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AMERIKA

LOOKING BUT NOT SEEING?

Darla Migan on Faith Ringgold at Weiss Berlin

Through her imaginative investigations into narratives of heritage, stretching back and forth across the Atlantic in different media, Faith Ringgold's artwork – paintings, drawings, masks, books, and her latest inventions (a smartphone app titled *Quiltuduko*¹) – questions America's historical formations, commemorates the tragic loss of life in the fight for equality, and celebrates the ongoing struggle for civil rights wherever that struggle is happening today. For the last 70 years, Ringgold and her work (which includes witnessing her own unique life with her family and the struggle for Black political freedom) ask us to literally and metaphorically tilt our heads and critically confront some of modernity's most violent and oft-repeated scripts of racialized violence. In her experiments with being and becoming a Black feminist, with her overlapping positions as an artist and Civil Rights activist fighting against racism and for gender equality, the exhibit at Weiss Berlin displays, interrogates, and reorients viewers' relation to the many textures of African American culture. The result is a show where art unequivocally demands that we become more complex in our ways of both seeing and saying, more intimate in our reflections on the past as a requisite though non-exhaustive possibility for freedom in the present.

In April, at Ringgold's delivery of the W.E.B. Du Bois Lecture at the Humboldt University, the artist shared a technical and pragmatic reason for why she has employed the use of a single panel backgrounded by an underlying and sometimes multilayered border, as in "Feminist Series: We Meet the Monster" (1972), "Tar Beach #2" (1990–92), and "Seven Passages to a Flight" (1997) for her story quilts. The floral prints and polyester textiles that frame the paintings form a memory

bridge organized from the decorative schema and textures of Ringgold's Harlem childhood – where, for example, as in "Tar Beach #2," the roof of a tenement building becomes the shore of a starry beach. While indirectly paying homage to the tradition of her foremothers, Ringgold also wanted to lose the heavy stretcher bars necessary for supporting canvases in her painter's studio. She explained in her lecture that gallery viewers often stand in front of her paintings in wonder, attempting to find the patchwork on the main surface; and yet, there are no patches to be found in the main panel.

According to Ringgold, "they (viewers) look without seeing." That some viewers desire to predetermine the presence of a patchwork on the main panel of the story quilts may serve as an appropriate metaphor for Ringgold's attempt to rework supposedly essential markers of African American culture. By merely hinting at the patchwork form with the use of traditional quilt textiles, but not in fact sewing her images, Ringgold brings select elements from her African American heritage to the fore in a way that refuses any transparent insight on how intimate spaces of love and survival unfold in community. To see and not merely to look may mean vulnerably encountering the impossibility of ever fully knowing Black worlds that have been cordoned off, underappreciated, or simply happen beyond or below the purview of the Western fine arts tradition. The longer one looks and sees, the more complex Ringgold's pastiche of techniques, learned and developed from her training as a fine artist with her knowledge of folk art traditions, becomes.

Still, when we hear the name Faith Ringgold and only think of quilts we are once again looking without seeing. The earliest work in this



exhibition is not a story quilt but a painted oil print on a single canvas surface. Eight equal-sized triangles splice a square with only solid, muted tones to showcase Ringgold’s typographic rigor. Literally putting the “writing on the wall” – an element that returns again and again in her work – “Black Light Series #7 (Ego Painting)” (1969) abstracts the words “Faith,” “Ringgold,” “Black,” and “America” to work simultaneously as complete image-in-itself and as Ringgold’s personalized oath of allegiance to what matters to her as an artist. By placing her own first and last names into the equidistant triangular panels, Ringgold encourages the viewer to exchange their

own names with hers and invites us to examine the significance of the signs that organize our opportunity to seek and make value in the world, perhaps in relation to race and country, but certainly as those with a role to play in the drama of images and representation more generally.

At the same time, the “Ego” painting is an unremitting example of the idea of the singular artist in the modern tradition, with Ringgold boldly confirming that her work is very much her own and not a token of a type. By adding her name to the canon directly from her canvas, the artist defies the willful under-recognition or limited discourse on abstract paintings made by art-



ists who are also usually never spoken of without failing to mention their social location or identity as a skeleton key to understanding their work.

Ringgold compellingly portrayed the violence of the 1960s American Civil Rights movement as it was happening, but in a way that sharply departed from the familiar photojournalistic language of the day. The narrow public record of photographs of the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, for example, have circulated so widely in representing the period that their realism may, ironically, undermine their capacity to work as signs of the ongoing struggle for moral progress, or even as historically contextualized images of the events they represent. In contrast, the “American People Series,” including

“American People Series #20: Die” (1967), which now hangs in the Museum of Modern Art (which refused the work at the time of its creation), came about because Ringgold says she asked herself, “If not me, who? If not now, when?” This mode of radical orientation to the world, which drives Ringgold’s artistic practice, ought to be as easy for us to imagine the German protestant leader Martin Luther asking of himself as well, no less than the African American Civil Rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr.

However, Ringgold was aware that the early conditions of her acceptance into the contemporary art market depended on not offending the sensibility of collectors, on not reminding them of their often ill-gained advantage based



on their skin color. Thus, Ringgold recounted in her lecture how one of her most well-known works, “Echoes of Harlem” (1980, not included in this exhibit), was not problematic (i.e., treated as “acceptable” art for audiences) because, with no clear narrative element and its portraits of figures in a series of squares, perhaps this painting more closely mimicked the traditional patchwork style. While still only an allusion to some idea of a tightly knit Black family, this piece brings to mind a humble keepsake and thus appears not to talk back or contest the violent repression of Black people. But long before “Echoes of Harlem,” Ringgold began writing on her art in order to talk back to hegemonic narratives. The overarching question, repeated among the many painful and

sometimes deeply private anecdotes that Ringgold imagines for her canvas (paper-drawings, children’s books, and sculptures), asks us if we might find another way to be free, to find a way toward freedom that is not based on the violent repression of others. In the small, tight font of “Seven Passages to a Flight” (1997), on one of the story quilts most heavily textured with language, in which scenes from the artist’s developing practice unfold, Ringgold writes: “Probably the first time I rewrote history in my art was when I painted a mural of some black and white boys sitting together eating watermelon with George Washington’s soldiers at Valley Forge, I had complained to my mother that my teacher wanted me to paint ...” Rather than waiting for American history to canonize their significance or waiting for her own biography to surface, Ringgold moves against and within the legacy of the gallery exhibition to represent her personal journey as an artist and to make the portraits of her heroes and heroines of the Civil Rights movement visible.

In the “Hate Is a Sin” diptych (2007), Ringgold talks back to those who would claim that the Confederate flag is merely a symbol of the history of the American South when its use is truly an abuse of history through which its supporters also claim that “there is nothing to see here.” Ringgold shows that what looks like an abstract symbol offers its supporters a form of dissimulation that is interpretable based on historical usage. By resignifying the flag with her own words and naming it as an image of hatred, Ringgold runs the risk of delimiting this symbol by literally spelling out its functional logic for viewers. But from the point of view of her historically informed knowledge of African Americans being a target of that hatred, and in her urgency to

overturn the ways in which violence is perpetuated, Ringgold writes “Hate Is a Sin” in the place where the flag’s stars, representing those states that seceded from the United States in order to protect their right to own other human beings, normally appear. The words “Hate Is a Sin” also remind us that the sustaining logic of the slave-owning states is an interpretation of Christianity, of Christian agape-love even, wherein it is claimed that God intended for the “superior race” to own the “inferior race.”² This reminder of the symbol’s actual significance, beyond any mere generic claim to heritage, may in turn help us to better understand how and why anti-Black racists brought the Confederate flag back into heavy circulation during Reconstruction with the rise of the Ku Klux Klan in the early 20th century; why and how anti-Black segregationists used the flag as their banner during the 1960s American civil rights movement; and why anti-Black racists continue to wave the flag at events like the “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Virginia in 2017. On the other hand, “The Feminist Fable,” the other side of the diptych, moves out beyond the specificity of American history to address any culture that would organize itself within the logic of white supremacy, Christian or otherwise. The global import of Ringgold’s humanist message is clear when she asks the viewer to consider the violent logics of racism, generally, in the following line of the fable: “He and his wife had one beautiful child whom he was bringing up to live in his perfectly White World.” What are the ways to see Ringgold’s storytelling style of commentary on the racist and gendered violence of the US, to better understand the interconnections between the colonial and neo-colonial situation, between the gendered violence across centuries

and the precarity of immigrants from the Middle East and Africa all over the world today?

What are the unique conditions for viewing Ringgold’s work in Berlin, especially during this time of increasing xenophobia in the US and across Europe (including in Germany)? What are viewers prepared to learn about their own historical and current political situation from the sometimes nearly imperceptible or subtly arranged writing that Ringgold embeds in her colorful and courageous commentary on the racist and sexist past and present, on the city and country – from Harlem, New York to Arles, France? While early in her career Ringgold’s politically charged word-paintings made her artwork too “challenging” to institutions such as the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney in New York, what does it mean for our current times that Ringgold is being shown in Berlin in the midst of rising neo-nationalism all over Europe today?

“Faith Ringgold,” Weiss Berlin, April 26–June 16, 2018.

Notes

- 1 <https://www.aarp.org/disrupt-aging/video-disrupt-aging/info-2017/faith-ringgold-quiltuduko-video.html>.
- 2 W. E. B. Du Bois, “The Black Worker,” in: *Black Reconstruction in America 1860–1880* [1935], New York 1999, pp. 3–16.