcerated women you see in the empathetic film **"Paint Me a Road Out of Here,"** deftly handled by the filmmaker and activist Catherine Gund, and now at Film Forum.

Faith Ringgold and Mary Enoch Elizabeth Baxter. Photograph courtesy Aubin Pictures

The expertly edited documentary tells us that, among other things, the majority of people held in local jails have yet to be convicted of a crime, but can't afford bail. They're just sitting there, waiting; aspiration isn't part of the deal. And whereas Ringgold stands at the crux of two institutions, the prison structure and the museum structure—the restored painting has since been displayed at the Brooklyn Museum—Gund introduces us to a young multimedia artist named Mary Enoch Elizabeth Baxter, who tells her story, and many others besides. Baxter, imprisoned in Philadelphia while pregnant, was tied to a hospital bed while giving birth; she saw her son once before he was taken away. Seven months later, she was released from prison. Part of what Baxter wants to show, in her work and through the film, is how two very different artists from different circumstances tried to instill something like hope in a situation that's meant to shut hope out. When you go inside, Baxter says, "You're rubber-stamped with all of these negative connotations about who you are or what you represent." And, of course, those negative connotations act as a kind of branding on the soul. For both Ringgold and Baxter, the point of making work for and with women who have been jailed is to say, by example, that if you can speak—itself an act of defiance—you can say your name.

HYPERALLERGIC

Film Reviews

The Tumultuous Journey of Faith Ringgold's Rikers Mural

Catherine Gund's *Paint Me a Road Out of Here* uses the artwork to tell truths about the US carceral system.

Eileen G'Sell February 12, 2025

Faith Ringgold and Mary Baxter in *Paint Me a Road Out of Here*, dir. Catherine Gund (all images courtesy Aubin Pictures)

"Nothing, and no one, is safe at a prison," asserts the late American artist and activist Faith Ringgold. The line launches Catherine Gund's *Paint Me a Road Out of Here*, a thought-provoking, if uneven, documentary that investigates the history of a mural the artist created for the Women's House of Detention on Rikers Island in 1972. Titled "For the Women's House," the piece was on view in a vestibule until 1988, when the jail's inhabitants were relocated. What followed was a travesty of justice for the artwork's treatment and display.

As the film tells it, the story of this mural is also that of the crisis at Rikers and of "prison" in spectacular decay — both Rikers as a site of **atrocious conditions** and the carceral system more

broadly. Though technically a complex of jails for those awaiting a "swift and speedy trial" (a gross irony given the fact that the process can take years), Rikers has come to represent the failure of American Corrections writ large.

Much of the documentary follows artist and rapper Mary Enoch Elizabeth Baxter, who served a year at Rikers in the late aughts, during which she was forced to give birth in shackles. Ruminative and down to earth, Baxter is a sympathetic whistleblower for the carceral system's inhumanity, especially against those imprisoned while pregnant. A ward of the court by the age of 12, she exemplifies how social condition, rather than a series of "bad decisions," often make "criminals."

Enid "Fay" Owens, Nancy Sicardo, and Mary Baxter with "For the Women's House" in *Paint Me a Road Out of Here*, dir. Catherine Gund

Offsetting the gravity of her advocacy, Baxter's budding friendship with Ringgold is a delight to behold. "I was going to fight for liberation, but I didn't get the grant," Baxter jests to the bespectacled nonagenarian, quoting a button on the hazards of funded activism. In light of Ringgold's pivotal role in the Black Power Movement, including participating in the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition's historic rally against **The (whitewashed) Whitney** in 1968, it's clear that her choice to create and gift "For the Women's House" was motivated by a genuine desire to make art that effects change. Arguably, the same can be said of director Catherine Gund's motives for making this movie. But as an anti-carceral feminist who has spent years teaching in a Missouri prison, I found some of the film's methods and rhetoric fraught.

“We need that painting in a safe place,” Ringgold declares to a seated audience of New York arts patrons, “and that safe place is the Brooklyn Museum!” But if that’s the attitude from here on out — that artworks should be “safe” above all — art will never be seen by those who potentially need it most to resist and endure. While Ringgold’s determination to get her artwork out of harm’s way is admirable, Gund’s decision to paint a happy ending — including Rikers closing to be replaced with “smaller facilities” — is misleading on a number of levels, only one of which is the fact that no “smaller facilities” in New York exist that can house those individuals caged in Rikers today. Rikers is, further, unlikely to **close by 2027**, as was federally mandated last year. This is not a story of de-incarceration, let alone *liberation*, as audiences might pleasantly believe.

“For The Women’s House” restoration in *Paint Me a Road Out of Here*, dir. Catherine Gund

At best, *Paint Me a Road* indicts the evil of **mass incarceration** that, for more than half a century, has intensified racial and economic inequalities across the country. At worst, the film indulges in false equivalences between art and human life. We *should* lament the abuse of an artwork by a canonical Black American artist — not least because, for decades, that artist was excluded from the canon. We *should* applaud the Brooklyn Museum’s efforts to restore the painting and protect it from harm. But to seemingly conflate the painting’s rehabilitation with that of the **two million incarcerated people** raises ethical questions that the film nimbly sidesteps.

“Art gives us permission to imagine a world that currently doesn’t exist,” says **Art for Justice**’s Helena Huang, one of many lofty talking heads featured in the film. *Paint Me a Road* offers a

glimpse of the cruelty of incarceration that *does* exist, and suggests — unconvincingly — that the security of "For the Women's House" is good news for the **nearly 200,000 women** currently jailed or imprisoned in the United States today.

Paint Me a Road Out of Here *is screening at the Film Forum (209 West Houston Street, Greenwich Village, Manhattan) through February 20.*

The New York Times

DOCUMENTARY LENS

Paint Me a Road Out of Here': Faith Ringgold's Gift to Prisoners

In this documentary, the artist depicts what a more just and beautiful world might look like.

By Alissa Wilkinson

Feb. 7, 2025

Paint Me a Road Out of Here Directed by Catherine Gund

In 1971, the artist Faith Ringgold received a grant to make a painting for a public institution in New York City. She decided to ask the prisoners in the Women's House of Detention on Rikers Island what they wanted to see in a painting. "I want to see a road leading out of here," one incarcerated woman told her.

Ringgold took that idea and ran with it. She didn't paint a literal road. Instead, her canvas — entitled "For the Women's House" and installed at the prison in January 1972 — is divided into eight sections. In each, women are depicted performing jobs traditionally held by men at the time: bus driver, construction worker, basketball player, president. The road is implied: Seeing women in positions and roles they don't always occupy can open up the viewer's world. She might be in a prison for now, but there's a place for her worth aspiring to beyond these walls.

This was Ringgold's imagination at work, always depicting what a more just and beautiful world might look like, particularly for the people whom the powerful prefer to ignore. Ringgold and "For the Women's House" both appear in the documentary "Paint Me a Road Out of Here" (in theaters), directed by Catherine Gund, and hearing and seeing her talk is reason enough to see the film. Ringgold died in 2024 at 93, and is widely considered one of the most important American artists of the 20th century, a native New Yorker who was unflagging in her activism and commitments to dismantle racism wherever it surfaced. As a Black woman and an artist, she insisted on coupling political meaning with her work, which is suffused with curiosity and joy.

"Paint Me a Road Out Of Here" is not a biographical film about Ringgold, even though you'll learn a lot about her biography from it. The film has bigger aspirations, connecting art, prisons, activism and an expansive life. One major subject in the film is the artist Mary Enoch Elizabeth Baxter, an executive producer of the film whose prison reform work often draws on her own experiences while incarcerated. Shortly after her own arrest, for example, Baxter went into labor — 43 hours while shackled to a bed.

The film is about other things, too — so many that at times it feels scattered, though every piece of it also feels urgent. One major thread critiques the ways that prisons make incarcerated people feel less than human, and calls for major reform, specifically within Rikers Island, which New York City is required by law to close in 2027. (This is proving to be a challenge.) It's also about the ways that art and activism are inextricably linked.

The wildest part of the film, though, is the tale of what happened to "For the Women's House" — a story that feels like a thriller as well as a metaphor for the way societies treat incarcerated people. I won't spoil it (though it's been well-documented), because the film includes interviews with many of the major players. But as one of the participants says, art takes away abstraction about incarcerated people. The painting's saga, and others told in "Paint Me a Road Out of Here," is part of that work.

Paint Me a Road Out of Here Director Catherine Gund

Rating Not Rated

Running Time 1h 30m **Genre** Documentary

wbur

A small but powerful exhibit showcases Faith Ringgold's work in Worcester

January 05, 2024

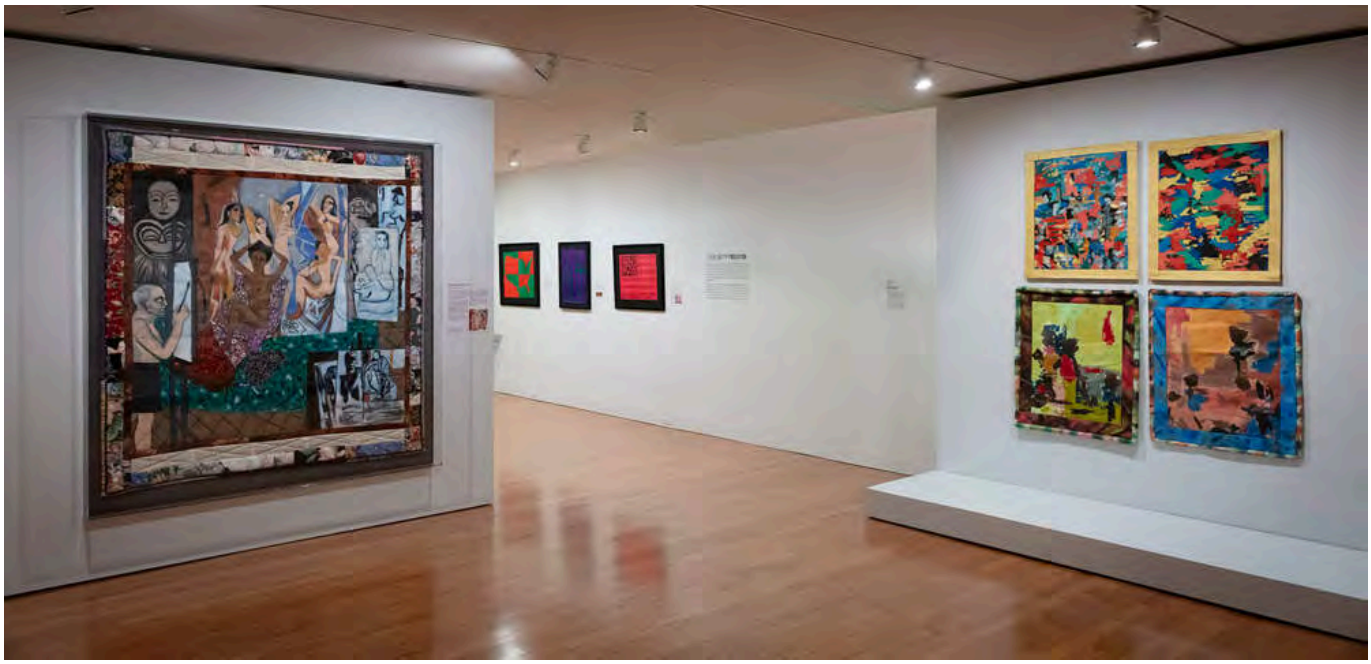
By Arielle Gray

Faith Ringgold has always said what she pleases.

Born in 1930 in Harlem, the 93-year-old artist has spent decades creating artwork that challenges dominant cultural narratives about Blackness and womanhood. She's fought for the inclusion of Black artists in spaces like the Whitney Museum and the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Ringgold has even seen the inside of a jail cell for expressing her artistic voice, when she was accused of desecrating the American flag in 1970.

This audacious spirit of challenging and questioning the status quo is at the center of "Freedom to Say What I Please," now on view at the Worcester Art Museum. It's the first New England solo exhibit of Ringgold's work in nearly 15 years, says Samantha Cataldo, associate curator of contemporary art.

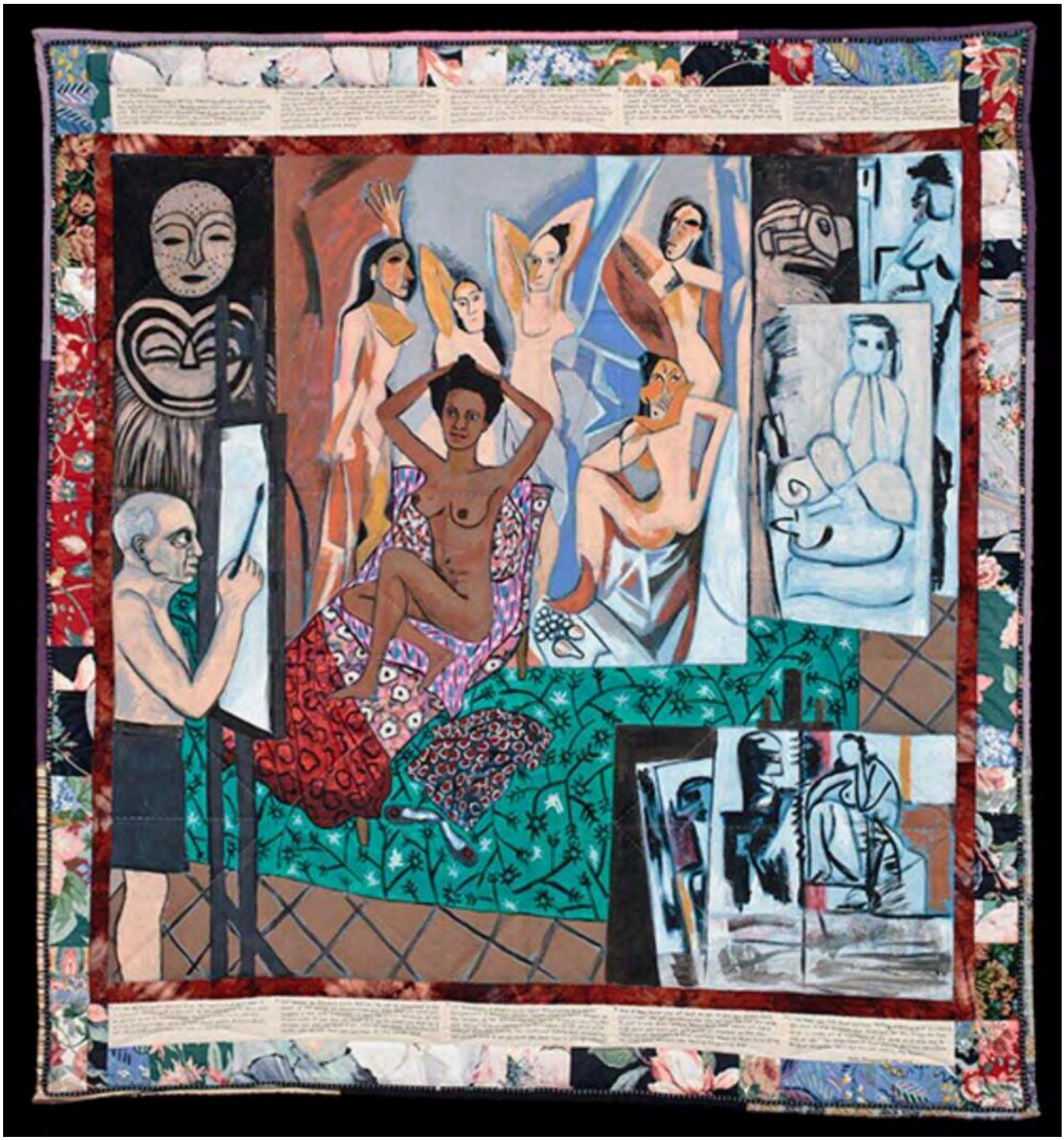
The exhibit is comprised of 16 pieces that range from soft sculptures to prints to one of Ringgold's celebrated "story quilts" that interweave textile work, painting and storytelling.



The exhibit of Faith Ringgold's work, "Freedom to Say What I Please," is on view at the Worcester Art Museum through March 17. (Courtesy Worcester Art Museum)

The story quilt at the core of the exhibit is "Picasso's Studio" and is a part of the museum's permanent collection. Created in 1991, it's one of 12 story quilts in the "French Collection," which follows a fictional character named Willia Marie Simone, who is loosely based on Ringgold. "So all of Faith's work both is and isn't about her," says Cataldo. "The story that's happening is very much related to Ringgold's own life as an artist, though the setting and the time isn't hers."

The story takes place in the 1920s. Ringgold's protagonist travels from New York to Paris to live and work as a model (Ringgold first visited Paris with her mother and daughters in 1961.) There, she has a number of experiences and meets cultural figures like Henri Matisse and Josephine Baker. "Picasso's Studio" portrays Simone modeling nude for Pablo Picasso, with his famous painting "Les Demoiselles d'Avignon" situated behind her.



Faith Ringgold, "Picasso's Studio," 1991, acrylic on canvas; printed and tie-dyed fabric. (Courtesy ACA Galleries, New York)

As Simone sits, she has a conversation with the women in Picasso's painting. "[It] revolves around that issue of Picasso's 'sources' of inspiration, which, for those who have seen enough of his work, you do have that African influence, that sort of co-opting of African artists," Cataldo says.

Simone comes to realize that she's not interested in being a subject for white male artists. "She's like, 'I'm not the model. I'm the artist and I should be able to say what I want'," explains Cataldo. "So the title of our exhibition actually comes from how this text ends and the text is in the form of a letter that this protagonist is writing back to her aunt in America." In the letter, Simone writes, " You asked me once why I wanted to become an artist. It is because it's the only way I know of feeling free. My art is my freedom to say what I please."

Through the character of Simone, Ringgold revises history and creates one in which a Black woman is at the artistic and cultural nexus. All of the pieces in "Freedom to Say What I Please" highlight Ringgold's ability to craft layered questions about our past and present while emphasizing her penchant for offering new realities in which marginalized people, like Simone, are centered.

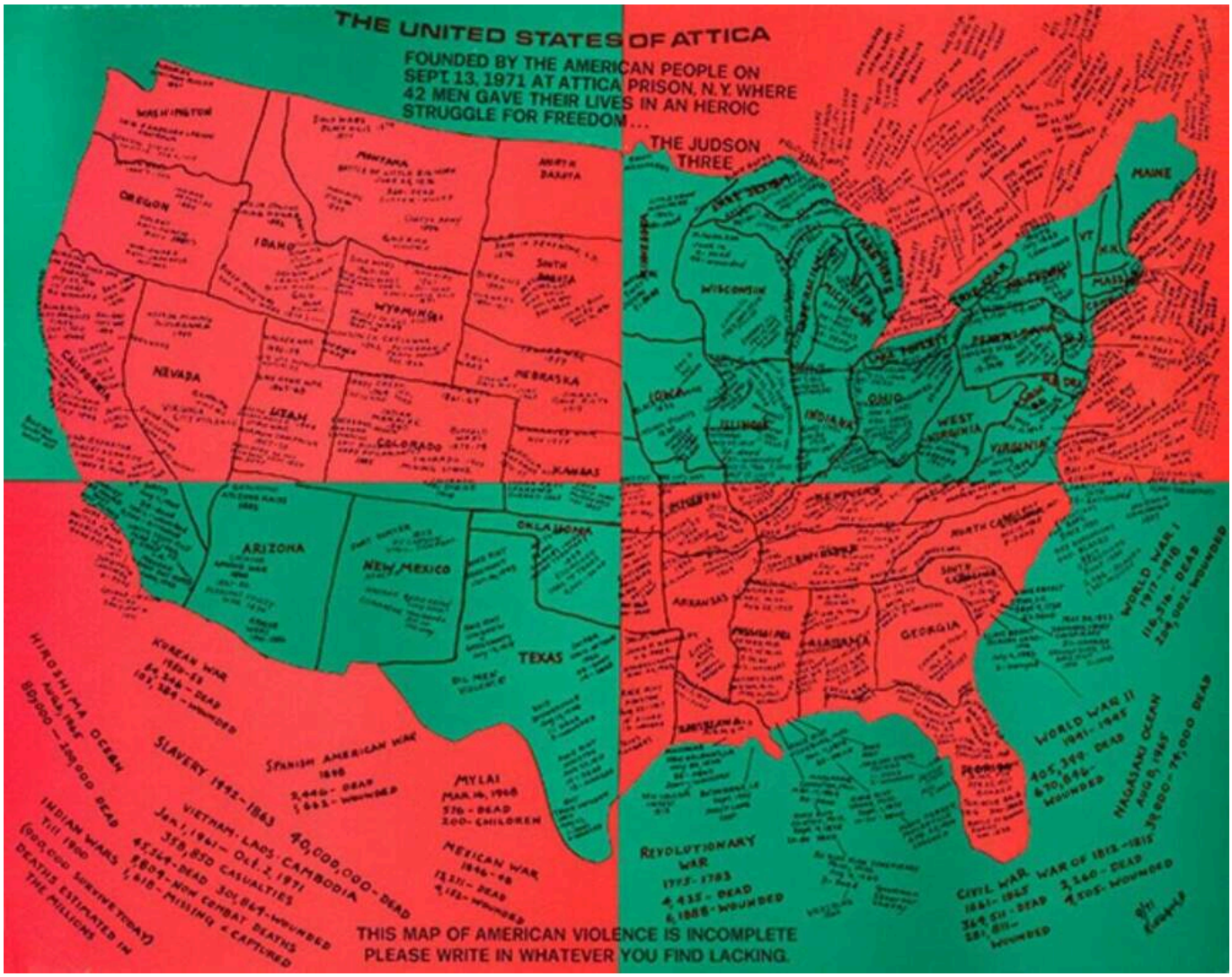
Some works in the exhibit are more closely tied to Ringgold's personal life, like two pieces from the "Baby Faith and Willi" series. Rendered in abstract shapes that suggest forms, the artist made these works after the passing of her mother Willi Posey Jones, who was a major influence and presence in her life. Jones died before "Baby Faith," Ringgold's granddaughter, was born. The move to creating more abstract work was, in part, a reaction to her grief.

"Faith is thinking that these generations above and below her aren't going to be able to be together in life, but they can be together in spirit and in her art," Cataldo explains. "And I think that that's really beautiful. And these are some of my favorite works in the show because they're deeply personal and so connected to her life."

Faith Ringgold stands in her studio at her home in Englewood, New Jersey in 2013. (Melanie Burford/Prime for The Washington Post via Getty Images)

Other works, like the print "United States of Attica," emphasize Ringgold's acute attention to the social issues impacting the world around her. It was created in the aftermath of the 1971 Attica Uprising, which exposed abuse in the American penitentiary system. The work is dedicated to the men who lost their lives.

It's "one of the lovely, but also heartbreaking things of this exhibition," says Cataldo. "Because there's work that Faith made literally 50 years ago that she could have made yesterday with slightly different words or names in it, and it would still be advocating for the same things. It would still be pointing out the same societal issues in America... This piece to me has been the one that most clearly shows that the work is not is not done."



Faith Ringgold, "United States of Attica," 1972, offset print. (Courtesy ACA Galleries, New York)

The world is certainly slow to change. Many of the same inequities Ringgold was actively fighting against in the '60s and '70s still exist in today's art spaces and institutions. A 2019 survey of 18 major museums found that 85% of the works in their collections were by white artists while 87% are by men. Although there's been a renewed interest in Ringgold's work, particularly in the past ten years, it's a recognition that often comes far too late for many Black female artists.

There's more work to do when it comes to the representation of artists of color in museums. But Cataldo is optimistic. "I think museums are starting to think more broadly and maybe also even starting to pay more attention to their immediate communities and finding the artists who are there and

might be those Faith Ringgolds who are being overlooked in their time," she says.

It's why the message at the heart of "Freedom to Say What I Please" is so important. "The act itself of being a Black woman artist...she's saying what she wants to say," Cataldo points out. "That itself is a radical act, and that itself is a form of protest and advocacy for more representation of women, more Black people in the art world."

"Faith Ringgold: Freedom to Say What I Please" is on view at the Worcester Art Museum through March 17.

The New York Times

CRITIC'S PICK

Faith Ringgold's Path of Maximum Resistance

A survey of her trailblazing, 40-year career in Manhattan shows us how, as a Black artist, she survived and thrived.

By Holland Cotter

Published Feb. 17, 2022 Updated Feb. 20, 2022

If you want to catch the heat of the lava flow that was United States racial politics in the 1960s, the second floor of the New Museum in Manhattan is a good place to go. There you'll find the earliest work in "Faith Ringgold: American People," the first local retrospective of the Harlem-born artist in almost 40 years.

Now 91, Ringgold was already a committed painter when the Black Power movement erupted. And she had a personal investment in the questions it raised: not just how to survive as a Black person in a racist white world, but how, as a woman, to thrive in any world at all.

As an artist of ambition, she seems to have made strategic decisions for forward movement. One was to be constantly producing, no matter what. Another was to seek out support within a Black matriarchy of family and friends. A third decision — the tough one — was to forge a career path of maximum resistance. To this end, she pursued figure painting, worked with fabric art and focused on narrative content at a time when the mainstream art market wanted little to do with any of these.

Ringgold's "American People Series #20: Die," 1967, at the New Museum, with scenes of biracial carnage. Faith Ringgold/ARS, NY, DACS, London and ACA Galleries; Simbarashe Cha for The New York Times

This retrospective, which fills three floors of the New Museum, combines figures, craft techniques and storytelling in inventive combinations. And it makes clear that what consigned Ringgold to an outlier track half a century ago puts her front and center now. It says a lot about strong art and changing taste that her 1967 mural-size painting "American People Series #20: Die," an explosive scene of blood-spattered biracial carnage, was a star attraction of the Museum of Modern Art's much-watched 2019 permanent collection rehang.

Stick-to-itiveness and art-making came early to Ringgold. As a child she was frequently housebound with asthma. To keep her occupied her mother, Willi Posey, a seamstress and clothing designer, supplied her with art materials. The creativity stuck. In 1950, she enrolled in art courses at City College of New York. She also

married and had, in quick succession, two daughters, one of whom, Michele Wallace, is now a noted art historian, and a collaborator with Ringgold on activist projects.

The marriage came and went. What persisted was Ringgold's interest in art. After earning a graduate degree, she took a job teaching in a public school. There one of her students was the young sister of James Baldwin, whose writings were instrumental in turning Ringgold's painting — mostly Impressionistic landscape through the 1950s — in a political direction.

From left, brooding figure paintings in "American People Series #2: For Members Only," 1963; "American People Series #3 Neighbors," 1963; "American People Series #1: Between Friends," 1963; "American People Series #4: The Civil Rights Triangle," 1963. Faith Ringgold/ARS, NY, DACS, London and ACA Galleries; Simbarashe Cha for The New York Times

The retrospective — organized by Massimiliano Gioni, the artistic director of the New Museum, Gary Carrion-Murayari, a curator, and Madeline Weisburg, a curatorial assistant — begins at this turning point moment with a group of brooding, broadly stroked figure paintings called “American People Series.” In one, dated 1963, a row of light-skinned male figures face outward, a wall of blank-eyed malice. In another, called “The Civil Rights Triangle,” four of five men depicted have dark skin, but a light-skinned fifth man towers over them. All the pictures are about hierarchies of power; women are barely even present. Ringgold referred to this early, wary work as “super realist.”

At this point she approached members of New York’s Black male art establishment — Romare Bearden, Hale Woodruff — for career help but was turned away with what sounds like the equivalent of a pat on the head. She must have realized that she was, professionally, on her own, and maybe that further loosened up her art.

In the late 1960s and early ’70s — years marked by police killings of Black activists across the country — her paintings suddenly go big, loud, bull-blast crazy. MoMA’s “Die” comes from this time, as does a related picture, “The Flag Is Bleeding,” both done on a mural scale to connect them with Picasso’s “Guernica” and Mexican mural paintings of the past.

“I just wanted to give some understanding of what America is about,” Ringgold said of that work, in the catalog interview with Gioni. “You notice there is no Black woman in the picture. The white woman was trying to bring the Black and white man together because she really had no power, and the only way to acquire it was by bringing together the men. Black women were literally out of the picture, period. It took decades before people realized that we existed.”

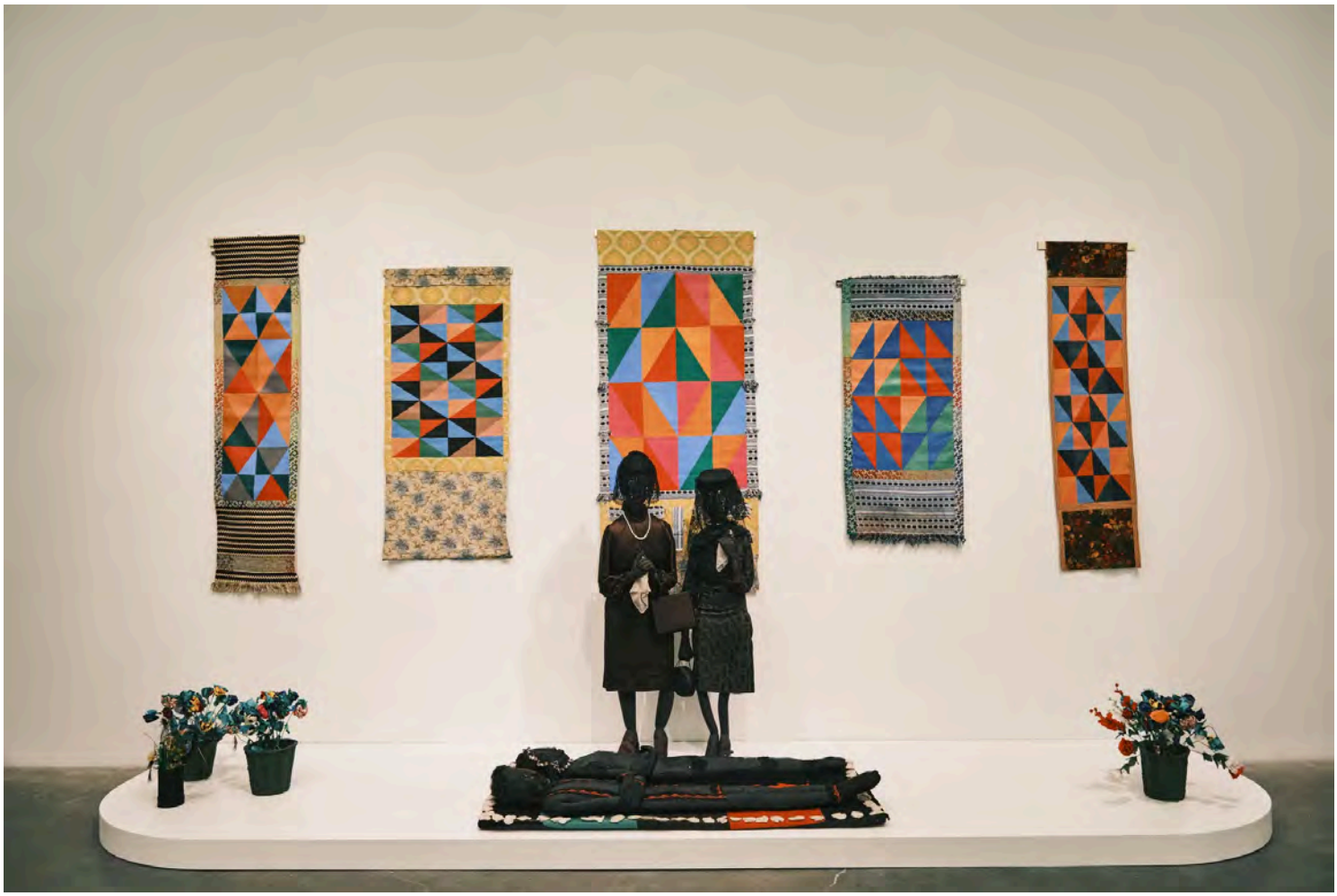
“For the Women’s House,” 1971, which Ringgold created for the Correctional Institute for Women on Rikers Island. Based on African textiles, it depicts women of different ages and ethnicities engaged in a range of professions. Faith Ringgold/ARS, NY; Dario Lasagni

Other paintings of the time go almost mute. For a group called “Black Light Series,” Ringgold eliminated white paint entirely from her palette and darkened her colors with black. Faces and bodies seem to float out of reach, submerged, all but invisible.

Her political commitments in general expanded. As co-organizer of an anti-Vietnam War exhibition she was accused of desecrating the United States flag and arrested. (The charge was dropped.) She designed posters protesting the jailing of Angela Davis and the killing of prisoners at Attica. She joined Michele Wallace in picketing the Whitney Museum of American Art for its exclusion of Black women artists.

Her relationship to the predominantly white feminist movement was guarded, though not to feminism itself. A bold statement of her allegiance came in the form of a mural-style painting she made for the Correctional Institute for Women on Rikers Island in 1971.

Long in storage on Rikers and now, at Ringgold’s request, on long-term loan by the city to the Brooklyn Museum, the work is in the show. Using bright colors and a compartmented design based on African textiles, it depicts women of different ages and ethnicities engaged in a range of professions — doctor, athlete, bus driver, United States president — that prisoners, given the chance and resources, might pursue once out in the world. Before getting down to work on the piece, Ringgold invited all the women at Rikers to propose ideas for it. And she discreetly included herself in the picture. (You see her in profile in the picture’s lower right side.)



Painted fabric hangings behind the sculpture "The Wake and Resurrection of the Bicentennial Negro," 1976. This entire installation originated as part of a performance piece. Faith Ringgold/ARS, NY, DACS, London and ACA Galleries; Simbarashe Cha for The New York Times

Collaboration with women has always figured in her art, beginning with contributions made by her fashion-designer mother, Willi Posey.

They first worked together in the early 1970s on the "Feminist Series," a group of paintings with fabric frames modeled on those of Tibetan thangkas and sewn by her mother. Posey also worked on a group of life-size, African-inspired fabric figures worn by Ringgold in performances or displayed as soft-sculpture tableaus, like the imposing, multipart 1976 "The Wake and Resurrection of the Bicentennial Negro," installed on the museum's third floor.

Finally, in 1980, Posey sewed Ringgold's first painted quilt, "Echoes of Harlem," helping to create the prototype for what would become the artist's most familiar art medium. After her mother died the following year, Ringgold paid tribute with

“Mother’s Quilt,” a quilt appliquéd with doll-like Black figures, like angels, made from fabric scraps the women were saving for future use.

An elaboration on the painted quilt form, called “story quilts,” brought Ringgold attention both inside and outside the art world. Vehicles for personal narratives, often annotated with sewn-in text panels, some of these hangings are diaristic, as in the case of “Change: Faith Ringgold’s Over 100 Pound Weight Loss Performance Story Quilt,” from 1991. Most combine fiction and autobiography.

Best known of them is the single quilt “Tar Beach,” which illustrates Ringgold’s childhood memory of summer-night picnics on a Harlem rooftop with the George Washington Bridge glowing in the distance. From the quilt, Ringgold derived a suite of drawings, which, in 1991, appeared as a widely praised children’s book, the first of many Ringgold has done. (You can page through all of them in an exhibition reading room on the museum’s 7th floor.)

From left, story quilts from Ringgold’s “French Connection” series, her most formally complex painting project, 1991. It relates the story of an African American painter immersing herself in European art. Faith Ringgold/ARS, NY, DACS, London and ACA Galleries; Simbarashe Cha for The New York Times

The story-quilt form is also the vehicle for Ringgold's most formally complex and buoyant painting project, "The French Connection," which unfurls in 12 regally scaled hangings, like chapters, on the midnight-blue walls of the museum's 4th floor. It related the experience of a single main character, a young African American painter named Willia Marie Simone, who comes to Europe for the first time in the 1920s with her two young children, to immerse herself in European art — a journey, which, as it happens, Ringgold herself made in 1961 for the same reason, and with her mother and daughters in tow.

Once settled in, Simone is everywhere, meeting everyone. She poses for Matisse. She spends time in Gertrude Stein's salon. She joins time-traveling compatriots — Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Rosa Parks — to stitch a sunflower quilt in Van Gogh's Arles. Finally, back in Paris, she paints an all-female *déjeuner sur l'herbe,* in which all the picnickers are Ringgold's family and friends. Actually, there is one male in this scene, Pablo Picasso, posing skinny and nude on a towel on the grass. No one seems to notice him.

"Faith Ringgold, We Came to America: The American Collection #1," 1997, acrylic on canvas with painted and pieced fabric. Faith Ringgold/ARS, NY and DACS, London; ACA Galleries

Overall, "The French Collection" feels, in tone, like a far cry from the grim, damning "American People" pictures of the 1960s (and from the scary, apocalyptic "We Came to America" picture — it's in the show — that Ringgold painted right after the 12-part series was done). But there's politics at work in the French paintings, too, embodied in the guiding Black female presence of the cosmopolitan Willia Marie Simone, who is, of course, a version of Ringgold herself.

Half a century ago, a presence like hers had to fight to exist in the mainstream art world. Look around now, and you see it, not everywhere yet, but more and more. Faith Ringgold, artist-agitator-seer, can be thanked for that.

COVER STORY

FAITH RINGGOLD'S "JAZZ STORIES: SOMEBODY STOLE MY BROKEN HEART"

The artist talks about teaching and her advice for young artists.

By Françoise Mouly, Art by Faith Ringgold

March 21, 2022

In the artist Faith Ringgold's children's book "Harlem Renaissance Party," Lonnie, a young boy, and his Uncle Bates spend a whirlwind day in nineteen-twenties Harlem meeting Black artistic greats, including Langston Hughes, Josephine Baker, Louis Armstrong, and Coleman Hawkins. At the end of the tour, Lonnie says to his uncle, "Black people didn't come to America to be free. We fought for our freedom by creating art, music, literature, and dance." His uncle responds, "Now everywhere you look you find a piece of our freedom." This understanding of the inescapable entanglement of joy and sorrow—and of hardship and creation—is one that echoes through much of Ringgold's work, which can be seen, in a major retrospective, "Faith Ringgold: American People," at the New Museum, in New York City, through June.

This week's cover, for the Spring Style & Design Issue, features a piece from Ringgold's "Jazz Stories" series, which she began in 2004. In it, Ringgold, who was born in Harlem in 1930, celebrates the music that has provided her with a lifetime of inspiration.

Can you talk about your connection to jazz and music?

I have spent a lifetime listening to the great music of Billie Holiday, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway, Ella Fitzgerald, Count Basie, and others. Many of these musicians also lived in Harlem, so, even though they were stars, they were also neighbors. I grew up with Sonny Rollins. My first husband, Earl Wallace, was a classical pianist and composer. Our home was lively with musicians, such as Miles Davis, Charlie Parker, and Jackie McLean, among others.

"Mama Can Sing" (2004) and "Papa Can Blow" (2005) © Faith Ringgold / ARS / Courtesy ACA Galleries

These silkscreens were part of my first jazz series, which I dedicated to Romare Bearden, the greatest of the jazz painters. I could easily spend the rest of my life singing my song in pictures.

You have also been an educator for a long time. Did teaching change your work?

I grew up with role models in my family who were teachers. The most notable was my mother's father, Professor B. B. Posey. Over the course of more than forty years, I have taught students from junior high to college. In 1985, I was offered a position as a full professor in the visual-arts department at the University of California at San Diego, teaching studio courses in drawing and painting. Teaching art brought a richness to my life and my art that could never have occurred otherwise. I couldn't be more pleased to describe myself as both an artist and a teacher.

"Wynton's Tune" (2004) © Faith Ringgold / ARS / Courtesy ACA Galleries

You've painted, quilted, sculpted, and authored children's books. Is there a medium where you feel most at home?

Since the nineteen-fifties, I have worked in sixteen distinct mediums, including oil paintings, story quilts, *tankas*, soft sculptures, prints, masks, book illustrations, and more. I've never limited myself to one medium or technique. I've used each to tell my story, to express what I needed to express.

You've been creating art for decades. What's one thing that you wish you'd known when you were starting out as a young artist?

I think about the things people did tell me, instead of what I wish I'd known. My mother told me I would have to work twice as hard to get half as far. My father always said, "We ripped up the pattern for this one." And I tell every young artist that anyone can fly—all you have to do is try.

National Gallery of Art

OCTOBER 21, 2021

Iconic Faith Ringgold Painting Acquired by National Gallery of Art

Faith Ringgold
The American People Series #18: The Flag is Bleeding, 1967
oil on canvas
182.88 x 243.84 cm (72 x 96 in.)
National Gallery of Art, Washington

Gift of Glenstone Foundation and Patrons' Permanent Fund
2021.28.1

The National Gallery of Art has acquired *The American People Series #18: The Flag is Bleeding* (1967), its first painting by Faith Ringgold (b. 1930). This pivotal work by a leading figure of contemporary art exemplifies the artist's skill in using art as a vehicle to question the social dynamics of race, gender, and power. As a visual storyteller, Ringgold is known for her thought-provoking depictions of the difficult realities of the American experience. The painting was acquired with funds gifted by Glenstone Foundation and from the Patrons' Permanent Fund. On view through October 24, 2021, at Glenstone Museum, the work is scheduled to appear in Ringgold's retrospective at the New Museum in New York from February 17 to June 5, 2022.

"This may well be the most important purchase of a single work of contemporary art since the National Gallery acquired Jackson Pollock's *No. 1, 1950 (Lavender Mist)* in 1976," said Harry Cooper, senior curator and head of the department of modern and contemporary art.

For Ringgold, the American flag is a potent and powerful symbol. She has said, "The flag is the only truly subversive and revolutionary abstraction one can paint." This painting is part of her first fully developed body of work, *The American People Series* (1963–1967). Considered to be among her most powerful series, it features unflinching and often puzzling depictions of the racial tensions and political divisions in the United States during the 1960s.

The Flag is Bleeding examines American identity and history in and through an iconic depiction of the flag, one of Ringgold's signature motifs. The painting features a semitransparent US flag with colors that appear to bleed or run as a bold backdrop to the ambiguous interactions of three figures—a Black man, a white woman, and a white man—who stand with arms linked. The Black man, who holds a knife with one hand and covers his bleeding heart with the other, simultaneously protects the wound and pledges allegiance to the flag. The vague and shifting relationships of the figures speak to the violent protests in Los Angeles, Detroit, Washington, DC, and elsewhere during the politically turbulent era of the civil rights and antiwar movements of the late 1960s.

Ringgold is a painter, mixed-media sculptor, performance artist, writer, teacher, and lecturer whose multifaceted career spans six decades and encompasses a variety of media: paintings, prints, collages, drawings, sculpture, textiles, and children's books. Her works explore many themes—the race, gender, and class in the United States, as well as history, memory, family, community, and popular culture—all conveyed in a simplified representational style that she has termed "Super Realism." Ringgold received her BS degree in fine arts and education and MA in fine arts from the

City College of New York and is a professor emeritus of art at the University of California in San Diego. After struggling for many years to gain proper recognition in the art world, she has been acclaimed as one of the leading artists of our time, receiving more than 80 awards and honors, including 23 honorary doctorates.

Throughout her career, Ringgold has been driven by a commitment to political change and an interest in world art. During the early 1960s, she created her first political paintings, *The American People Series* (1963–1967), and had her first and second one-person exhibitions at Spectrum Gallery in New York. In the early 1970s, Ringgold began making tankas (inspired by the Tibetan art form of paintings framed in richly brocaded fabrics), soft sculptures, and masks. She later used this medium in her masked performances of the 1970s and 1980s. Inspired by African art during the 1960s, it was not until the late 1970s that she traveled to Nigeria and Ghana to see the rich tradition of masks that have continued to be a great influence.

CBS NEWS

SUNDAY MORNING

Faith Ringgold's art of fearlessness and joy

SUNDAY MORNING

July 11, 2021 / 9:31 AM EDT / CBS News

Lush, colorful and daring, each piece, each artistic phase tells a story – the signature style of artist Faith Ringgold. She is best known for her story quilts – a patchwork of images with a story written right onto the fabric

One, "Tar Beach" (1988), was adapted into a now-beloved, award-winning children's book.

"Woman on a Bridge #1 of 5: Tar Beach" (1988) by Faith Ringgold. Acrylic paint, canvas, printed fabric, ink, and thread. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

But in fact, Ringgold's work spans over 70 years, an observation of decades of social upheaval in America.

Correspondent Nancy Giles asked, "When people said one thing, you would say, 'But I'm gonna do it anyway'?"

"Yes," Ringgold replied. "That's necessary if you want to do something. You cannot just go by what other people want."

A consummate fighter for justice, Ringgold – now 90 – struggled to be seen and heard as a Black female artist through the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, and the Women's Liberation Movement of the 1970s.

"I constantly looked for the galleries that accepted Black artists," she said. "If I asked, and they said, 'No,' it didn't bother me, because I expected to hear, 'No.'"

Faith Ringgold, pictured before her 1997 painting, "The Flag Is Bleeding #2."

Born in Harlem in 1930, Ringgold credits her determination to her parents. Due to debilitating asthma, she was educated mostly at home, which, she says, gave her the freedom to be herself.

"I think there was a lot of feeling at that time that, 'We can't do this, we can't do that.' Oh, yes, we can! We can do it. All you gotta do is try."

So, when the art world rejected her or tried to pigeonhole her work, she fought back.

Giles asked, "What was their difficulty with you and your work?"

"First of all, I painted White people," Ringgold replied.

By then, she was teaching at a New York City high school by day and painting by night.

This 1962 piece is called "Four Women at a Table":

"Early Works #7: Four Women at a Table" (1962) by Faith Ringgold. Oil on canvas.

"So, you were one of the Black teachers there, but you weren't allowed at that table?" asked Giles.

"I noticed that I wasn't invited. Did I want to sit with them? Of course! I wanted to be included. But you supposed to stay with the Black people, and don't paint White people. Because White people were considered superior. And if you painted them in such a way that they were characterized in one way or the other, then you were criticized, because you were causing trouble.

"I painted them the way I saw 'em," she laughed. "Sorry!"

Emily Rales, director and chief curator of the Glenstone Museum in Potomac, Maryland (where a large body of Ringgold's work is currently on display), said, "If she wanted to do something, she was not going to let anything stand in her way. Whether that was experimenting with different kinds of media or techniques, she was gonna do it, no matter what.

"Each decade brought a new innovation. One of the things that I feel really defines her practice is this fearlessness to take on anything," Rales said.

"Black Light #9: American Spectrum" (1969) by Faith Ringgold. Oil on canvas.

In 1968, when New York's Whitney Museum put on a retrospective of American art from the 1930s onward that didn't include a single Black artist, Ringgold protested, along with dozens of fellow Black artists.

In 1970 Ringgold helped organize a show in downtown Manhattan. "There were flag desecration laws in place," Rales said. "And there were certain people who were being arrested for doing that kind of work. And she thought that was wrong, and she was gonna do something about it, you know?

"And so, she organized a show where a bunch of artists all used the flag as their imagery. And she got arrested."

That same year, Ringgold became involved with the women's movement fighting for women's art to be seen.

Giles asked, "I always thought, the Black power movement was more about Black men, and the feminist movement was more about White women and not women of color. Did you have the same impression?"

"Yes," Ringgold said. "I had to fit the women in."

"And they were there."

"Absolutely! So, let 'em in!"

And finally, the doors have started to open, thanks in part to her own perseverance.

Ringgold said, "I have kind of forgotten the sharp feeling I used to get of being rejected, and maybe it has to do with being left out so many times: 'All right, go ahead, leave me out if you want. I'll come in another door!'"

"Have you felt more free, as you've gotten older?" Giles asked.

"As you get older, you become more free," Ringgold replied. "If you will take advantage of the freedom that you have attained, anyone can fly. All you gotta do is try."

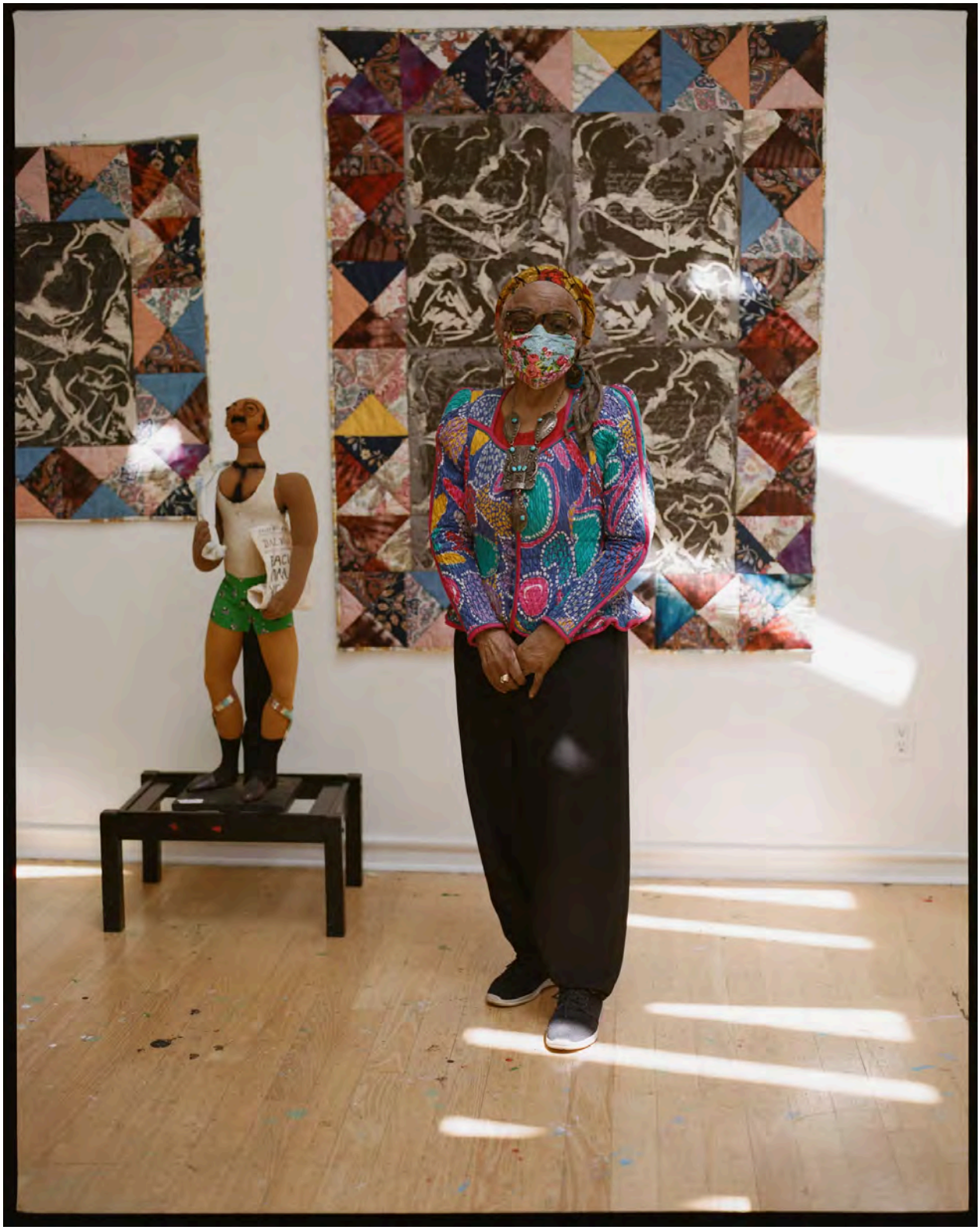
A montage of Faith Ringgold story quilts.

W

STUDIO VISIT

In the Studio With Faith Ringgold, Living Icon

by **Steph Eckardt**
April 23, 2021



Faith Ringgold photographed by Miranda Barnes for W Magazine.

"Mhm, that's right," Faith Ringgold says, reading the text at the bottom of her 1972 work *United States of Attica*: "*This map of American violence is incomplete. Please write in whatever you find lacking.*" We're discussing one violent event in particular—the massacre that rocked Tulsa, Oklahoma 100 years ago—when it hits me: The massacre almost took place during Ringgold's lifetime. The artist is now 90, and about as spry as a nonagenarian can be.

Ringgold was born and raised in Harlem, when the neighborhood's renaissance was in full swing. (Langston Hughes and Duke Ellington lived just around the corner.) She moved into her home and studio in Englewood, New Jersey, in 1995, though not without difficulty. Ringgold knew hers wouldn't be the only Black family—Eddie Murphy and Whitney Houston were part of the community—but her white neighbors put up such a fuss when she started building an addition for her studio that she had to take them to court. She won, of course, and some neighbors apologized—upon realizing that Ringgold was a star. At that point, it had been years since Oprah Winfrey commissioned one of Ringgold's signature "story quilts" as a birthday gift for Maya Angelou. And yet, it's only relatively recently, following the MoMA's acquisition of a major work by Ringgold in 2016, and a 2017 Brooklyn Museum group show, that the era-defining artist has gotten her due.

United States of Attica (1972) inside Ringgold's studio in Englewood, New Jersey. Photographed by Miranda Barnes for W Magazine.

Inside Ringgold's studio in Englewood, New Jersey.
Photographed by Miranda Barnes for W Magazine.

For as long as she's been an artist, Ringgold has been a storyteller, and she sure does have stories. Over the course of three-and-a-half hours, we barely scratch the surface. Like the time she was arrested for organizing a show on desecrating the American flag and was escorted to the Tombs, the infamous detention center in Lower Manhattan. Or when she left eggs and sanitary napkins all over the Whitney Museum of American Art while campaigning for it to exhibit more Black women artists. Once, she almost sold David Rockefeller a painting of an American flag emblazoned—very subtly—with the N word. (Upon tilting their heads to read it, the collector's reps hastily fled.) And that wasn't the only occasion in which Ringgold snuck subversive messages into her work. You'll find, for example, that the words "Black power" in the painting below, from 1967, appear against a white backdrop that spells out "white power"—though only if you crane your neck to the right.

American People Series #19: U. S. Postage Stamp Commemorating the Advent of Black Power, 1967.

The current survey of Ringgold's nearly six-decade-long career at Glenstone, a major American art museum that spans 300 acres of Potomac, Maryland, is full of the tales she spins on her story quilts. Quilting has a long tradition in the Ringgold family; the techniques the artist learned from her mother, the fashion designer Willi Posey, go all the way back to their enslaved ancestors. Ringgold came to quilting out of practicality; she was born with severe asthma, and had to rule out sculpture due to the dust. Painting has always been a part of her practice, but transporting a large canvas was nowhere near as easy as rolling up a quilt and tucking it under her arm.

Ringgold uses story quilts to put forth her own narratives. Her first, *Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima?* (1983), was a repudiation of the archetypal "mammy" portrayals of Black women in art. Many of the hundreds that have followed since are personal. For years, Ringgold used works like *Faith Ringgold's Over 100 Pound Weight Loss Performance Story Quilt* (1991), which is among those on view at Glenstone, to hold herself accountable for her weight. She says her

next series is on aging. (Also up next: a complete takeover of the New Museum, slated for early next year.)

Change 3: Faith Ringgold's Over 100 Pound Weight Loss Performance Story Quilt, 1991.

Faith Ringgold and her mother, Mme. Willi Posey, quilting *Echoes of Harlem*, 1980.
Courtesy of ACA Galleries, New York

Though she is certainly not scared of confrontation, a significant portion of Ringgold's practice is purposely family-friendly. She created the app Quiltuduko, an art-making take on Sudoku, and has published 17 children's books, starting in 1991 with *Tar Beach*. Perhaps unwittingly, Ringgold practically created a literary genre, which has taken off since last summer's racial reckoning; Ibram X. Kendi's *Antiracist Baby*, for example, is now a *New York Times* no. 1 bestseller.

In the 1960s, when Ringgold's activism with the Black power movement became fully intertwined with her practice, she came to a conclusion: Works need to merit their space. *American People Series #20: Die* (1967), a mural-scale homage to Picasso's *Guernica*, certainly deserves the six-by-12 feet it's taken up at the MoMA since 2016. The figures in it vary in race and age, but they are all splattered with blood. Ringgold says that when she painted such harrowing, chaotic carnage, she was terrified: "I saw *Die* as a prophecy of our times," she recalls. "Painting blood is serious. You can feel it. And I've seen it. People used to have riots all up and down the streets of New York, and you'd see the blood in the streets and look for where it was coming from, who had it on them."

Inside Ringgold's studio in Englewood, New Jersey.
Photographed by Miranda Barnes for W Magazine.

To Ringgold, the '60s aren't too far off from the present-day. "Oh yeah, we just keep repeating the same crap," she says. But she still doesn't doubt that things will eventually change. "It's a change that's been going on since since the beginning, since the people came up and looked around and saw that each one of them was different. They had to decide who was the best, and they've been deciding and deciding and deciding." She pauses, then laughs. "And I guess they'll just keep doing that until they find something else better to do."

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

ART

At Age 90, Artist Faith Ringgold Is Still Speaking Her Mind

The provocative pioneer known for quilts chronicling scenes of Black history, hope and protest, is the focus of a sweeping show coming to the Glenstone museum in Maryland

By Kelly Crow Follow

March 31, 2021 11:00 am ET

For 15 years, Glenstone, a private contemporary art museum in Maryland, has showed solely the collection of its founders, Mitchell Rales and Emily Wei Rales. Now, the museum is ready to make an exception.

On April 8, Glenstone will open "Faith Ringgold," a survey of more than 70 works by the artist known for her story quilts—patchwork tableaus like 1988's "Tar Beach," which chronicle scenes of Black history, hope and protest. The exhibit marks the only U.S. stop for a show that drew raves when it launched two years ago at London's Serpentine Gallery and later traveled to Bildmuseet in Sweden.

Ms. Rales said she and her husband, who have begun collecting Ms. Ringgold's works, were "blown away" by the scope of the Serpentine exhibit and felt compelled to bring it to the Washington area. "Nobody used to pay much attention to her work, and now she's finally getting her due," Ms. Rales said of the artist, who is 90 years old. "We couldn't pass up our chance to get it."

Ms. Ringgold at Glenstone, where a show of her work will open April 8. PHOTO: GLENSTONE MUSEUM

The Glenstone version is bigger than earlier iterations, with galleries devoted to Ms. Ringgold's soft, sculptural works and installations—as well as a series of colorful, abstract paintings never before exhibited. For those unfamiliar with this once-overlooked artist, "Faith Ringgold" offers a poignant reminder of how difficult it was for a Black woman to join the New York art scene in the early 1960s.

Born in Harlem in 1930, Ms. Ringgold grew up in a rich cultural stew, with Duke Ellington as her neighbor and jazz musician Sonny Rollins as a childhood pal. The daughter of a car company executive and a fashion designer, she embraced art early on, using an easel and paints from her parents. Yet in 1948 when she applied to study art at City College, she was told only men could earn the degree and that her only workaround option was to major in art education. She did so, and spent years teaching art in New York public high schools while rearing two daughters and developing her own artistic practice.

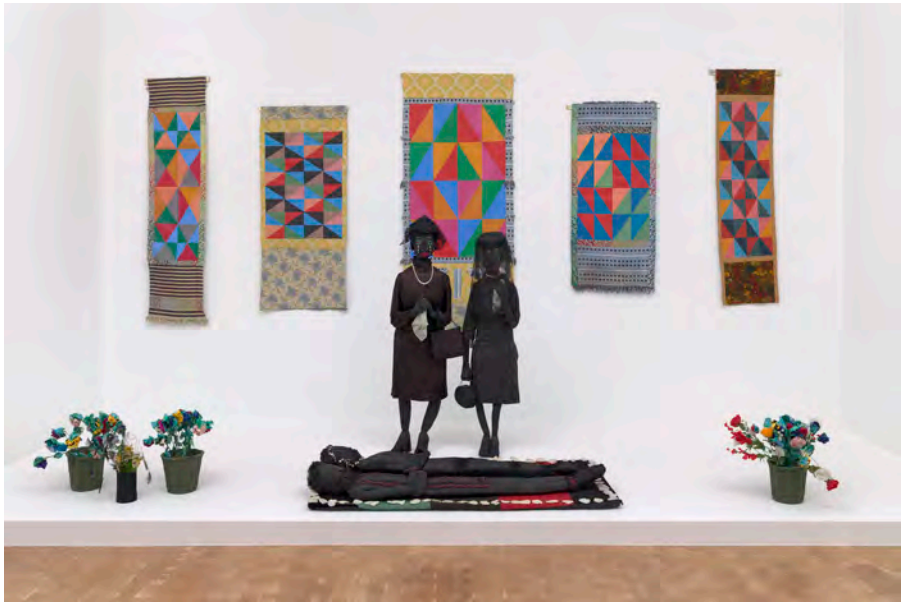
"I couldn't imagine my life without art, so it was persistence all the way," said Ms. Ringgold, who lives and works in New Jersey.

Glenstone's Faith Ringgold exhibit includes more than 70 works by the artist. PHOTO: ACA GALLERIES, NY/GLENSTONE MUSEUM

Her first break came in 1967 when Spectrum Gallery in New York gave her a solo show. Many works in her "American People" series in that debut have become iconic, such as "American People Series #20: Die," a Guernica-like mural depicting splayed and spattered bodies swept up in a race riot. The same work caused a stir in 2019 when the Museum of Modern Art reopened its expanded galleries and hung it near Pablo Picasso's 1907 "Les Demoiselles d'Avignon."

Ms. Rales said given the mural's popularity, she didn't ask MoMA's curators to lend it. Instead, the Glenstone show brims with other, early works in which Ms. Ringgold critiques the power dynamics that informed the country's race relations, midcentury. From boardrooms filled with imperious-looking white men to a group portrait reflecting that some founders of the NAACP were white, Ms. Ringgold pierced accepted narratives to reveal more complicated truths, Ms. Rales said. "Faith likes to problematize everything," she said.

Nothing from her Spectrum show sold immediately. Ms. Ringgold said she didn't care at the time, noting that she just wanted someone "to put me on a wall and let me speak." The scale and political bite of her canvases grew, with works such as "The Flag is Bleeding," a 1967 line of Black and white people standing with interlocked arms, a group she superimposes with a U.S. flag that appears to be dripping blood.



In one part of the show, Ms. Ringgold aimed to nod to a church wake by hanging textile pieces that evoke stained-glass windows behind black-fabric sculptures that look like mourners. PHOTO: ACA GALLERIES, NY/GLENSTONE MUSEUM

The Glenstone show also explores Ms. Ringgold's "Black Light" series, exuberant works that explore how she painted Black faces using many tones and hues—a series inspired by the tonal varieties she saw in minimalist Ad Reinhardt's black-on-black paintings. In some ways, her portrayal of happy Black couples doing everyday things was just as radical as Reinhardt's black voids, but she said collectors largely stayed away from the works and she eventually moved on to other projects. She returned to the U.S. flag motif in the 1970s, making protest posters for the Black Panthers and incorporating African Kuba textile patterns into her designs.

By the 1980s, Ms. Ringgold found her signature style when she began working with textiles, enlisting her mother's sewing skills to frame her paintings with quilted borders over which she painted and scrawled narratives. Some were fantasies of a life free of inequality. Others offered glimpses into her personal view of the world, like "Tar Beach," a sweet story of a young girl who finds city life less stifling atop her apartment building's roof. (She later illustrated the same story in a children's book and a short animated film.)

Over the years, Ms. Ringgold created more than 130 quilts, documenting everything from her weight-loss woes to an invented back story for Aunt Jemima, the longtime pancake and breakfast brand that was retired last year and renamed Pearl Milling Co. in February. Glenstone owns the quilt "Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima?" and Ms. Rales said she is curious to see how visitors react to it.

The Guggenheim, the Art Institute of Chicago and other museums have collected Ms. Ringgold's quilts. The Glenstone show gave the artist more space to arrange some wall

hangings alongside her sewn sculptures of people, a lesser-known part of her practice. In one area, Ms. Ringgold said she wanted to create a church-like environment by hanging textile pieces that evoke stained-glass windows behind a group of black-fabric people at a wake—part of a larger performance piece in 1976 that imagines a man's resurrection. "That's the idea, that they go together," the artist said.

The show's final gallery features the "Dahs," a group of rainbow-hued abstracts that Ms. Ringgold painted following the death of her mother in 1981. The artist said that after years of having so much to protest and champion in her art, she was shocked to find that her grief was best expressed in wordless, colorful abstraction. "I tried to imagine what the next world looked like," she said, "and I didn't see sadness, so I painted a joyful, safe space."

Write to Kelly Crow at kelly.crow@wsj.com

Appeared in the April 1, 2021, print edition as 'Faith Ringgold's Works Get a Survey'.

The Guardian

Black lives

Faith Ringgold: 'Make your art what you want it to be. And I did that.' Photograph: Jill Mead/The Guardian

Faith Ringgold: 'I'm not going to see riots and not paint them'

In a 70-year career, Ringgold has shown the US its bloody, brutal side. And yet the artist started out wanting to paint landscapes ... She talks about growing up during the Harlem Renaissance and her battles with the establishment

By Ellen E Jones

Thu 18 Mar 2021 02.00 EDT

It looks a long way down from the window of Faith Ringgold's attic studio to her snow-covered garden in Englewood, New Jersey. Her friend and longtime gallerist Dorian Bergen is holding the phone aloft, giving me a video tour of an impressively ordered room. There is a long work table in the middle, with paints of every kind and colour at one end, and canvasses piled high, ready for use, at the other. Hung on one wall are two framed quilt editions from Ringgold's Coming to Jones Road series, inspired by her move to this very house 28 years ago, when the neighbours' hostile reception ended in a court case. Ringgold herself - now aged 90, and regal with it - sits by that window with its vertiginous view, as if on a throne backlit by the sun.

In a 70-year career spanning the US's 20th-century social revolutions, the artist, activist and children's author has infused the US art establishment with traditions that had previously been systematically excluded: west African; African American; the work of women; and the perspectives of children. But while her famous fans include Oprah Winfrey and Hillary Clinton, it is only in the past five years that the art world has come to appreciate the full scope of her legacy.

The celebrated story-quilts showcased many of Ringgold's artistic preoccupations - African American history, vivid colour palettes, the elevation of oft-dismissed domestic crafts to high-art status - but their prominence has also overshadowed just how much else there is. Ringgold's subjects have varied from prettified landscapes to highly charged political portraits, and her medium has encompassed painting, sculpture, mask-making, performance art, mosaics on the NYC subway and a large-scale mural at the Rikers Island women's prison. As she explained in a 1972 interview, she chose the site after receiving a grant to create a public work and being rejected by a number of academic institutions, including her alma mater, City College. "When I spoke to the deans I would get a lot of 'Who are you?' ... I asked myself, do you want your work to be somewhere where nobody wants it, or do you want it to be somewhere it is needed?"

For a long while the American art world didn't seem to know what to make of Ringgold's determination to depict the nation - racism, violent upheaval and all. In December 1967, her striking, 12ft by 6ft American People Series #20: Die was first shown at Spectrum, a cooperative gallery in midtown Manhattan. The painting draws on the influence of Picasso's Guernica to depict a dramatic scene of civil unrest on the streets of an unnamed American city. Injured or dying bodies of men, women and children - black and white - are dramatically splayed on the pavement, amid splashes of blood. One visitor to the gallery apparently emerged from the lift, saw the painting, and immediately let loose a wild scream of terror.

"People weren't used to seeing blood," says Bergen now. "I wasn't used to painting blood either, by the way," adds Ringgold. "But I found it very easy and very interesting. Because I saw it all the time, you see. People were having these riots, but nobody was painting them." In 1964, Harlem had seen six nights of what Ringgold described in her 1995 memoir as "tumultuous thrusts for freedom", after a 15-year-old African American, James Powell, was shot dead by a white police officer. By summer 1967, uprisings were taking place all over the country. "I said: 'I'm not gonna see all these riots and not paint them. I can do what I want,'" says Ringgold.

Faith Ringgold with her mother, Willi Posey Jones. Photograph: Courtesy of Faith Ringgold

Making art that elicits screams would doubtless attract notice today, but despite the political tumult of the late 60s, white men dominated the New York art scene, just as they did other spheres of public life. And the attention she did get was not always favourable. In 1970 she was arrested for what the NYPD termed "desecration of the flag". She had designed the flyer for the People's Flag Show exhibition in Greenwich Village, a red and black lithograph that reimagined the US flag to include text such as: "A flag which does not belong to the people to do with as they see fit should be burned." Ringgold insists it was far from desecration. "It was just people, y'know, trying to control creativity." The authorities soon realised their mistake and she was released that same night.

Things were slowly changing, though, with Ringgold seemingly involved in every major liberation movement of the 70s and 80s. As a founding member of the Ad Hoc Women Artists' Committee, in 1970 she protested against the almost exclusively male lineup of the Whitney annual exhibition by depositing raw eggs and sanitary towels around the gallery. In 1971, she co-founded the black women artists' collective Where We At, to foster community art, and in 1974 she and her elder daughter, Michele Wallace, were founding members of the National Black Feminist Organization. Her Anyone Can Fly Foundation remains dedicated to "expanding the art establishment's canon to include artists of the African diaspora".

Ringgold's childhood took place amid the creative buzz of the Harlem Renaissance, when Langston Hughes was writing poetry and Bessie Smith was singing the blues. Her father, a truck driver and a minister, "would always make sure that I had enough paint and crayons". He brought home her first easel when she was 10. Her mother was a fashion designer, offering a role model as someone who made a living through art. "We all had lots of beautiful, unique clothes made and designed by my mother. People were very careful about being dressed in those days. Nobody went out in the street looking raggedy, unless they were."

This was particularly important, because you never knew who you might bump into. Ringgold says, of the black artists of the 1930s: "No matter how famous or important they were, they lived in Harlem." There was a lot of racism elsewhere in New York City, but her neighbourhood was the exception, "because Harlem was for us". Duke Ellington lived around the corner, so Ringgold and her friends would make a diner coffee last for hours, in hopes of crossing paths with him. The jazz saxophonist Sonny Rollins also lived nearby, and remains a life-long friend. "If he played at home then the neighbours would complain, y'know - they didn't want all this music, all

hours of the night. So his parents told him no, and he'd go on George Washington Bridge and play."

Ringgold and her mother in the 1930s.
Photograph: Courtesy of Faith Ringgold

Her memories of growing up in Harlem fed into the semi-autobiographical Tar Beach (1988) and Tar Beach 2 (1990) story-quilts, which depict an eight-year-old girl soaring above her neighbourhood and claiming its landmarks as her own. The inspiration was the sun-heated asphalt roof of her childhood apartment building. "We'd go up there and my mother would make up lunch and put it all on a table, and everything. It was perfect." In 1991, Ringgold adapted Tar Beach into her first illustrated book for children. She has now published 17 such titles.

Chronic asthma meant Ringgold was mostly home-schooled until the age of eight, but after several years teaching in Harlem's public schools, she now looks back at that early period as fundamental to her artistic development. "I noticed there's a point in the life of children when they kind of give up on art," she says. "They don't like the idea that some people won't like what they do, and I just didn't have that problem. Because I was home a lot, I didn't have to deal with people who liked or didn't like. I liked - and that was the end of that."

In 1950, her application to study art at the City College of New York was rejected, owing to her gender and race. She refused to take no for an answer and a compromise was eventually reached: instead of majoring in art, she would study "art education", considered a more acceptable subject for a woman. In retrospect, this diversion was a happy one. "Children are extremely inspiring when it comes to art," says Ringgold. "I'm very glad I did it." But back then, wasn't she outraged? "Absolutely! I was determined that I didn't want to be limited."

Ringgold's formal education focused on the European masters and her early work reflected that. "A lot of boats and trees and whatever they taught you in school. Not political at all." This period coincided with Ringgold's first marriage, to the jazz and classical pianist Robert Earl Wallace. The two married in 1950, separating four years and two daughters later. It wasn't until 2004, however, with her Jazz Stories series of quilts and acrylic paintings, that Ringgold explicitly incorporated the soundtrack of her youth into her art. "I'm definitely not a musician of any kind," she says with a laugh. "But the music was rampant - it was all over the place."

In the early 1960s a fateful meeting with the New York gallery owner Ruth White changed everything. "She said: 'You can't paint any of this kind of stuff.' And I said: 'I wonder why she's telling me what I can do? I can do what I want.' But then I realised what she was saying - 'With all the racist things that are going on in the world, you're painting landscapes?' So I said: 'OK, here it comes ...'"

Ringgold married her second husband, Burdette "Birdie" Ringgold, in 1962, and with his financial support and encouragement was able to devote more

time to art. Influenced by the writing of James Baldwin, as well as White's challenge, she began work on her American People series of oil paintings (1963-67), now among her most celebrated works. These paintings, usually of figures chosen to reflect the interracial tensions of the times, were rendered in a bold style that combined influences from pop art, post-cubist Picasso and African sculpture. She eventually gave up teaching in 1973, though she continued to hold prestigious positions at various US universities until the early 00s.

Her mother, Willi Posey Jones, was a key supporter, providing both childcare and collaboration. "She taught me how to make these quilts," says Ringgold, pointing to the framed editions hanging on her studio wall. "She knew how it should be composed." Mother's Quilt (1983) was the first quilt work that Ringgold completed without her, and the physically demanding work became a kind of grief therapy. "Finishing that quilt, after my mother died, was very helpful," she says.

Groovin' High, 1996. Photograph: © 2021 Faith Ringgold / ARS and DACS member/Courtesy ACA Galleries, New York

Sometimes Ringgold's work has been able to combine the politically incendiary and the personally cathartic. In the early 90s, some of her New Jersey neighbours were apparently unhappy about a black family moving to the area. The ensuing legal battle inspired Coming to Jones Road, which depicts runaway slaves migrating north. Ringgold saw parallels in "the slaves coming to America, people deciding where we should be. Of course, I didn't know anything about that, being born in Harlem; who tells anybody where to live?"

As an enthusiastic traveller, she did her own version of the European Grand Tour in 1961, taking in the galleries of Paris, Florence and Rome, and in the mid-70s there were trips around west Africa, where she studied mask-making and other traditional fabric techniques. Since her international reputation began growing in the 1980s, she has shown her work in galleries from Cairo to Tokyo and collected honorary doctorates (she has 23) from institutions around the world. Her only regret is that she can't currently represent her work in person. "We can't even get out of the house now because of this corona thing," she says.

In 1989, Oprah Winfrey commissioned a quilt as a birthday gift for Maya Angelou, and in 1994 Ringgold was seated next to Hillary Clinton at a White House dinner, but it wasn't until 2016 that the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York purchased the bloody, scream-provoking culmination of her American People series, Die. In 2017, Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power at the Tate Modern in London included some of her most confrontational work, alongside that of other African American artists. This was followed two years later by her first solo show in a European institution,

at the Serpentine Gallery in London. A version of the same show will open at Glenstone Museum in Maryland next month.

Ringgold's wedding to Birdie, 1962. Photograph: Courtesy of Faith Ringgold

In the era of global Black Lives Matter protests and a white supremacist-led storming of Capitol Hill, Ringgold's work has found new resonance. Today, though, she doesn't seem interested in talking about her activism. "We've made some progress, yes, but I don't pay much attention to it any more." At 90, Ringgold has been there, done that, and got the MoMA x Vans T-shirt, based on one of her collages. Since the loss of Birdie in February last year, grief has challenged even her prodigious productivity. "Most of my life, I used to get up at six o'clock in the morning, every morning and do my work. Now, I don't quite do that, because my husband died … That has set me back."

Even so, the work continues, and in conversation the right topic can light a fire behind Ringgold's eyes. Take a series that she has been painting in semi-secrecy since the 2016 presidential election but has been in no rush to exhibit: "I'm like, what else is [Trump] gonna show me about himself? I wanted to see more …"

If Ringgold has slowed down, it's only because so much is already accomplished that she can afford to take her time. She has lived her life, and created her art, without regrets. "Make your art what you want it to be. And I did that. So all my work is there - I don't have anything waiting in the corner that I'd like to show." She pauses for a moment to skim the vast exhibition catalogue in her brain. "No, I think I've got it all out there."

This article was amended on 20 March 2021 to remove some details.

The New York Times

Faith Ringgold Will Keep Fighting Back

After the loss of her husband and a pandemic lockdown, this ardent activist was creatively blocked. Now, after watching the protests, she is inspired again.

By Bob Morris

Published June 11, 2020 Updated June 12, 2020

ENGLEWOOD, N.J. — Faith Ringgold has seen plenty of shake-ups and strange moments in her 89 well-traveled years. But the provocative Harlem-born artist — who has confronted race relations in this country from every angle, led protests to diversify museums decades ago, and even went to jail for an exhibition she organized — has had no reference point for the pandemic keeping her in lockdown and creatively paralyzed in her home in this leafy suburb for much of the spring.

“I’m trying to make sense of things, bring some light to the situation,” she said a few weeks ago, when the distraction of the news kept her from climbing the stairs to the beautiful and airy studio she had built when she moved from Harlem 30 years ago. “The children aren’t in school, and all over the world, the same situation,” Ms. Ringgold, a former art teacher, mused, while her two grown daughters hovered and MSNBC played.

“I’m just keeping my eyes wide open so I can find a point of view on all this,” she said with a sigh. “I’ve been waiting for the inspiration that can help me inspire others.”

Then, with the death of George Floyd on May 25, she found herself starting to emerge from her haze and to think more clearly, beginning to visualize how to get her thoughts down. She is, after all, the visionary behind the painting of a race riot in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art that, in the last week, has been called a “gateway” to challenging entrenched ways of thinking about social

injustice. Her large-scale work “American People Series #20: Die,” from 1967, was inspired by “Guernica,” and hangs now alongside several of Picasso’s iconic paintings.

“I was just trying to read the times, and to me everyone was falling down,” Ms. Ringgold said of the well-dressed black and white people she painted tumbling to the sidewalk. “And if it upsets people that’s because I want them to be upset.”

Faith Ringgold’s “American People Series #20: Die,” from 1967, was a centerpiece of the MoMA rehang last fall. Faith Ringgold/Artists Rights Society (ARS),New York, Courtesy ACA Galleries, New York; The Museum of Modern Art

The painting will still be on view in late summer, when the museum is set to reopen. Meanwhile, on June 18, Ms. Ringgold and Anne Umland, a curator there, will participate in a live Q. and A. session at 8 p.m. on YouTube, part of MoMA’s Virtual Views series. They will discuss “Die” in detail, and much more.

“Certain works become visitor favorites over a long period of time, but it’s rare when a painting instantly becomes one,” said Ann Temkin, MoMA’s chief curator of painting and sculpture, about the large canvas that stunned crowds in the months after the museum reopened last fall.

With her work recently displayed around the world as never before, Ms. Ringgold is having a late-life moment she would not have imagined when she protested at the Whitney 50 years ago, demanding it include more women and people of color. Dorian Bergen, her gallerist at A.C.A. (which has a history of representing political artists), thinks the surge in popularity (and prices) got a jump-start in 2017 with her inclusion in the Tate Museum of London's "Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power."

Ms. Ringgold's "All Power to the People" (1970), from cut paper. Faith Ringgold/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; ACA Galleries, New York

Ms. Ringgold's "American People Series #4, The Civil Rights Triangle," (1963). Faith Ringgold/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; ACA Galleries, New York

The show traveled widely, including to Brooklyn. A crowd-pleasing retrospective at London's Serpentine Galleries in 2019 followed; The Times of London called it "bright, beautiful and brutal" and "a gorgeous gut punch." In the coming months, there will be shows at the Bildmuseet in Sweden and at Glenstone, the contemporary art museum outside of Washington, D.C. In addition, a Ringgold work with text, "Street Story Quilt" (1985), will be on view at the 150th anniversary show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art when it reopens.

“It’s a story of survival and redemption and speaks to powerful social and historical inequities,” said Sheena Wagstaff, the museum’s chairwoman of Modern and Contemporary Art. She oversees a collection that includes younger black female artists (Kara Walker, Lorna Simpson and Wangechi Mutu among them), but notes that while some are better known, “Faith did it first.”

Ms. Wagstaff admires in particular how Ms. Ringgold incorporated black women into her scenes of daily life, adding that while Beyoncé may have invaded the Louvre in a recent music video, Ms. Ringgold had been there three decades ago. Her “Dancing at the Louvre” quilt series from the late ’90s shows exuberant black families enjoying great works of European art. In one work she shows Picasso painting a naked black woman in front of his “Les Demoiselles d’Avignon.”

“It acknowledges art history while subverting it,” Ms. Wagstaff said. “Faith Ringgold is always polemical but never one-sided.”

“American People Series #19: U. S. Postage Stamp Commemorating the Advent of Black Power” (1967) includes the slogan in a subtle text. Faith Ringgold/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; ACA Galleries, New York

And also, never predictable. Some of the portraits in her “American People Series” show elegant black figures subjugated in subtle ways by whites. Later images include a postage stamp of a grid of faces with almost-hidden texts spelling out “Black Power” and “White Power.” One of her earliest painted quilts (her mother, a dress designer, helped) from 1983, called “Who’s Afraid of Aunt Jemima?,” uses her texts and images to reimagine the mammy figure as an entrepreneur.

“I’m always thinking about what can be better,” Ms. Ringgold said about looking at life straight on while questioning it. “And if you don’t get it out there, the situation will never change.”

If Romare Bearden, who encouraged Ms. Ringgold early on, believed that “an intense, eager devotion to present day life” was “the calling of the Negro artist,” she got the message. Every one of her images tells a story, as often to uplift as critique and almost always in bright, bold and inviting ways. In a quilt from her “American Collection” series (1997), she painted the Statue of Liberty with her own face and dreadlocks in a harbor full of flailing black figures. Her painting of the American flag called “Freedom of Speech” is covered with handwritten names in gold of everyone from Harriet Tubman to Jesse Helms.

“Freedom of Speech” by Faith Ringgold, from 1990. In the 1960s, Ms. Ringgold began to incorporate text into her works, often used as posters. Faith Ringgold/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, via The Metropolitan Museum of Art

“I didn’t want to leave anybody off,” she remarked in a laid back and youthful voice informed, it almost seemed, by a jazz rhythm. “Everybody gets to speak.”

“We Came to America” (1997), a painted story quilt, showed black people drowning in New York Harbor.
Faith Ringgold/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; ACA Galleries, New York

Her Harlem childhood was full of music and the art-making that her mother encouraged. In 1950 she married Robert Earl Wallace, a jazz musician, had two daughters, Barbara and Michele, then divorced in 1955. She graduated from City College with a master's degree in 1959 and taught art in public schools and later at college level. She married Burdette Ringgold, who became a loving provider, in 1962, found a gallerist in 1967, had a couple of shows that didn’t do much for her

career, then got into organizing protests. She ended up in jail in 1970 for desecration at an incendiary American flag show she co-curated at Judson Church in Greenwich Village.

“They didn’t keep me in for long because the media was watching,” she said.

Around the same time, she met with women imprisoned at Riker’s, then painted a mural showing a female police officer, basketball player, minister, construction worker and U.S. president. “All the things life could bring them if they had freedom,” she said.

“Her images are often of active women wielding axes, marching or singing their lungs out, and as an African-American woman that always interested me,” said Lisa Farrington, an author and associate dean at Howard University. “She stood out because she was so in your face and so politically honest.” So much so that when Chase Manhattan’s curators were about to buy one of her flag paintings for the bank’s well-reputed contemporary collection, they backed off when they noticed it contained an incendiary racial slur.

Faith Ringgold, “Tar Beach #2” (1990), silkscreen on silk. Her lyrical series became an inspiring picture book celebrating urban rooftops and the power of imagination. Faith Ringgold/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; ACA Galleries, New York

Later decades have found her working in a variety of mediums and styles, including African masks and soft sculptures, thangka (Tibetan tapestries) and the quilts for which she is best known, including the lyrical “Tar Beach” series that became an inspiring picture book celebrating urban rooftops and the power of imagination.

In the months before the pandemic hit, Ms. Ringgold had been typically active. Using a cane she barely needed and wearing a “Women, Freedom, Now” T-shirt based on one of her collages, she took a day off from working in February to come to MoMA and check out her race-riot painting, and the crowds pondering it. She hit the Met Breuer, too, where her “Freedom of Speech” flag hung in a show of international political artists.

Back in her studio the same week, she was hoping to get back to a commission of stained-glass windows for Yale University that were to replace the racially insensitive ones depicting the former U.S. vice president and notorious slavery advocate John C. Calhoun, hanging in Calhoun College (now renamed for Grace Hopper). She also inspected her series of celebratory paintings of lively elderly people. “Old people don’t always act like old people,” was the message. “What I am saying to people my age is to let yourself continue,” she said.

But she herself could not continue.

Her beloved husband, who spent his life on an automobile assembly line, died on Feb. 1 after years in a nursing home with Parkinson’s. Near the stairwell of her home, she pointed to her painting of a 2001 garden party. He towered over guests with arms out as if to fly. “I guess he’s better off now,” she sighed. In her office, dozens of honorary degrees hung on every wall. A bold painting of some flowers from her student days brightened a corner.

“In college they never told you to paint the world as it really is,” she said as she turned off the light to go downstairs for dinner. “But I always have to feel something to paint it.”

Then came the virus that had her glued to the news without a response.

But with the death of George Floyd late last month, she started to wonder if it would be a catalyst that would turn the tides of social justice in this country. “I can’t imagine what he did to deserve to die,” she said. “His breath was stolen by a system that threatens our freedom.”

"I'm not done yet," Ms. Ringgold said. "I've got so much more to do." Meron Tekie Menghistab for The New York Times

That's when, as a late spring finally took hold outside, she felt her ideas and politics resurging. "I've got to see an idea in my head first, and I'm starting to visualize what it is I have to say," she said.

As of this week, she is working again, actively mulling ideas for a flag project for a commission from the real estate giant Tishman Speyer. The company will install 192 of them in August in Rockefeller Center. Her flag will be flying in good company, with others by Jeff Koons, Marina Abramovic, Sarah Sze, KAWS and Laurie Anderson.

"And I'm not done yet," she said. "I've got so much more to do."

When she isn't working and even, of late, doing strengthening and stretching exercises, she looks out at the big backyard garden that her husband loved so much, and that she featured in several works, with its colors as bright as any in her paintings. After years of neglect, it is being restored.

"That keeps me feeling up," she said. "Because we are interested in life."

A version of this article appears in print on , Section C, Page 1 of the New York edition with the headline: Inspired Anew, She's Still Fighting Back

HYPERALLERGIC

Faith Ringgold's Painted and Sewn Survey of United States History

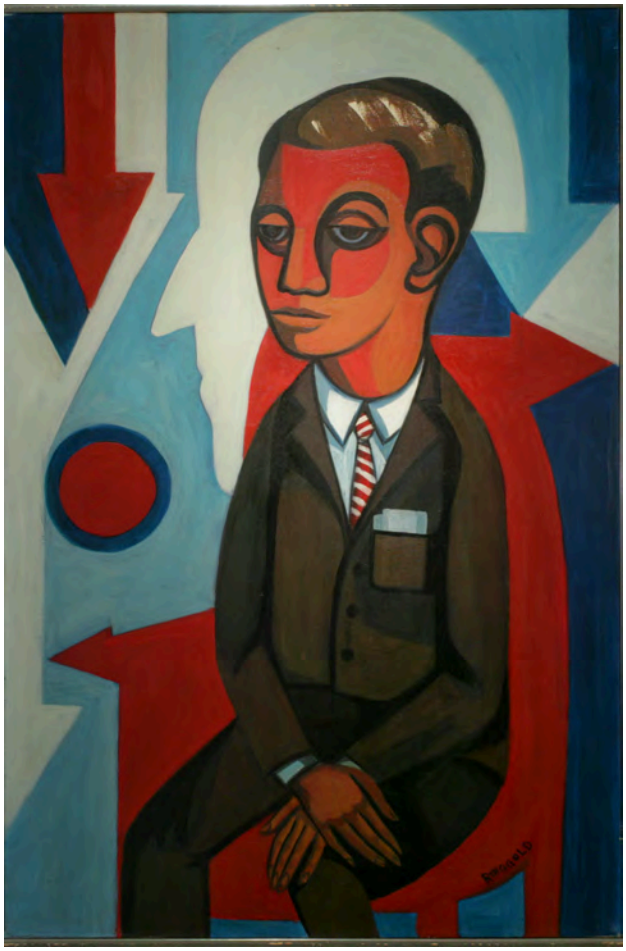
At London's Serpentine Gallery, Faith Ringgold tells stories of race and self-discovery which have too often gone untold.

Naomi Polonsky August 5, 2019

Faith Ringgold, "American Collection #1: We Came to America" (1997), Acrylic on canvas, 74.5 x 79.5 in, 189.2 x 201.9 cm (Courtesy of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia. Art by Women Collection, Gift of Linda Lee Alter)

LONDON — For almost 60 years, Faith Ringgold has delicately interwoven the autobiographical and archetypal, the tragic and celebratory, and told stories which have too often gone untold. A small but punchy retrospective at London's Serpentine Gallery (the first in a European institution) is a testament to the extraordinary range and power of her works.

Ringgold was born in Harlem in 1930. It was the Great Depression. It was also the Harlem Renaissance. She grew up in a lively creative milieu which included figures like Billie Holiday, Langston Hughes, Duke Ellington, and James Baldwin, as well as her fashion designer mother and jazz pianist father. After graduating from the City College of New York with a degree in arts education (women weren't allowed to get degrees in fine art at that time), she started creating her artistic oeuvre, drawing on European Modernism, African design, and American folk art.

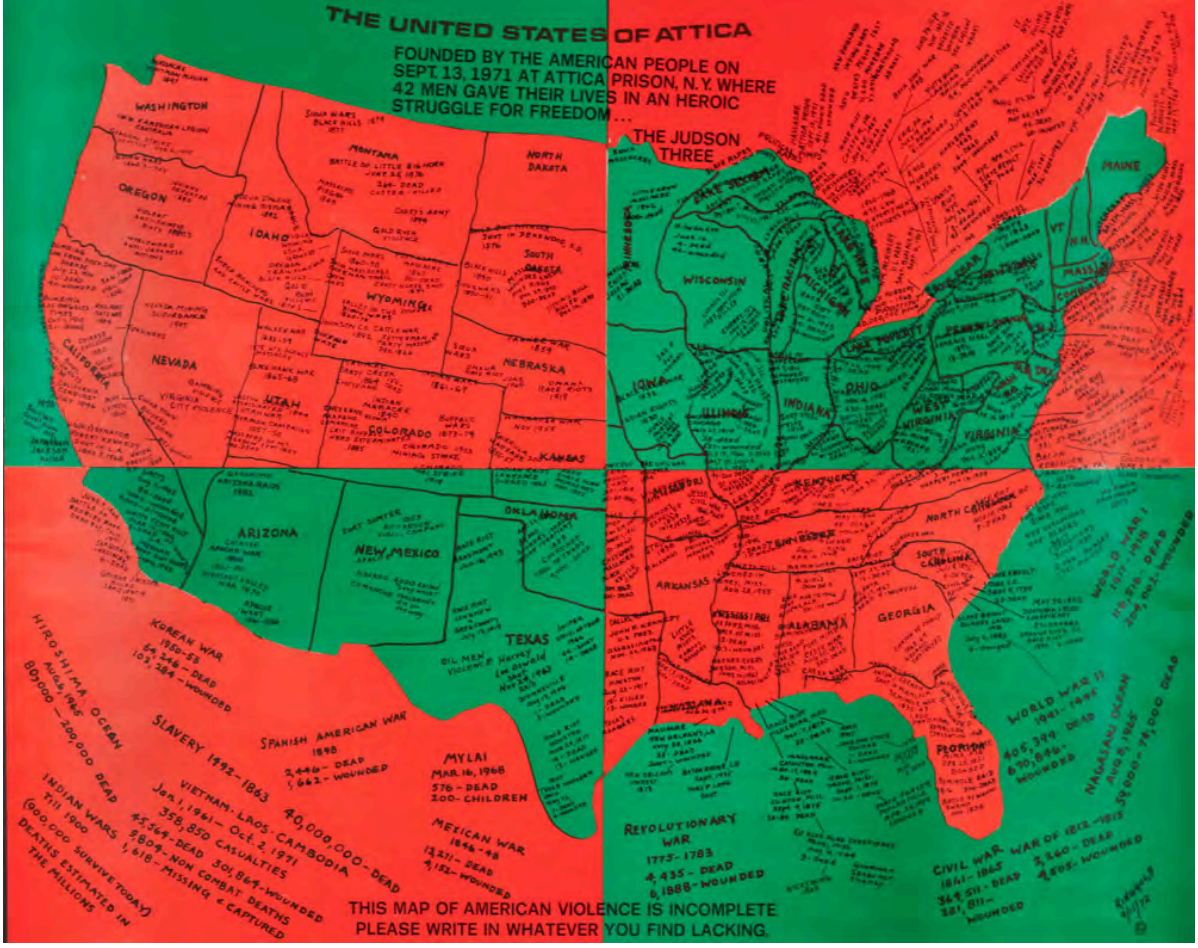


Faith Ringgold, "American People #14: Portrait of an American Youth" (1964), Oil on canvas, 36 x 24 in, 91.4 x 60.9 cm (Courtesy the artist and ACA Galleries, New York)

The Serpentine's show begins with Ringgold's painterly survey of American society in the mid-1960s, *American People* (1963-7). She created the series as a record of the growing Civil Rights movement which played out on the streets but was rarely reported in the news. One painting depicts a "Mr. Charlie" (1964) (an imperious white man), staring creepily out from the canvas, his hand on his chest in a gesture of faux sincerity. Another shows a demure "American Youth" (1964), based on Ringgold's brother Andrew, who was beaten in a racially biased attack. The works are painted in an ironic palette of red, white, and blue.

In a work from a later series, *The American Collection,* a dreadlocked Statue of Liberty cradles a Black baby in one arm and holds up her flaming torch with the other. Around her, dozens of slaves flail in the sea, drowning, while the ship that transported them burns in the background. "We came to America" is the title of Faith Ringgold's painting — a damning portrait of the land of the free.

In the 1970s, Ringgold became an activist — by desire, but also by necessity. "I remember when I was young," she said in a recent **interview**, "and I would go into a gallery to show my work, the gallery dealer would look at my legs, but not my art." In 1970, Ringgold and some fellow demonstrators placed eggs and tampons around the Whitney in protest against the consistently small percentage of women artists on display in its annual exhibition of contemporary art.



Faith Ringgold, “United States of Attica” (1971-1972), Offset print, 22.5 × 27.5 in, 57.1 x 69.8 cm (Courtesy the artist and ACA Galleries, New York)

Times have changed. Black and female artists are more visible than ever before. And Ringgold, once an art world outsider, now has works in the collections of MoMA, the Guggenheim, and gratifyingly — the Whitney. The second room in the Serpentine’s showcases some of her activist pieces, such as the *Feminist Series* — impressionistic landscapes with quotes by feminist icons, which she painted on unstretched canvas so that they would be easy to transport and exhibit. Nearby are a selection of her political posters, including her famous map piece, “The United States of Attica” (1972). Printed in red and green, it shows the death tolls of different American wars and conflicts, creating a harrowing picture of the country’s violent history.

Ringgold is probably best known for her colorful “story quilts,” which she began to make in the 1980s. Textiles, dismissed for centuries as “women’s work,” were reclaimed as an art form by many 20th-century women artists, including Anni Albers and Hannah Ryggen. In an American context, they are even more charged with meaning. Not legally allowed to read and write, slaves communicated with each other, instead, through the rich language of the American quilt.

Faith Ringgold, “Woman on a Bridge #1 of 5: Tar Beach” (1988), Acrylic on canvas with fabric border, 74.6 x 68.5 in, 189.5 x 174 cm (Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Gift, Mr. and Mrs. Gus and Judith Leiber, 1988)

Ringgold’s “story quilts” — painted on canvas with colorful fabric borders — are a vibrant celebration of everyday African American life. “Woman on a Bridge #1 of 5: Tar Beach*”* (1988), which the artist later turned into a **children’s book**, is an ode to the summer nights she spent on a rooftop in Harlem as a child, gazing up at the star-studded sky. Other quilts depict a jazz band mid-song and a bustling graffitied subway platform.

Quilt-making, for Ringgold, is an act of empowerment. In “Who’s Afraid of Aunt Jemima” (1983), Ringgold recasts Aunt Jemima — the smiling face of a still-existing **pancake and waffle mix brand** based on the racist “mammy” stereotype — as a savvy businesswoman. In another, more personal one, “Change: Faith Ringgold’s More Than 100 Pounds Weight Loss Performance Story Quilt,” she discusses her complicated relationship with food and self-image. “In the 1970s food was a feminist issue,” it reads, “and I was a fat feminist.”

From “fat feminists” to unsung heroines, a triptych of luminous portraits in the next room pays homage to some of the key figures in the Black freedom struggle. Alongside Martin Luther King are two, far less lauded, female freedom fighters: Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman. Both women were born into slavery and became important abolitionists and human rights activists. They strike powerful poses and are surrounded by quotations, in which they narrate their own lives in their own words.

“I have always wanted to tell my story,” the artist wrote in the preface to her memoir, ***We Flew Over the Bridge***, published in 1995. In fact, she tells many stories. And the Serpentine’s show proves that they are stories worth listening to.

THE CUT

STORIES

The Civil-Rights Activist Who Pushed Museums to Feature Black Artists

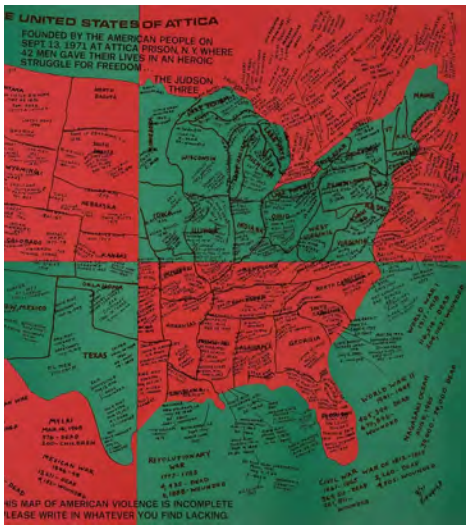
By Jenna Adrian-Diaz Sept. 28, 2018

Artist Faith Ringgold, right, with her daughter, the art historian and critic Michele Wallace. Photo: Kolin N. Mendez / Kolin Mendez Photography for the Brooklyn Museum

More than 300 people gathered at the Brooklyn Museum last night to listen to 87-year-old Faith Ringgold speak about her extraordinary career and activism, which included fighting for major New York City museums to feature work by black artists in the 1960s. Two of her artworks appear in the Brooklyn Museum's recently opened retrospective, "Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power, which features black artists who explored themes of race, identity, and activism from the years 1963 to 1983.

The sold-out event began with deafening applause and a standing ovation when Ringgold took the stage with her daughter, the art historian and critic Michele Wallace. “I became an artist because I wanted to tell my story as a black woman in America,” Ringgold began. “It was the height of the civil-rights movement, and I wanted my art to be a witness to the changes that were taking place.”

Ringgold was born in 1930 and grew up in Harlem. In 1955, after marrying her first husband and having two children, Ringgold attended the City College of New York to study art and earned both her bachelor and master’s degrees. She soon became a vocal civil-rights activist, and created protest posters for the Black Panthers. She also organized her own protests outside major New York City museums that featured no work by black artists.



United States of Attica, 1972. Offset

r, 21 ¾ x 27 ½ in. Photo: ACA Galleries New tesy ACA Galleries, New York. © 2018 Faith Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

“Different people were complaining and I remember saying, ‘Why don’t we just demonstrate?’” she recalled. “The Whitney was the first.” She protested at the Whitney in 1968 and 1970. After the second demonstration, sculptors Betye Saar and Barbara Chase-Riboud were included in the museum’s sculpture biennial, as the first black female artists to be exhibited at the Whitney.

Ringgold’s daughter, Wallace, added that she and her mother were among the first to protest the Met’s controversial 1969 “Harlem on My Mind” photography exhibit, which featured no black artists. After more people joined the protests, the Met’s director apologized, and the museum began to include work by black artists in its collection. Today, several works by Ringgold are on permanent display at both the Met and the Whitney.

Ringgold now creates illustrated children’s books from her studio in New Jersey. In “Soul of a Nation” at the Brooklyn Museum, her works on display are *The Flag is Bleeding* (1967), which she painted to represent oppression and violence against black people in America; and the *United States of Attica* (1972), a map of violence in the U.S. as a response to the Attica Prison riot in 1971. Learn more about the exhibit here.

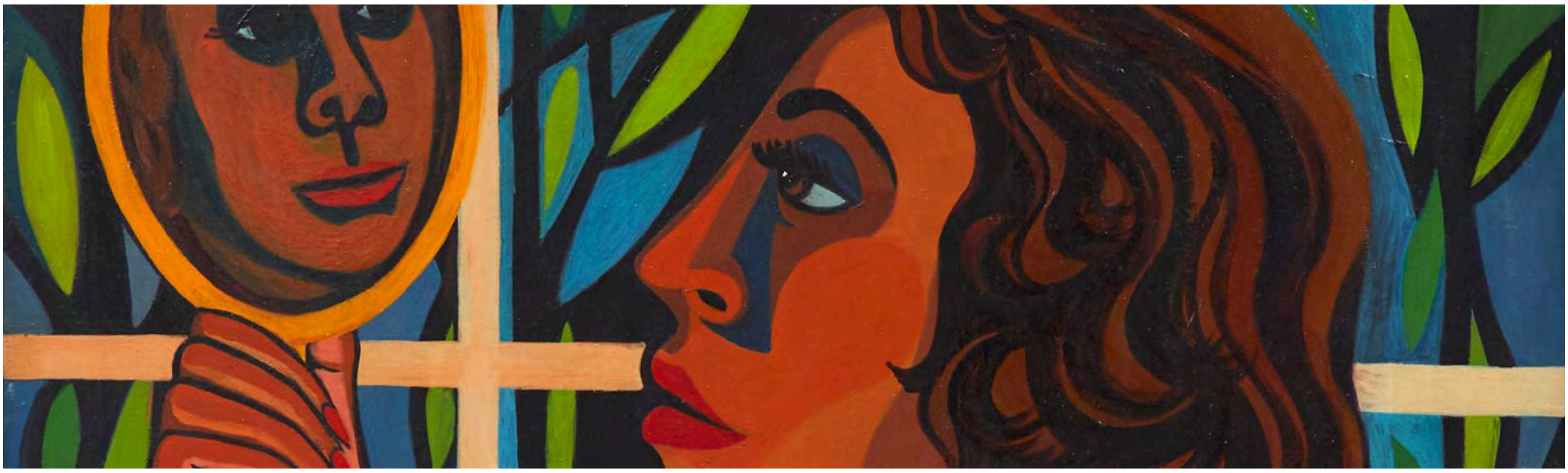
Ringgold's *The Flag is Bleeding*, 1967, pictured at right in the Brooklyn Museum's "Soul of a Nation" exhibit. Photo: Jonathan Dorado, Brooklyn Museum

FRIEZE

50 Years of Celebrating Black Beauty and Culture: Faith Ringgold

With her first UK show at Pippy Houldsworth Gallery, London, the Harlem-born artist reflects on the African American experience

BY **OSEI BONSU** IN **INTERVIEWS** | 19 APR 18



Against the backdrop of the civil rights movement in the early 1960s, Faith Ringgold began her 'American People' series (1963–67), in which she dissected the notion of the American dream to expose the uncomfortable realities of racial and gender inequality. Fusing pop art's hard edges with the political ideals of social realism, and techniques of Tibetan painting with the graphic symbolism of West African sculpture and design, her practice occupies a unique space within the black arts movement of the 1960s and '70s. This aesthetic originality is compounded by the fact that the figures and faces captured in Ringgold's early painting speak to a distinctly American social world – a world of bloody interracial tension and psychological trauma drawn along the lines of ideology and ethnic difference. Following in the footsteps of pivotal figures of the Harlem renaissance, such as Jacob Lawrence and Romare Bearden, her work is imbedded within the cultural tradition of storytelling that has been central to the survival of African American histories.

The narrative arc of Ringgold's own story runs parallel to the artist's radical activism; before co-founding the activist group Where We At, Black Women Artists, Inc. in the early 1970s, she led a series of protests against the lack of diversity in New York's Whitney Museum of American art, an institution that recently placed her work in an exhibition dedicated to protest. But perhaps the most enduring feature of the artist's work is her commitment to the art of storytelling. In 1980, Ringgold collaborated with her mother Willie Jones, a fashion designer, to produce her first story quilt. Developing a tradition once practiced by her great-great grandmother Susie Shannon, who was born into slavery and produced quilts for plantation owners, Ringgold uses fabric to weave together personal stories and histories of African American experience. The author of several children's books and a much-read autobiography, she once wrote: 'I have always wanted to tell my story, or, more to the point, my side of the story.'

Faith Ringgold, Subway Graffiti #2, 1987, acrylic on canvas with pieced, dyed and painted fabric, 1.5 × 2.1 m. Courtesy: Pippy Houldsworth Gallery, London and ACA Galleries, New York © the artist; photograph: Benjamin Westoby

Faith Ringgold, 'American People' series, *#9 –The American Dream*, 1964, oil on canvas, 91 × 61 cm. Courtesy: Pippy Houldsworth Gallery, London and ACA Galleries, New York © the artist; photograph: Benjamin Westoby

Osei Bonsu Throughout your career as an artist, one of the most enduring forms has been the quilts you began producing in the early 1980s, reviving the African and African American tradition of quilts that told stories and preserved memories. Your current exhibition at Pippy Houldsworth Gallery, London, includes quilts from the '80s onwards including *Subway Graffiti #2* [1987] and *Ancestors Part II* [2017]. What are your earliest memories of story quilts and how have they shaped your artistic approach to storytelling?

Faith Ringgold My earliest memory of quilting comes to me through my family history. My great-great grandmother, Susan Shannon, and her daughter, my great-grandmother Betsy Bingham, were both born slaves and were quilters all their lives. Both lived into advanced old age in Florida where they continued, after slavery, to work as quilters and seamstresses. Betsy taught her granddaughter, my mother, Willi Posey, how to quilt and my mother taught me, but not until 1980. Much of this story is retold in *Ancestors Part I*, which is currently on exhibit at Benedict College in Columbia, South Carolina.

My first collaboration with my mother was *Echoes of Harlem*, made in 1980, one year before she died, and now in the collection of the Studio Museum in Harlem. I continued to gradually make quilts on my own, producing my first story quilt, *Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima* [1983], over the course of an entire year as part of my mourning of the loss of my mother. Since then, I always work with collaborators, most recently my assistant Grace Matthews. The idea to make story quilts – that is, painting on canvas framed with quilting and bordered with boxes of text – first came out of my desire to tell my own story and to see my writing in print. Every time I exhibited a story quilt, I was also 'publishing' a story I had written.

OB The exhibition includes a number of paintings from your first mature body of work 'American People' series [1963–67] including *The American Dream* [1964] and *Woman Looking in a Mirror* [1966]. What did it mean to you, at the time, to make art that engaged directly with politics?

FR In 1963, I took my children with me to stay in Oak Bluffs [a black community on Martha's Vineyard] for the summer where I began the 'American People' series. This began with *Between Friends* [1963], inspired by the somewhat awkward meetings I witnessed of black and white female members of the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] at social events in the house of the family we stayed with. As it happens, this was also the summer of the March on Washington, followed immediately by the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham and the assassination of President Kennedy. This was a time of great eventfulness and turmoil in the civil rights movement in the North and the South. I was greatly inspired by the writings of James Baldwin, in particular *The Fire Next Time* [1963], in which he grapples with the issues raised by Malcolm X, a prominent figure in the North who would soon break with the Nation of Islam as a result of his efforts to articulate racism. It was Malcolm X's comments concerning the death of JFK about chickens coming home to roost that would lead to his expulsion from the Nation and begin his metamorphosis into a visionary political leader that would inspire the writer Leroi Jones [Amiri Baraka], whose work also inspired me.

Faith Ringgold, 'American People' series, *#19 – U.S. Postage Stamp Commemorating the Advent of Black Power*, 1967, oil on canvas, 1.8 × 2.4 cm. Courtesy: Pippy Houldsworth Gallery, London and ACA Galleries, New York © the artist

OB Throughout your career, you have addressed the question of race relations in America, a topic that continues to dominate the socio-political agenda. *Between Friends* [1963] recalls an uneasy meeting between a black and a white woman, while US Postage Stamp Commemorating the Advent of Black Power [1967] represented the demographic status
of African Americans as just ten percent of the population. What function do you think art has addressing these issues both historically and in the present moment?

FR In both *Between Friends* [1963] and *U.S. Postage Stamp* – as is true generally in the works of the 'American People' series, of which there are 20 – I am careful to emphasis that African Americans exist within an overall structure
dominated by white racism and power. I have continued to repeatedly address race relations as I have felt it necessary or compelling. But I added to my repertoire, as is visible in my 'Black Light' series [1967–69] as well as in the range of my 'story quilts' [1980-present], the celebration of black beauty and culture. Over the course of my career, I have combined my tributes to African American culture with my ongoing critiques of racism.

Faith Ringgold, *Bitter Nest, Part III - Lovers in Paris*, 1988, acrylic on canvas with pieced fabric border, 2.4 × 2.1 m. Courtesy: Pippy Houldsworth Gallery, London and ACA Galleries, New York © the artist; photograph: Benjamin Westoby

OB Although your work is very much in dialogue with issues in American society, you have drawn influences from many regions and cultures, including Tibetan paintings, traditional West African sculpture and the forms of lettering and design drawn from the Kuba people of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. How would you describe the influence of Pan-Africanist ideologies and aesthetics on your work and thinking?

FR In the summer of 1975, I sent my mother to West Africa to explore her interest in African fashion and design. She had such a wonderful experience travelling alone in terms of the warmth of the people she met that I decided to go on a trip myself through Nigeria and Ghana to study art-making techniques and traditions. This experience had a huge influence on my artistic practice, particularly on the soft sculpture and masks I produced in the 1970s. I returned to Africa again in 1977 to attend FESTAC, in which people of African descent from all over the world travelled to Lagos in a celebration and display of African cultures. I had already begun to incorporate Kuba design in my paintings as early as the 'Black Light' series [1967–69] and in my political poster designs. I often used the Kuba elements to organize my paintings. I began to adapt the thangka form as a result of a trip to Amsterdam in 1972 when a guard in the Rijksmuseum directed my attention to an exhibition of them. It occurred to me that making paintings framed by thangkas would allow me to roll my paintings and transport them easily and inexpensively. My mother made the thangkas that framed my 'Slave Rape' series [1972–73] and, in retrospect, her use of quilting techniques in their design is obvious. My use of thangkas in the 1970s was consistent with my exploration of the use of sewing techniques in the making of my art, which was strongly prompted by feminism and ideas of making feminist art.

OB Could you discuss the role that audience participation plays in your practice, both in terms of art and activism?

FR Over the course of my career, I have found different ways to incorporate audience participation. I have also always collaborated with other artists, beginning with my mother, Willi Posey. In 1976, for example, I did a performance called *The Wake and Resurrection of the Bicentennial Negro* in tribute to the Bicentennial Celebration of the founding of America in 1776. I travelled to various campuses around the country, working with students to collaborate on a dance in which the lives of two characters, Bena and Bubba, were explored. Bubba died of a drug overdose and Bena died of a broken heart. This story epitomized the crises we were facing in Harlem over drug addiction and the difficulties of black families in the community in the 1970s. Harlem, which is now being gentrified, was at that time turning into a wasteland. Much of my work, whether it is paintings, posters or sculpture, involves some form of protest and political statement. I have often collaborated with writers such as my daughter Michele Wallace, and others including Nikki Giovanni, Zora Neale Hurston, Gwendolyn Brooks and even Martin Luther King, using their texts as the basis for illustrations I have created in print formats or paintings used to illustrate children's books.

Faith Ringgold, *Ancestors Part II,* 2017, acrylic on canvas with pieced border, 1.5 × 1.6 m. Courtesy: Pippy Houldsworth Gallery, London and ACA Galleries, New York © the artist; photograph: Benjamin Westoby

OB In 1968, you led a group of artists who were protesting the Whitney Museum of American Art's lack of inclusion of black and Hispanic artists. You also joined the Ad Hoc Women's Art Committee and co-founded Where We At, Black Women Artists, Inc., a collective of black female artists. Ironically, your work was eventually acquired by the Whitney in 2014 and is currently on display in the exhibition 'An Incomplete History of Protest: Selections from the Whitney's Collection'. How do you think American museums have handled issues of exclusion and inequality over the years?

FR In 1968, I was involved in the first black protest against the racist but routine exclusion of black artists from major museum shows. The occasion was a survey of 1930s art at the Whitney Museum of American Art which included no black artists whatsoever. A group of us met at my gallery, Spectrum, then located on Madison Avenue near the Whitney. I prompted them to make signs and to picket the museum. It was at this protest that I first experienced being called a 'nigger' right outside the Whitney on Madison Avenue. This is what I wrote about in my painting *Hate is a Sin Flag* [2007] which was bought by the Whitney in 2014 and, as you mention, is currently on display there.

In the late 1960s, I protested at the Museum of Modern Art with the Art Workers' Coalition. Tom Lloyd suggested that I join him in demanding a wing for African American and Latino Art at MoMA, which we never got – perhaps partly because we wanted to name it after Martin Luther King and at the time, Coretta King, his widow, would not support this endeavour. Instead, two black artists, Romare Bearden and Richard Hunt, received retrospectives. It was the exclusion of the work of black women artists generally, despite these attempts, that led me to become a feminist in 1970 and to the formation of WSABAL [Women Students and Artists for Black Art Liberation], which often participated in protests, most notably with Ad Hoc Women, a feminist offshoot of the Art Worker's Coalition led by the art writer Lucy Lippard. In 1970, WSABAL participated in 'The People's Flag Show' at the Judson Memorial Church. It was an open show designed to protest the federal laws forbidding the desecration of the American flag, which was causing a lot of arrests around the country. Just as the show was about to close, I was arrested by the District Attorney's office along with Jon Hendricks and Jon Toche [friends from the Art Workers' Coalition]. We became known as the Judson Three and were vindicated on the grounds of the First Amendment [freedom of speech] in court via a team of lawyers from the ACLU [American Civil Liberties Union]. Monies raised on our behalf were used to bail out and defend young people getting arrested all over the country for displaying the flag in ways considered unsuitable by the powers that be.

OB Throughout your career, you have published many children's books on historical figures such as *Harriet Tubman* [1992] and *Rosa Parks* [1999]. Your own work has clearly been marked by artists like Jacob Lawrence and Romare Bearden. What do you hope that oncoming generations of artists and students will take from your artistic and political endeavours?

FR The answer to this question is simple: My hope is to inspire others to tell their stories and to have the courage to do so.

'Faith Ringgold: Paintings and Story Quilts, 1964–2017' *, is on view at Pippy Houldsworth Gallery, London, UK, until 28 April*

Main image: Faith Ringgold, 'American People' series, #16 – Woman Looking in a Mirror *(detail), 1966, oil on canvas, 84 × 81 cm. Courtesy: Pippy Houldsworth Gallery, London and ACA Galleries, New York © Faith Ringgold; photograph: Benjamin Westoby*

HYPERALLERGIC

An Exhibition About Revolution that Keeps Faith with Ringgold

It is a great irony that the Faith Ringgold's first public commission was effectively imprisoned for over 40 years, but this situation raises valuable questions regarding our notions of the public and how that public is served.

Ramsay Kolber September 15, 2017

Faith Ringgold, "For the Women's House" (1971) oil on canvas, 96 x 96 (243.8 x 243.8 cm) (courtesy of Rose M. Singer Center, Rikers Island Correctional Center 2017 © Faith Ringgold / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York)

The Brooklyn Museum's current, corrective survey, *We Wanted A Revolution: Black Radical Women 1965-85*, opens with an impressive eight-by-eight-feet mural painting. The work is divided into eight, equal triangular sections , each offering a view of women actively at work: suspended narratives like driving a bus or holding a press conference, extended across differences in age, race, and class.

In recent months when giving tours of this mural at this museum where I work in the Education Department, I most often stand in front of the wall text and encourage visitors to get close to the painting. I ask them to consider the scale of the canvas, to think of when it might have been painted, to imagine who it might be intended for. I ask them to *see* these women, and to reflect.

This work, *For the Women's House*, was painted in 1971 by the artist, author, and activist **Faith Ringgold**. That year, Ringgold had received a grant from the Creative Artists Public Service program (CAPS), which stipulated the creation of a public work. By this time, Ringgold was already a prominent voice in the **Black Arts Movement** and the fight for gender and racial equality in the United States. Her artistic practice embodied these activist energies, critiquing US society, as well as art and academic institutions, for their systematic failure to acknowledge the contributions of women and people of color.

Jan van Raay, "Faith Ringgold (right) and Michele Wallace (middle) at Art Workers Coalition Protest, Whitney Museum" (1970), digital C-print (courtesy of Jan van Raay and the Brooklyn Museum © Jan van Raay)

For this commission, the artist's immediate impulse was to make a public installation about and for women. She went first to her alma mater, City College, to see if they would be interested, but was turned away. This response reminded Ringgold of her interactions with museums as a black woman: a feeling of being excluded as both an artist and a black woman, from institutions founded on perpetuating narratives of white, Western-male dominance.

In a 1972 interview with her daughter, the cultural critic and activist, Michele Wallace, Ringgold reflected on the impact of discrimination on the painting's production: "I asked myself, do you want your work to be somewhere where nobody wants it or do you want it to be somewhere it is needed." The idea drew her to the thought of mounting the work in a women's prison. Who would be more in need than society's unwanted?

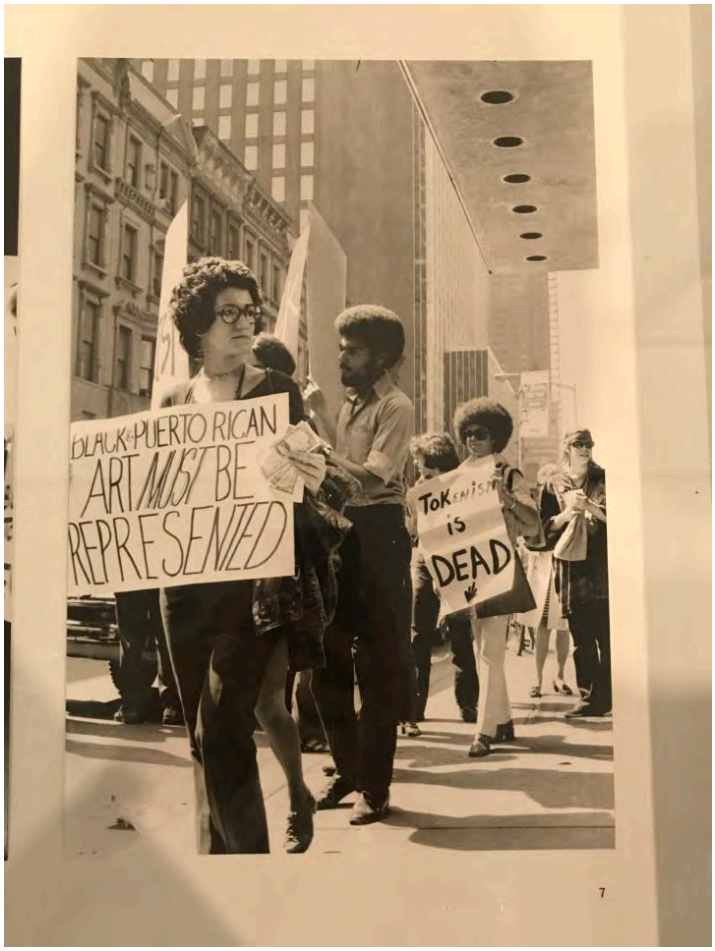
She decided on the Correctional Institution for Women on Rikers Island, formerly the Women's House of Detention. The original Women's House had been opened in 1932 on Greenwich Avenue and Tenth Street in Manhattan. **Hailed by the New York Times** in 1931 as, "New York's Model Prison," the jail was a site of constant outrage for both activists and local residents alike until its ultimate close in June 1971, the year of Ringgold's commission.

During its 39-year tenure, the Women's House of Detention had housed female activists such as Dorothy Day, Andrea Dworkin, and Angela Davis. Davis's detainment in 1970, helped draw national attention to the corruption of the country's criminal justice system, only more violently echoed in the Attica uprising the following year. When the Women's House closed in 1971, the inmates were quietly moved to the then newly finished Correctional Institution for Women on Rikers, which was immediately assailed by opponents as "**a huge penal colony**" that would only further isolate and endanger women prisoners.

This was the site Ringgold chose for her first public commission, a work meant and made *for* the women of the Women's House, in her own words, "the blood guilt of society." Assisted by the CAPS program, the artist contacted the jail's warden and, in turn, representatives of the Department of Correction (DOC), who welcomed the idea. Over the next months, Ringgold interviewed the incarcerated women about what they wanted to see. The consensus was something that reflected women of all races holding hands in solidarity with one another. They wanted an image of freedom, justice, equality, but most of all they wanted an image of hope, of a future — in the words of one female prisoner: "**a long road leading out of here**."

Ringgold stated **in a recent interview** with Brooklyn Museum senior curator **Catherine Morris**, that she incorporated the inmates' requests, making the work illustrate "different aspects of American life that they [the female inmates] were not privy to." This illustration, Ringgold felt, offered inspiration for what women could, in an equal world, achieve. For these incarcerated women, this painting must have felt like a window into some unknowable reality. Isolated and unseen, they lived on fragile freedoms, if they had any at all.

In 1988, the inmates would once again be moved to the newly opened Rose M. Singer Center (Rosie's) on Rikers, now considered **one of the country's 12 worst jails** with regard to staff sexual misconduct. Their former facility, which still housed Ringgold's painting, then became the **George Motchan Detention Center** (GMDC), a male detention center. Apparently, the



Jan Van Raay, "Museum of Modern Art Protest, Black Emergency Cultural Coalition, Art Workers' Coalition (AWC) Guerrilla Art Action Group (GAAG)" (1970) digital C-print courtesy of the artist (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

aspirational and empowering images of women in Ringgold's mural spoke less to this new, male audience.

In 1999 Ringgold learned of the extent of this distaste in a call from a jail guard, who recounted the claims of one male inmate, who had bluntly stated that they were "tired of looking at all those bitches." She was told that her painting had been whitewashed and that a male inmate had been set to paint a new picture on top, but was overwhelmed by its scale. The censored canvas had been moved to the basement, presumably to hide the evidence, and was seemingly steps from complete erasure. Ringgold rushed to Rikers, also calling the superintendent of the DOC at the time, **Bernard Kerik**. Through some miraculous intervention, Kerik raised thousands to have the painting restored. It was then installed at Rosie's, where it it still housed today.

We Wanted a Revolution is only the second time the painting has been *seen* by the general public. The other instance was in ***American People, Black Light****:* a 2010 survey show of Ringgold's paintings from the 1960s at the Neuberger Museum of Art. It is a great irony that the artist's first public commission was effectively imprisoned for over 40 years, but it raises valuable questions regarding our notions of the public and how that public is served.

"It seems to me that the most important criteria for a successful society is that it meet the needs of its people," Ringgold stated in her 1972 interview with Wallace. The hope was that the painting might be a step in the right direction, towards racial and gender equality, towards a type of collective empathy. But one need only think on Rikers with its **crippling bail system, institutional corruption and violence**, which is, for me, representative of the overarching structure of our criminal justice system in the United States, to understand that as a society we are just as far from serving the public as we were in 1972, perhaps even farther.

In addition to being the artist's first public work, the painting is considered the artist's first explicitly *feminist* one too — due to its exclusive, inspirational focus on women. Yet it is important to note that in 1972, the idea of "feminism" was primarily associated with the white,

college-educated women of the **second wave**. And in many ways it remains so. In addition to the context of *We Wanted a Revolution*, which serves to aptly credit the contributions of black women to feminist art and art history generally, the title and date of production of Ringgold's mural strikes me as particularly poignant.

In January 1972, the same month "For the Women's House" was unveiled to the female inmates of Rikers, the infamous Feminist Art Program at California Institute of the Arts opened ***Womanhouse*** near the college's campus. *Womanhouse* was a large-scale, collaborative project, in which the predominantly white women of the Feminist Art Program, led by the artists and founders Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro, transformed a condemned house into a site-specific installation. The project was meant to mobilize earlier consciousness-raising sessions and push women to work, beyond the confines of domestic labor and craft qualified commonly as "women's work," through the renovation and reclaim of the house, a traditional site of female oppression. As noted by artist-participant Faith Wilding: *"Womanhouse* became the repository of the daydreams woman have as they wash, bake, cook, sew, clean, and iron their lives away."

Womanhouse (January 30 – February 28, 1972) organized by Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro, co-founders of the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) Feminist Art Program; cover of the original exhibition catalog designed by Sheila de Bretteville (courtesy of Womanhouse)

While both projects reflected a contemporary interest in society's systemic oppression of women via the house as a physical and metaphorical site, there is a clear distinction between being

imprisoned by traditional gender roles, as is often claimed by women's movements led primarily by white women, and those abuses suffered by women who are in fact imprisoned.

It is not new to cast incarceration and the populations targeted by the criminal justice system within the context of the violent history of slavery. Yet it is an essential point to reiterate as long as our courts and jails continue to reflect the nation's foundations on ingrained prejudice, racism and economic inequality. Of the women held at Rosie's today, 82% are Black or Latina, almost exactly the numbers in 1972, when Ringgold installed her work.

In 2017, there is still much work to be done to break down the barriers to a truly equitable society: some palpable, others invisible. But fighting for freedom often comes with having the freedom to do so in the first place, and not everyone is equally free. This is a point that Faith Ringgold and *We Wanted a Revolution* both make ardently clear: we cannot continue to whitewash the histories of those women who society has systemically failed. Rather we need to acknowledge those failures and *see* the long road out, towards a better, more empathetic future. Ringgold's painting still offers us a window to that world; don't send it back unseen.

We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965–85 *continues at the* ***Brooklyn Museum*** *(200 Eastern Parkway, Prospect Heights, Brooklyn) through September 17.*

ARTnews Est. 1902

‘Freedom of Speech Is Absolutely Imperative’: Faith Ringgold on Her Early Art, Activism at the Museum of Modern Art

BY ANDREW RUSSETH
December 8, 2016 3:28pm

Anne Umland, Faith Ringgold (https://www.artnews.com/t/faith-ringgold/), and Thomas Lax at MoMA last night, with paintings by Ringgold from 1964 on the screen.

ARTNEWS

Earlier this year, the Museum of Modern Art in New York **acquired one of Faith Ringgold’s landmark early paintings (/art-news/news/moma-acquires-and-hangs-a-major-early-faith-ringgold-6687/)**, *American People Series #20: Die* (1967), a potent 12-foot-long scene of a riot that shows black and white men and women running, crying, and falling to the ground, their faces gripped by horror. Two terrified children hold each other amid the mayhem. Blood is everywhere.

For the past few months, *Die* has been on view at the entrance of MoMA’s collection galleries on the fourth-floor, and it always seems to have a crowd around it when I pass by. Last night Ringgold sat center stage in a theater at the museum—a museum that she **protested in the late 1960s (https://www.moma.org/explore/inside_out/2016/07/29/from-the-archives-faith-ringgold-the-art-workers-coalition-and-the-fight-for-inclusion-at-the-museum-of-modern-art/)** and **the early 1970s (https://www.flickr.com/photos/mjsoulpictures/galleries/72157623976615706/with/1272872980/#photo_1272872980)**—to talk about the painting. It was a packed house.

Ringgold, who turned 86 in October, was in fine form. As Anne Umland, a curator in the museum’s painting department, and Thomas Lax, an associate curator in its media and performance department, asked questions, she shared one story after another from the 1950s, ‘60s, and ‘70s, interspersing her comments with jokes and gossip.

Faith Ringgold, *American People Series #20: Die*, 1967.

COURTESY MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

At the time she made *Die*, Ringgold was teaching in New York City public schools, raising two daughters, Michele and Barbara Wallace, who were in the front row during their mother's talk, and experimenting with her art—"I wasn't going to get accepted, so actually I had nothing to lose," she said, referring to the discrimination she faced in the art world as a black woman.

Ringgold said that she painted *Die* on two 6-foot-square canvases so that she could move it through the stairwell of the building that housed the Spectrum Gallery, a co-op in Midtown Manhattan, where she had her first show, in 1967. (Even at that size it didn't fit in the elevator.) It is her largest work on stretched canvas, and in the 1970s she began working with un-stretched fabric, a move that would lead to her now-famous quilts. The switch was a matter of practicality. Working with large stretchers, she said, "I had to wait for my husband to come home from work to move the art. That doesn't make any sense!"

The opening night at the Spectrum sounds like it was a ball. The gallery's director, John Newman, set up a record player in one of the rooms for Ringgold's young daughters and their school friends to dance. Some 400 people turned out, Ringgold said, and one woman stepped off the elevator, saw *Die*, let out a yelp, and immediately got back on the elevator. "She saw the blood," the artist said, before adding, "It gives you the creeps to paint blood. Because where there's blood, there's death."

It is still a painful work to look at—it is absolutely unflinching in depicting the racial violence that continues to permeate American life. "I wanted people to understand it's not just poor people breaking into stores and stuff like that," she said of the riot she depicted. "What is happening is people are trying to maintain their position in life, either rightly or wrongly, trying to keep one group down. One group is trying to keep the other from advancing. Another group is trying to maintain their position. Another group is trying to get out of the way. So you've got all of these things that are happening. Everybody is involved, nobody gets away without a struggle. There is a struggle." She paused and spoke more slowly. "Freedom is not free. Everybody is going to have to pay a price to be free.

Jon Hendricks, Ringgold, and Jon Toche at the Judson Memorial Church on November 9, 1970.

Ringgold was heavily involved in activism at the time. In 1970, she was arrested along with artists Jon Hendricks and Jean Toche for their involvement in organizing **"The People's Flag Show" (http://www.gvny.com/history_section/judson_flag_show.htm)** at the Judson Memorial Church in Greenwich Village, for which scores of artists had made works involving the U.S. flag, to protest the arrest of New York dealer Steven Radich on the grounds that he had desecrated the stars and stripes by displaying works by the artist Marc Morell that involved it.

"The art world turned out to defend the flag!" Ringgold said. The Judson 3, as they soon came to be called, were convicted and forced to pay a $100 fine. (Later court decisions protected flag burning and so-called flag desecration as on First Amendment grounds.)

A twinkle of mischief came across Ringgold as she remembered the affair. “Somebody better tell someone because we don’t allow that,” she said, clearing alluding to President-Elect Donald J. Trump’s recent proposal that those flag burning be stripped of their citizenship. “Freedom of speech is absolutely imperative. You can’t have art of any kind without freedom of speech.” The audience burst into applause.

Umland announced that Hendricks, who is a curator at MoMA these days, was actually in the audience. Ringgold was delighted, calling out to him, “Well, you know they’re talking about the flag burnings again, you know that, right?”

“I’d heard that,” Hendricks replied dryly.

“Isn’t that interesting?” Ringgold said. “Are you *ready*?”

“Yeah, ready to move to Switzerland,” Hendricks joked.

Six of Ringgold’s eighteen children’s books.

As it happens, Ringgold’s newest children’s book—her 18th—concerns another hot-button issue: immigration. It’s titled ***We Came to America*** **(http://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/154448/we-came-to-america-by-faith-ringgold/9780517709474/)**, and tells the story of all types of people finding a home in this country. “I think it might have been the most difficult one [I’ve made] because so many people came here,” Ringgold said. “I didn’t want to leave anybody out. Now, today, we’ve got so many different ethnicities of children, and I wanted them all to be able to see themselves.”

Before opening up the floor to questions, Umland asked Ringgold to think about *Die* in the context of today, at a time of political crisis. Ringgold made some comments about the work, but then shifted her attention immediately to the present. “I see it coming, people disrupting the peace and tranquility of our country—not that we’re all that tranquil,” she said. “But I think that people will definitely not sit still and allow our freedoms to be assaulted.”

CULTURE

The Surprising Vision of Artist Faith Ringgold

DECEMBER 26, 2013 · 10:16 AM ET

HEARD ON TELL ME MORE

Legendary artist Faith Ringgold began her career in 1963 — the same year as the March on Washington. She talks to guest host Celeste Headlee about her life, work and why no one originally wanted to hear her story.

The Surprising Vision of Artist Faith Ringgold

CELESTE HEADLEE, HOST:

And it's time now for our Wisdom Watch segment. That's when we speak to those who've made a difference through their work and their lives. Today, we go back to 1963 when the fight over civil rights in America was nearing its boiling point. It was also the year that legendary artist Faith Ringgold began her series "The American People." It's a harrowing depiction of American life painted with bold colors and striking lines and absolute honesty. That series alone could have made a career. But Faith Ringgold went on to create other things - quilts, sculptures, books, maybe even now some digital apps. I spoke with Faith Ringgold earlier this year, and she told me how her neighborhood, Harlem in New York City, influenced her artwork.

FAITH RINGGOLD: Well, everybody looked beautiful all the time. I can recall that nobody ever went out the door that wasn't dressed nicely, even though it was the depression. I particularly remember on Sunday, the day we all went to church, if you didn't have it together, you kind of stayed in the house. But of course, in my family, we always had it together.

HEADLEE: Many people think of the art world as, you know, very liberal, open, accepting, but the Art World - capital A, capital W - can sometimes be quite the opposite. I wonder if it was complicated for you - by your choice of not only materials, but subject matter. You were very proud to mix things which were thought of as craft materials, that you were so famous for turning the quilt into high art. Your very first story quilt, for example, was "Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima?" which is, you know, an advertising icon for syrup. Did that also complicate your relationship with the sort of elitist art world?

RINGGOLD: I would say no. I thought there was going to be a problem. And the reason why I began making quilts is because I wrote my autobiography in 1980 and couldn't get it published because I wanted to tell my story and my story didn't appear to be appropriate for African-American women. That's what I think, and that really made me so angry.

HEADLEE: Why? What was it about your story that wasn't appropriate?

RINGGOLD: Well, you know, I didn't have that knock-down, drag-out, black woman story. That was what was being published at that time. My story was about growing up in Harlem and becoming an artist, getting married, having two children and continuing my struggle to be an artist. It wasn't that typical bad-luck story. But it was a story of struggle to be.

HEADLEE: If you're just joining us, I'm speaking with the legendary artist Faith Ringgold about her life and career. You know, one of the things about your art is that you didn't end up just telling your story. It almost feels to me as though you were retelling all of our stories.

I mean, you wanted to recapture - even going back to your first quilt, "Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima?" you took ownership of that story. You gave her a new storyline as opposed to the one that was stereotyped for her - the assumed story that everyone thought when they looked at that picture on the syrup bottle. To what extent does art have to have a story or a message? I mean, you've gone so

far - you've been arrested for your political views. You have always stood on the side of activism and voicing your opinion. Is that a necessary requirement for an artist?

RINGGOLD: Not necessarily. It's whatever your story is, whatever you need in order to live in the world and be a part of it. If it's just colors - there are very many artists who just want to paint colors. That's fine. I couldn't do that. I have something else I want to make my story about. And I need the freedom to do that. And I have the freedom to do that. Of course, it's been difficult. The work that I did in the '60s, from '63 to '67, comprised my first exhibition. And that's the work that kept me out of everything.

HEADLEE: What do you mean it kept you out of everything?

RINGGOLD: Well, it kept me from advancing as an artist. The struggle was on. People didn't like that work. They didn't want to see it. They were not accepting of it. That work has not been shown since the '60s. It got shown again in 2010. So what's that? Almost 50 years. But I kept working, and I kept telling my story in different ways.

HEADLEE: What was in these paintings that you think people objected to?

RINGGOLD: I think they were a little bit too bold in that I was showing the relationship between black and white people, the struggle for independence and freedom that black people were pursuing during the civil rights era. It was just a little bit too damn much going on. The struggle was one thing when you talk about it, another thing when you picture it. I wanted people also to look at that work and see themselves. Whichever part you were playing, this is what's going on. This is what I'm seeing. I want you to see what I'm seeing. And I think it was a little bit too much. In fact, I was told that many times - just a little bit too damn much. Pardon the expression.

HEADLEE: We know a lot about what has changed in the past half century. I wonder what has not changed that you expected to be different by now.

RINGGOLD: My expectations were not all that much. I don't think I was sitting around expecting. What has not changed is people are still doing whatever they think they can get away with. I think there's still a lot of advancement for people, generally speaking, to learn to let other people live in the world with freedom. So that might be a continuing struggle. As long as people are different and they can

find a way to classify a group and oppress them accordingly, I think people pretty much will do it, if you understand what I mean.

HEADLEE: I do, sadly. One of our producers noticed on your Twitter feed that you are looking for a Sudoku game developer for something that you called Quiltuduko.

RINGGOLD: Yes.

HEADLEE: Can you explain to me what that is that you're working on?

RINGGOLD: Well, Sudoku is nine numbers.

HEADLEE: Right, in the boxes.

RINGGOLD: And so I like it 'cause, you know, it's good for my brain.

HEADLEE: I think your brain is doing just fine.

RINGGOLD: I like to feel I'm 22, OK. So I developed this aspect called Quiltuduko, which I named it. And instead of just numbers, I do nine colors with nine images with the same rules, right? And you end up with quite a nice abstract art piece. This is new, and I'm excited, very excited.

HEADLEE: I mean, it's no surprise to me that you'd be interested in something like this that kind of brings a new form of artwork to...

RINGGOLD: ...Yes

HEADLEE: ...Everybody. I mean, you've been involved in teaching your whole life.

RINGGOLD: That's true.

HEADLEE: And I wonder if we could just take a moment and picture a little girl listening to our conversation right now. Somewhere in the back seat of her car or her parents have the radio on, she's listening to us talking. She loves to draw. She loves art, and she wants to grow up to be an artist someday.

RINGGOLD: All right.

HEADLEE: What advice do you give her?

RINGGOLD: Do it. Children are so talented. Little children, until about the age of 10 or 11, are just little artists. They need to be given the time and the space and the materials to do their work. That's all they need. However, when they get a little older, they start picking themselves apart and deciding that, well, you know, maybe I'm not as good as I think I am. But when they're very little, from the time they come into the world practically, they're little artists. And they just need to be given the opportunity, the time, the place, the materials to do their work. So go for it.

HEADLEE: Legendary artist Faith Ringgold. She joined us from our New York bureau. Thank you so much.

RINGGOLD: Oh, this has been great. Thank you.

HEADLEE: And that's our program for today. I'm Celeste Headlee. You've been listening to TELL ME MORE from NPR News. And we'll talk more tomorrow.

The Washington Post

Museums

Faith Ringgold's 'American People, Black Light'

June 13, 2013

By Lonnae O'Neal Parker

Fifty years after the racial upheaval of the 1960s, Americans often like to say they don't see color. They pretend not to see it even when it's right in front of their faces, says artist Faith Ringgold. It's a worldview she finds delusional, counterintuitive and impossible for artists like herself who traffic in color and shades of meaning.

"You don't have to not see," Ringgold says. "You can see and accept and love and allow. It's okay. It's okay. The more you look, the more real everybody becomes, and it's okay."

That's one of the many messages in the comprehensive survey "American People, Black Light: Faith Ringgold's Paintings of the 1960s," opening June 21 at the National Museum of Women in the Arts. They are paintings of a nation convulsing from civil rights and feminist ideals. They are the faces and bodies of people going through massive social change during a time when the abstract traditions of Pollock and De Kooning held sway, and minimalism and pop art — cubes and commercial imagery — were ascending. It is a message that has come back around, though it's taken decades.

The 49-piece exhibition unfolds chronologically, taking up eight galleries and provoking visitors with paintings of enormous size, arresting intimacy and unsettling intensity. They are marked by large, emoting eyes, her signature U-shaped line descending from the eyebrows around the nose, and "high-keyed" blues, reds, and greens, colors that dominate not with brightness, but with depth. It is a style she calls super-realism — one that demands that viewers engage.

The pictures are of people alone with their thoughts, alone with their mirrors, or using other people as mirrors. They are blacks and whites together in crowds, silent, or smug, or alienated. Or, as in the case of 1967's "Die," dripping blood, and savaging one another. There are words painted inside American flags, black and brown faces alight with the beauty of self-love, along with posters of revolution:*Free Women, Free All Political Prisoners, All Power to the People.*

“Every time people struggle, they survive, they do better and then they forget and they end up back where they started from,” Ringgold says. People learn to speak up, to make themselves seen and heard and counted, then suddenly they stop doing those things. “It has happened over and over again. It is so sad that it takes so long for people to understand what needs to happen in order to be free.”

Ringgold, 82, a Harlem native, was an icon of the Black Arts Movement, a conscious, community-connected, politically engaged artistic aesthetic that shared philosophical corollaries with the black power movement of the 1960s and 1970s. But she is most celebrated for her revival of African American story quilts beginning in the late 1970s. After the early 1970s, Ringgold says people didn't want to show her early paintings, "and I mean they didn't show it," she says. "It was a political time, but not with art," which was "beautifully abstract, but abstract. And here I come with these images of black and white people and a lot of people got angry at me."

When an artist becomes famous for a certain thing, it can take time "for historians and galleries to reconnect with what an artist did early in their career," says museum director Susan Fisher Sterling. But everything that informs Ringgold's story quilts was in process in her earlier work, Sterling says. "It was the proving ground, if you will. The first stages toward that desire to create a different view of African American life and her sense of herself as a woman, and an artist and as an African American, not necessarily in that order." Sterling says Women in the Arts is the last venue in a tour of Ringgold's 1960s work that began in 2010 at the Neuberger Museum of Art in Westchester County, N.Y., and continued on to Spelman College in Atlanta and the Miami Art Museum.

The paintings begin in 1963 — the year of the March on Washington and the assassinations of John F. Kennedy and Medgar Evers — with the intimacies of "American People."

“Neighbors” features four unsmiling white figures, a family, seemingly of one accord in their aloofness. “Portrait of an American Youth” is an image of pervasive sadness and stifled promise. A young man in suit and tie, seated and going nowhere against a white figure in the background and red, white and blues all around. In the hierarchy of “The In Crowd” a suited black man is at the bottom of a pile with a white hand across his mouth, his own hands nowhere to protest. Though the white man, “Mr. Charlie” is a rare smiling portrait, it conveys only menace and duplicity; an archetype of such singular historical resonance, it disturbs, even decades later.

“You have these tremendous social changes going on and Ringgold’s art addressed those social changes, says Sterling. “There’s no gloss-over on that.” Early in her career, Ringgold's canvases fit on easels, but by 1967, she had secured a large gallery space, sent her daughters (one of whom is noted feminist writer Michele Wallace) to Europe for the summer and began to stretch out. Her paintings grew larger and more imposing (72 by 144 inches for “Die”), their size a metaphor for the bigness of the issues she grappled with.

Also in 1967, Ringgold began exploring African American skin tone, diversity, beauty and love with tonal studies of abstracted faces in “Black Light.” It is work that presaged the “black is beautiful” idea, Sterling says. It was a notion that was bubbling up, and Ringgold caught it and made it her own. The series represents an evolution in her art and activism; a reflective move to the interior of a people. She rendered events of the late ’60s in text-based works, often painting words — “Music,” “Dance,” “America,” “Love” — on her canvas. Her later political posters used complementary colors, red and green to vibrating, three-dimensional effect, and Ringgold concentrated her artist’s voice on specific issues. “The United States of Attica” is a densely worded “Map of American Violence” covered in murders, wars, uprisings and numbers of dead. In 1970’s “The People’s Flag Show,” she painted these words in all-capital letters, unpunctuated and running together: “the American people are the only people who can interpret the American flag. A flag which does not belong to the people to do with as they see fit should be burned and forgotten.”

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Ringgold's art and activism became more organized and took on more of an overtly feminist bent. She organized protests by black artists demanding their work be shown at New York's Whitney Museum of American Art and Museum of Modern Art.

“I started out trying to open up museums to African Americans, because we weren’t getting any opportunity to show our work,” Ringgold says. But she noticed the curators would invite only the men in to talk. She worried that all her agitating seemed to make it easier for black men alone to walk through doors that were once closed. That’s when she became a feminist, Ringgold says. “I don’t need to be struggling for something that’s against me. I’m for others, but I’m also for me.” A protest at the Whitney museum led to exhibitions of works by artists Betye Saar and Barbara Chase-Riboud in the museum’s 1970 Sculpture Biennial, the first black women ever included. Ringgold herself has never had an exhibition at the Whitney.

Even all these years later, Ringgold says she's excited to be showing her early work. "I'm excited because it's in Washington D.C., and it's the only women's museum [dedicated to women in the arts] in the country." From 1969 to 2010, she says she didn't show her '60s work at all, which is why much of it remains in her possession. But "I did not stop working," she says. She has constantly reinvented herself, writing her autobiography in words, or writing her autobiography in quilts. She's written 17 children's books. From 1987 until 2002, she taught at University of California at San Diego. Her publicly commissioned work "People Portraits," 52 mosaics, was installed in the Los Angeles Civic Center subway station in 2010. She's created a deck of Obama family playing cards. And she is working on a series of acrylic paintings that will be the illustrations for a forthcoming book "Harlem Renaissance Party," to be published by Harper Collins.

In her autobiography, she wrote: “I have always wanted to tell my story, or, more to the point, my side of the story.”

To do that, “you have to stay in the game,” she says. You can’t be turned around, or turned out, or stopped. “People don’t mean any harm,” Ringgold says. “Don’t let them do you harm.”

“Just keep working.”