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The Secrets to Brazilian Painter Beatriz Milhazes's International Success



Courtesy Christie's
"O elefante azul," 2002, an acrylic, metallic paint, and ink on canvas, sold for \$1.5 million at Christie's London in June, setting an artist record.

by Eileen Kinsella, Art+Auction
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Brazilian artist Beatriz Milhazes once joked that it took her 25 years to become an overnight success, says Márcia Fortes, cofounder and codirector of Galeria Fortes Vilaça in São Paulo, one of several galleries around the world that represent the artist. Milhazes was likely referring to the excitement that followed a May 2008 Contemporary Art Day auction at Sotheby's New York, when *O Mágico*, 2001, zoomed to \$1,049,000 — far surpassing the \$250–350,000 estimate and more than doubling the artist's previous auction high of £228,500 (\$465,000) achieved just seven months earlier at Christie's London.

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That first \$1 million price at auction, though coming near the peak of the contemporary-art market boom, has been exceeded twice since. Christie's London set the current record this past June when a final price of £937,250 (\$1.5 million) was realized for *O elefante azul*, 2002, one of the works shown when Milhazes represented Brazil at the 2003 Venice Biennale. About two dozen other works have fetched solid six-figure prices at auction in recent years.

"She's a superstar," says Amy Cappellazzo, chair of post-war and contemporary development at Christie's, who first visited the artist's studio in Rio de Janeiro in the mid-1990s and has followed the work ever since. "Her market has^[OBJ] expanded tremendously, and more people want them than want to sell them." She adds that Christie's has handled private sales of Milhazes's paintings for prices that are in line with the public auction record.

James Cohan, who represents the artist in New York, concurs, observing that some of the auction battles can get "quite aggressive because of limited supply." On the primary market, new large paintings range in price from about \$300,000 to \$800,000, having made a steady climb from the \$100–150,000 range in 2004. Since Milhazes produces on average eight paintings a year, the international team of dealers that represents her, including Fortes Vilaça, Cohan, Stephen Friedman Gallery in London, and Galerie Max Hetzler in Berlin, collaborate closely on price and follow a set order for solo shows, with each gallery typically navigating a gap of four or five years between exhibitions. Steering works into museums and other institutional collections is a priority, Cohan says.

The next solo gallery show is scheduled for late summer of next year in São Paulo, and Fortes says she is already daunted by the notion of 100 collectors lining up for just five or six works.

They virtually explode with layer upon layer of intricate patterns and wild, rich colors. These derive from a vast variety of sources, including, in her earlier works, Baroque imagery and feminine lace or ruffle motifs that refer to 19th-century embroidery. Among continuing sources of inspiration are the rhythms of Brazilian music and the festive imagery of the Carnival, as well as the tropical flora and fauna of Brazil's lush rain forests. Her studio in Rio de Janeiro sits next to the city's botanical garden, and its influence on her practice — frequently studded with blooming rings of petals and elaborate floral designs — is palpable. Milhazes's later works have less of the spiderwebby patterns and feature more mechanical-looking swirls, circles, and squares.

This imagery is "a kind of defiant feminism," according to Cohan. "There is an audacity that goes along with making this kind of painting today." For her part, Milhazes described her work in a 2008 interview in the biannual art review *RES* as having "a healthy conflict. Many people say, 'Wow, it's beautiful,'" she said, "but on the other hand, it's not a comfortable beauty."

Her meticulous process limits the number of paintings she can produce. Milhazes applies paint to plastic sheets and allows it to dry before transferring the pigment to canvas and then removing

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the plastic. The result is an exceptionally flat, smooth appearance. "I do not want the texture of the brushstrokes or the 'hand' of the painter to be visible on my canvases," the artist explained in an interview at the time of a 2009 show at the Fondation Cartier, in Paris.

Milhazes was born in Rio de Janeiro in 1960. Her father was a lawyer and her mother an art historian; both were deeply involved in art and music. She originally studied journalism in college before opting for the School of Visual Arts in Parque Lage, Brazil. Her first solo exhibition, coming a few years after graduation, at the Galeria César Aché, in Rio, was a success, and near-annual solo shows followed with various dealers in her native country for the next seven years. Brazilian collectors were avid fans of her work from the start, particularly as the country's broader art market began to expand owing to a growing population and increasing wealth.

International interest in Milhazes's work from collectors, curators, and critics had been rising steadily since at least the mid-1990s. She was invited to participate in the 1995 Carnegie International in Pittsburgh by the museum's then-curator, Richard Armstrong, now director of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum and Foundation in New York. In 1996 she had the first of several solo shows at the Edward Thorp Gallery, in New York, followed by gallery exhibitions in Madrid, Paris, and London.

Milhazes's London dealer, Friedman, says her representation of Brazil at the 2003 Venice Biennale marked "a turning point for the artist in her reach, both in Europe and across borders," as reflected by a "growth in demand for her work by private collectors and institutions worldwide." In 2005 alone, three high-profile public art commissions in the UK helped solidify her position on the world stage: a monumental artwork spanning 19 vaulted archways in a London Underground station; a wall mural for the restaurant at Tate Modern; and a multilevel window installation for the façade of Selfridges department store in Manchester.

Some observers say the wide appeal of her work lies in what is often described as an international language. Fortes describes the artist's style as "a perfect balance between geometric abstraction and ornamentation. She's developed a language that is very much international but obviously has a Brazilian characteristic."

"She is definitely a crossover artist," says Henry Allsopp, international director of Latin American art and a senior specialist at Phillips de Pury & Company in London. In terms of major art fairs and gallery shows, "she was on the international scene at a pretty early stage in her career," he says, adding that Phillips continues to place her work in both its contemporary and Latin American sales, depending on the client or the timing of the consignment. "They fit well in both and because of the interest, will do well in either if properly estimated," he says. Christie's generally places the works in its contemporary sales, where Cappellazzo says their "conceptual quality" draws a wide range of buyers, "not just dedicated painting collectors." Among the paintings there is a hierarchy. Works dating from the late 1990s into the 2000s are

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particularly in demand, and "color plays a very big role, as do complexity and scale," with collectors chasing works with vivid hues and metallic paints.

Beyond her paintings, Milhazes creates collages and prints and is beginning to experiment with three-dimensional work. The collages incorporate everyday objects like shiny candy wrappers, shopping bags, and vividly colored papers. Not unlike the paintings, near-dizzying patterns fill the collages. However, they are much more affordable, currently ranging from about \$100,000 to \$200,000 on the primary and secondary markets.

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In 1996 Milhazes also embarked on what turned into a 16-year printmaking collaboration with Jean-Paul Russell and his wife, Ann Marshall, co-owners of Durham Press in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. Russell says printmaking has played a major role in Milhazes's development as an artist. Printmaking is "a way to inform and think about what she's doing with her paintings. She comes up with 156 ideas for painting while making prints," he says, adding that her prints are unusual in their size and elaborateness, making them closer to her paintings than most other artists' editioned works.

Milhazes has returned to Durham Press dozens of times over the years, and together they have produced roughly 25 sets of prints in various sizes and editions, using both screen print and wood-block techniques. Prices range from \$5,000 to \$70,000, depending on size.

Since 2007, the artist has designed stage sets for her sister, Marcia Milhazes, a choreographer who has a dance company in Rio de Janeiro. One was later shown at James Cohan in New York, but because the same company that produces Carnival floats makes the sets from flimsy, fragile materials, they have not been offered for sale. The experience has sparked her to explore working in three dimensions.

In 2009 Cartier commissioned her to create a large-scale mobile incorporating 14,980 carats of diamonds, rubies, emeralds, sapphires, and other rare jewels; it was shown at last year's Art Basel Miami Beach. "It was a big challenge. I am a painter, I do collages, and they are all connected," Milhazes told an interviewer. "I like to think of it as an adventure."