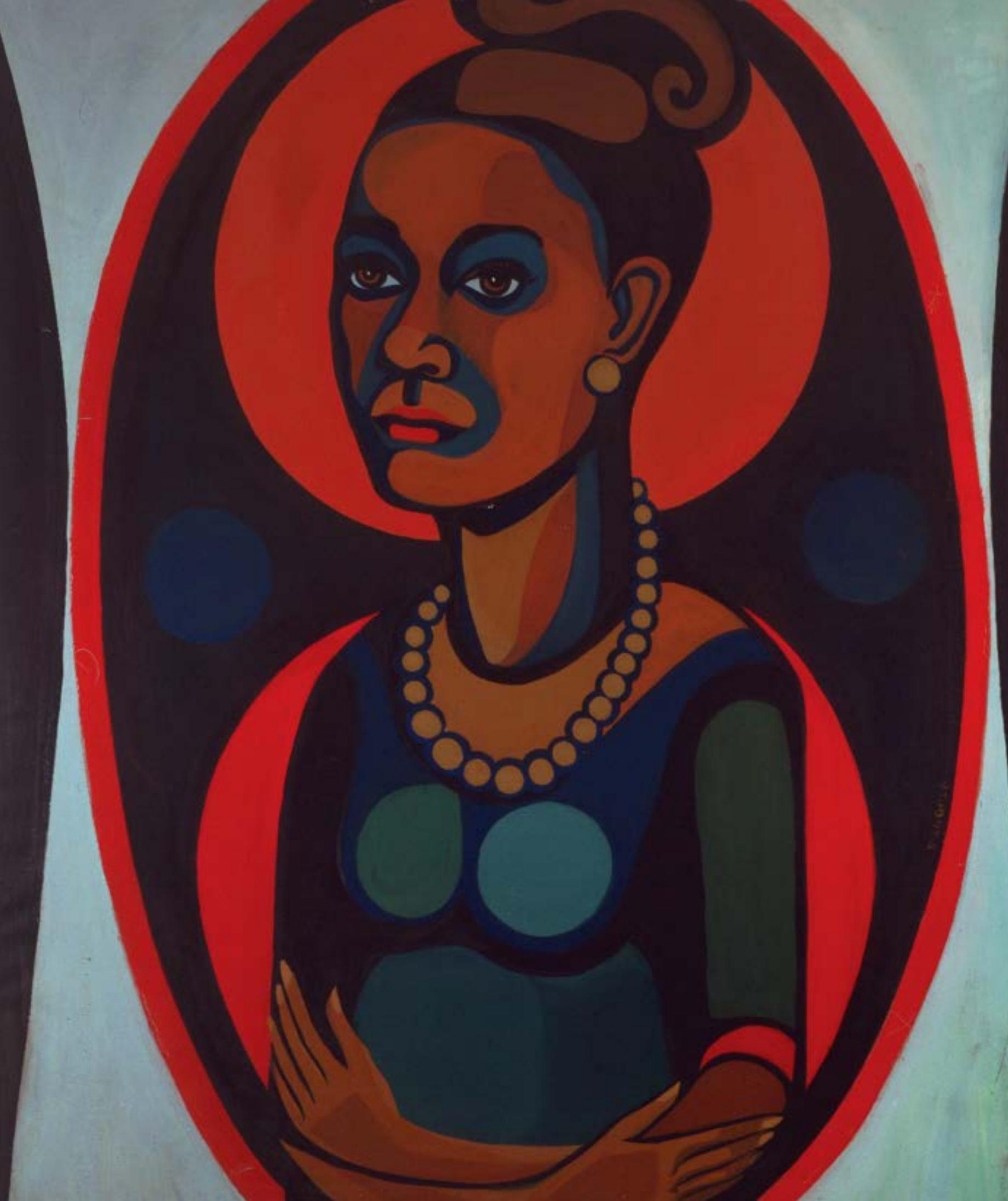
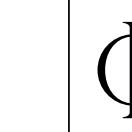


## **FAITH RINGGOLD: AMERICAN PEOPLE**



## FAITH RINGGOLD: AMERICAN PEOPLE

Edited by Massimiliano Gioni and Gary Carrion-Murayari



NEW  
MUSEUM



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## Foreword

The exhibition *Faith Ringgold* is devoted to analyzing the iconography of motherhood in the twentieth century as seen in the works of over one hundred artists and in numerous historical documents and images from the past one hundred years. The exhibition opens at the symbolic date of 1900 and continues to the present day, though it does not adhere closely to a chronological course and focuses instead on a series of key themes and turning points where the history of art overlaps with other manifestations of visual culture of the last century.

The exhibition (and the catalogue, which presents the works in almost the same order as they appear on display) is constructed like a large family album, a collection of images and portraits that recount existential adventures in which official histories are entwined with personal biographies.

The image of motherhood that emerges is a far cry both from the maudlin representation to which the visual rhetoric of the media and advertising has accustomed us and from the still more reassuring image projected by the nationalistic propaganda of totalitarian regimes. Motherhood, this exhibition demonstrates, appears to be constantly under attack throughout the history of modern and contemporary art. Drawing on a well-known work of the American artist Barbara Kruger (p. 192), we could say that, during the twentieth century, motherhood became “a battleground” for violent clashes to establish the boundaries of gender and gender roles—it is a sphere that men have all too often usurped from women and over which they have asserted all sorts of rights. As feminists active during the 1970s would have claimed, it is on the battlefield of motherhood that the patriarchal edifice was erected.

Paradoxically, in fact, any discourse about mothers and motherhood in the twentieth century always ends up as a discourse about fathers (to say nothing of lords and masters), the state, or nations and religions. Thus, examining the iconography of motherhood in the twentieth century inevitably

means beholding a process of usurpation whereby men are responsible for representing the maternal and its imagery rather than women, except in rare and controversial cases. Analyzing the representation of motherhood therefore means asking first and foremost who has the right to make decisions regarding bodies and desires, and who has the right to represent them. It means trying to understand and redefine the position of the individual with respect to herself, the family, the state, religion, and others.

Through the analysis of works of art and other visual materials, *Faith Ringgold* tells the story of these clashes and the relations constantly severed and rewoven during the twentieth century. To be more precise, this exhibition composes a visual history that is devoted not so much to maternity as a vague, abstract concept as it is to the attempt made by many women in the twentieth century to emancipate themselves from maternity as an unavoidable fact experienced almost as biological imprisonment. It speaks of many women’s desires to be more than just mothers. For many of the women artists of the early twentieth century featured here, motherhood was a responsibility to be refused, a problem to be avoided, a prison from which to escape. Many of the stories gathered together in this great and tormented family album speak of broken marriages and abandoned children, of a need for independence that often leads to painful consequences. The specters of a tradition of female oppression can still be discerned even beneath the proclamations and manifestos of the historical avant-garde movements, which often called for new relations between the sexes and new, liberated desires. Even the most emancipated women among the Futurists, Dadaists, and Surrealists were subjected to the harshest violence.

The most devastating image of this desire to escape from the suffocation of tradition is Meret Oppenheim’s *Votivbild (Würgeengel)* [Votive picture (Strangling angel)] (1931), which shows a woman holding a baby with its throat cut (p. 47). The

work’s most obvious iconographic points of reference are the stories of the Massacre of the Innocents and of the destroying angel sent to slay Egypt’s firstborn in the book of Exodus. Actually, as Oppenheim herself explained, she produced this extremely violent work first and foremost as a sort of talisman to avoid getting pregnant so that she could instead devote herself to art. Before the pill was invented, it was through the magical power of art that she sought to ward off the threat of unwanted pregnancy.

At this point it would also be possible to slip into cheap psychoanalysis and ask whether this succession of furious mothers, powerful or wounded, is not to be read as a projection of who knows what Oedipal fantasies on the part of the curator, yours truly. And while I hasten in typically neurotic fashion to assure readers that *Faith Ringgold* is really not about me, I must confess that I am writing just a few months before becoming a father for the first time and that the exhibition would unquestionably have been different had it come into being even just a few months later. Thus, examining the iconography of motherhood in the twentieth century inevitably means beholding a process of usurpation whereby men are responsible for representing the maternal and its imagery rather than women, except in rare and controversial cases. Analyzing the representation of motherhood therefore means asking first and foremost who has the right to make decisions regarding bodies and desires, and who has the right to represent them. It means trying to understand and redefine the position of the individual with respect to herself, the family, the state, religion, and others. The specters of a tradition of female oppression can still be discerned even beneath the proclamations and manifestos of the historical avant-garde movements, which often called for new relations between the sexes and new, liberated desires.

Lisa Phillips  
Director



# Hot from Her Soul: Faith Ringgold's Art Activism

Lucy R. Lippard

I'm not a member of those groups that would profit from being on the cutting edge. I'm not a man and I'm not white. So I can do what I want to do and that has been my greatest gift.

—Faith Ringgold<sup>1</sup>

Two images come to mind: first, Faith Ringgold with her two young daughters, Michele and Barbara Wallace, picketing the Whitney Museum of American Art's Annual in 1970 for its neglect of women, and especially Black women, artists. And second, Ringgold's magisterial 1967 painting *American People Series #20: Die*, featured in the Museum of Modern Art's 2019 reinstallation of its collection, dominating a room [p. 28] that also includes Pablo Picasso's *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907).<sup>2</sup>

I first met Ringgold in 1968 when she was already a force to be reckoned with, having made civil rights paintings and good trouble for several years. She was smart, unafraid, and glamorous in her African garb, becoming a visible figure in the early feminist protests of New York's art institutions and joining Black colleagues in demanding that MoMA open a Martin Luther King Jr. Wing. In 1970 she was a cofounder of the Ad Hoc Women Artists' Committee (with Brenda Miller, Poppy Johnson, and, finally, me). It was her idea to blow whistles in the museum stairwells during the campaign for women's representation in the Whitney Annuals, which drove the guards nuts. In 1971 she cofounded Where We At, with Black women artists uninterested in working with white women (although that was not where Ringgold was at). The same year, her daughter Michele Wallace, still a teenager, founded Women Students and Artists for Black Art Liberation, and Ringgold of course was involved there too. She was also one of the Judson Three, organizers from the Art Workers' Coalition arrested and convicted for using the American flag in an "uncomplimentary manner" in the context of the antiwar "People's Flag Show" at Judson Memorial Church in 1970. (Actually, it was Wallace who was initially arrested, but Ringgold, as one of the organizers, made the police let her go and took her place.) By then, her work had been rejected not only (predictably) by the white mainstream but also by the Studio Museum in Harlem and many Black male artists. She was denied membership in the influential Spiral group; it did admit one woman, a young Emma Amos.

Ringgold was raised in a mother-and-daughter-focused matriarchy in the Harlem neighborhood of New York, where she learned to be political at Adam Clayton Powell's Abyssinian Baptist Church and received her first art education at the knees of her fashion designer mother, Mme. Willi Posey, who collaborated on her *tankas*, soft sculptures, and masks—often making the clothes for them—and her first quilt, *Echoes of Harlem* (1980) [p. 114]. Ringgold's mother had learned these arts from her own mother, who had learned them from her once-enslaved mother.<sup>3</sup> Ringgold is a storyteller, a significant role in African-American and Indigenous cultures, and her now famous story quilts combine Black American history with fictional narratives. Her African-inspired masks and the soft



Fig. 1  
Ad Reinhardt, *Abstract Painting no. 4*, 1961. Oil on linen, 60 1/8 x 60 1/4 in (152.6 x 152.9 cm)



Fig. 2  
Lucy R. Lippard and Faith Ringgold at the open hearing "Are Museums Relevant to Women?", Brooklyn Museum, New York, December 12, 1971

people, which predate the quilts, defied the then predominant Conceptual and Minimalist canons commonly associated with white men (though there were women doing important work along these lines who were eventually noticed). Her popular and award-winning children's books broke another taboo.

Ringgold's relationship to the mainstream did have at least one significant result. Her *Black Light Series* was based in part on Ad Reinhardt's "colored" black paintings [Fig. 1], an ultra-formal idea that she hijacked for her own antiracist ends.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, Ringgold adapted African Bakuba design—eight triangles in a square—precisely "to get rid of that up-and-down business" (the ubiquitous grids of Minimalism) and "create a poly-rhythmic space."<sup>5</sup> This was the formal device behind her 1971 mural commissioned for the Women's House of Detention on Rikers Island [p. 85], though eventually it ended up in the basement of the men's prison. Working with

inmates, Black and white, to encourage rehabilitation, Ringgold declared at the unveiling: "Here we do not impress each other with our money, our status, or our clothes. Here we impress each other with each other."<sup>6</sup>

If she had been working in the South, Ringgold would have been labeled an "outsider artist," but she is in fact a consummate insider to New York's activist, feminist, and, finally, mainstream art worlds. She has denied "painting primitive," claiming a style that allows her to keep her paintings "flat" and to maintain an "all overness," including "all areas with equal intensity": "I am a painter who works in the quilt medium. It's still a painting. . . . I am not really a quilt maker. I have to say that because otherwise quilt makers will say it for me! But I love the oldness of the medium."<sup>7</sup> Although many feminists later followed her example, and artists like Miriam Schapiro and Joyce Kozloff were inspired by women's traditional arts to

help create the Pattern and Decoration movement, Ringgold was the unacknowledged mother of it all. "What I am trying to do with my story-quilts is to bridge the gap between painting and quilt making," she has said.<sup>9</sup> Well before even the first quilts, Ringgold had made the 1973 *Family of Woman Mask Series* [Fig. 4], figures who keep their eyes wide open to see what's going on, mouths wide open to speak out, or they boast two faces—to see what's coming up from behind.

Ringgold brought to the women's movement a strength and confidence that was rare in those days for any woman. She was well aware of the flaws of the movement even as she was a vital part of it, harboring no illusions that Black women's liberation could ever come from a white-dominated group. The title of a 1982 book says it all: *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave*.<sup>10</sup> In Ringgold's *Woman on*

*a Bridge* story quilt series of the mid-1980s, the women fly: "Any-one can fly. All you need is somewhere to go that you can't get to any other way."<sup>11</sup> She has been a bridge in many ways, rooted in Harlem yet willing to work with us white feminists who were often clueless and prone to putting our feet in our mouths. In these present days of the woman-founded-and-propelled Black Lives Matter movement and the increased awareness and responsibility it has brought to the art world, I like to think that we in Ad Hoc, Heresies, and other feminist groups would be far more humble and better informed rather than merely well-intentioned and hoping for sisterhood.

All of Ringgold's art, even that which appears abstract, is informed by activism. In my opinion, this makes her doubly important. Determinedly marginal and proud of it, Ringgold has persisted and triumphed. It was not until 1987 that she had



Fig. 3  
Alice Neel at the open hearing "Are Museums Relevant to Women?," Brooklyn Museum, New York, December 12, 1971



Fig. 4  
Faith Ringgold, *Family of Woman Mask Series: Faith*, 1973. Mixed mediums, 65 x 19 x 9 in (165.1 x 48.3 x 22.9 cm)

a solo exhibition in SoHo, then the mainstream's stronghold, where her focus on civil rights, family, Black lives, and community and history were unique. Her reputation has grown exponentially in the years since.

Is activism as an integral component of art a '60s and '70s thing? Although the forms are very different, the work of artists like Ringgold precedes what is known today as social practice (which has been dismissed as gentrified community arts). So much art these days is cut off from real life, even from the artists' real lives. For those of us who see communication as an integral element of art-making, the fusion of aesthetics and politics is an advantage. Ringgold's decades of varied mediums and aesthetic strategies, "hot from my soul," demonstrate the ways in which activism expands and deepens visual experience.<sup>12</sup>

- 1 "Interviewing Faith Ringgold/A Contemporary Heroine," in Eleanor Flomenhaft, *Faith Ringgold: A 25 Year Survey* (Hempstead, NY: Fine Arts Museum of Long Island, 1990), 15.
- 2 *Die* has been compared to Picasso's *Guernica* (1937), and Ringgold has said, "If I had to cite the single artist who inspired me the most [along with African art], I would name Picasso." Since Cubism was derived from African art, Ringgold has felt no compunction about reappropriating it. See Moira Roth, "Dinner at Gertrude Stein's," *Artweek*, February 13, 1992.
- 3 See Wade Saunders, "Making Art, Making Artists," *Art in America*, January 1993, 81–82; and Faith Ringgold, *We Flew over the Bridge: The Memoirs of Faith Ringgold* (Boston: Bulfinch Press, 1995), 76.
- 4 See Lucy R. Lippard, "Beyond the Pale: Ringgold's Black Light Series," in *Faith Ringgold: Twenty Years of Painting, Sculpture and Performance (1963–1983)*, ed. Michele Wallace (New York: Studio Museum in Harlem, 1984), 22.
- 5 Faith Ringgold, quoted in Lucy R. Lippard, "Faith Ringgold: Flying Her Own Flag," *Ms. Magazine*, July 1976, 34–39.
- 6 Faith Ringgold, quoted in *Art Material Trade News*, May 1972, 33.
- 7 Flomenhaft, *Faith Ringgold*, 10.
- 8 Moira Roth, "The Field and the Drawing Room," in *Faith Ringgold: Change: Painted Story Quilts* (New York: Bernice Steinbaum Gallery, 1987), 7.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Akasha (Gloria T.) Hull, Patricia Bell-Scott, and Barbara Smith, eds., *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies* (New York: Feminist Press, 1982).
- 11 Faith Ringgold, *Tar Beach* (New York: Crown, 1991), n.p.
- 12 Faith Ringgold, typed statement, October 1, 1982, author's personal archive.

X

## Early Works



Early Works #16: A Man Kissing His Wife, 1964

Oil on canvas  
19 x 12 in (48.3 x 30.5 cm)



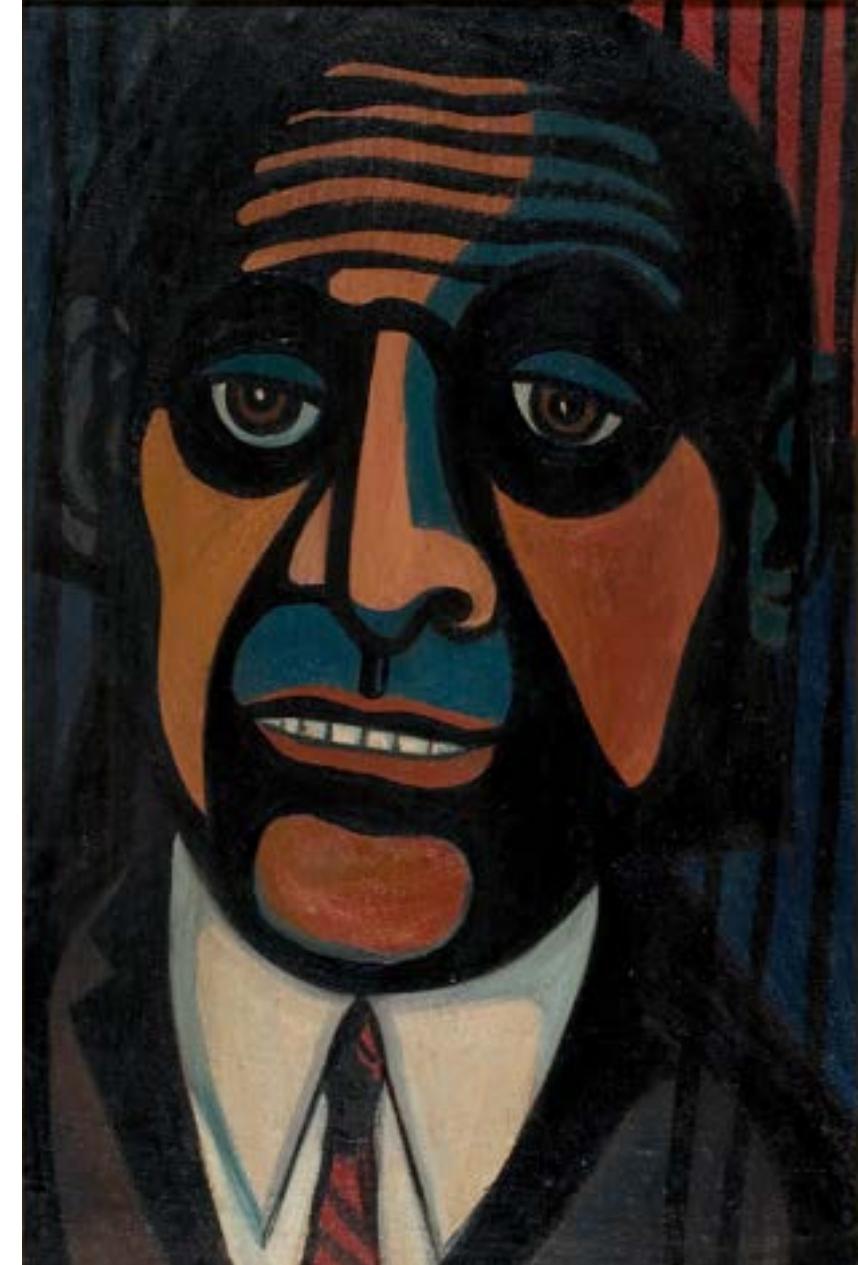
Early Works #15: They Speak No Evil, 1962

Oil on canvas  
40 1/4 x 30 1/4 in (102.2 x 76.8 cm)

X



Early Works #20: Black and Blue Man, 1964  
Oil on Masonite  
 $23\frac{3}{4} \times 16$  in (60.3 × 40.6 cm)



Early Works #17: Black Man, 1964  
Oil on canvas glued onto Masonite  
 $24\frac{1}{4} \times 16\frac{1}{8}$  in (61.6 × 41 cm)

X

X



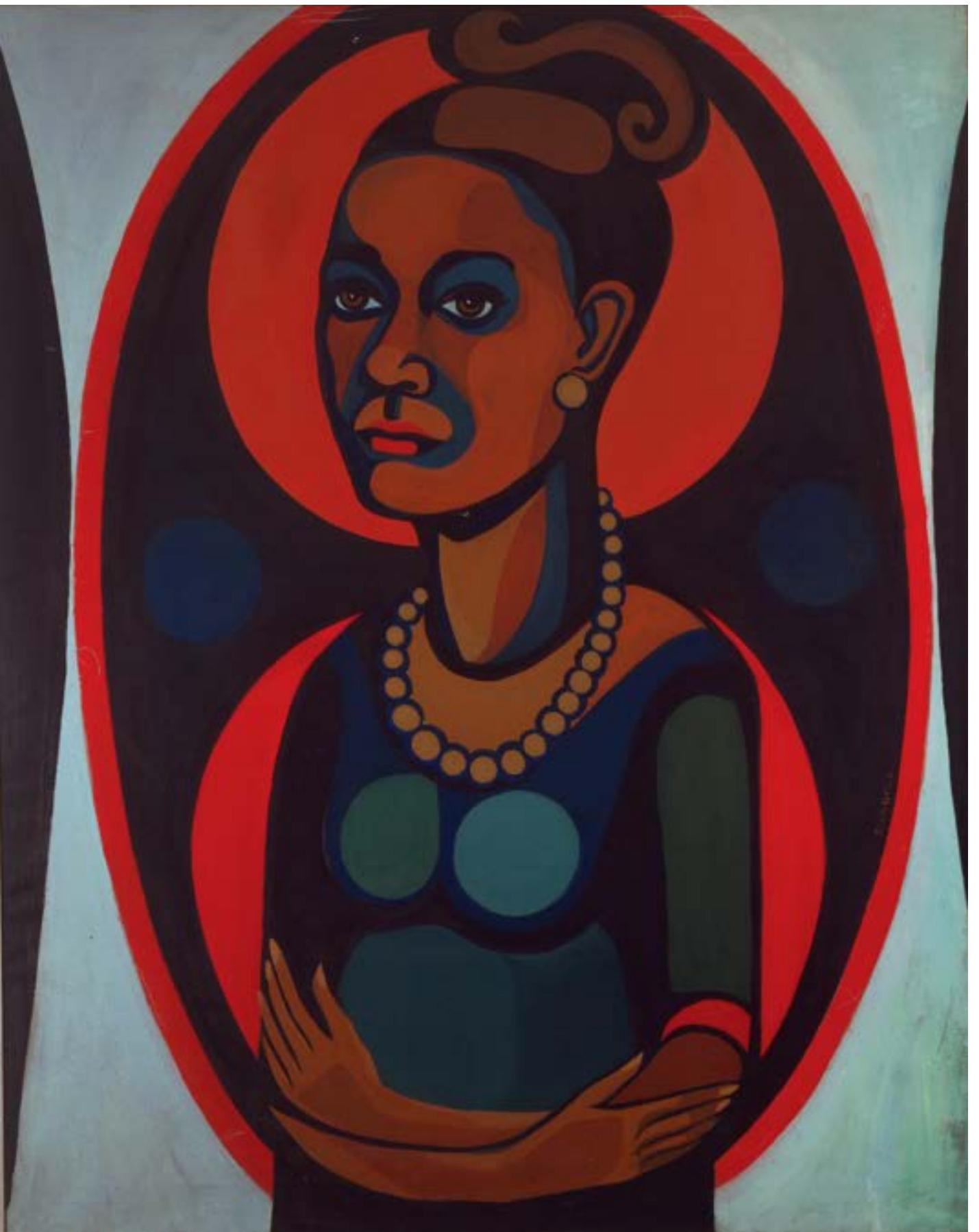
Early Works #19: Red, White and Blue Woman, 1964  
Oil on canvas glued onto Masonite  
18 × 14 ¼ in (45.7 × 36.2 cm)



Early Works #22: Uptight Negro, 1964  
Oil on paperboard  
24 × 18 in (61 × 45.7 cm)

X

X



Early Works #25: Self-Portrait, 1965

Oil on canvas  
50 x 40 in (127 x 101.6 cm)

# Murals on 57th Street

Mark Godfrey

## Joy and Celebration

A few days before Christmas in 1967, New York's gallery-goers packed into the Spectrum Gallery on 57th Street to attend the opening of the first solo show by Faith Ringgold, an artist who, up until that moment, had not presented her work in such a gallery space. More than five hundred people came, or so the artist remembers, and it was "a joy and celebration."<sup>1</sup> A photograph from the night shows Ringgold in a sequined black dress chatting away with friends. She is flanked by Richard Mayhew and Romare Bearden, and they are talking to two others. She has a glass of whiskey in her hand; it's all very festive. The picture stands in total contrast to the scenes depicted in the standout works from the show: three large paintings that Ringgold called "murals" and that the press release called "unique and unforgettable."<sup>2</sup> These were the final works of Ringgold's *American People Series*, and they were full of protest and violence and bloodshed. The paintings were applauded at the time but then mostly disappeared from view, yet currently they count among the most reproduced works of art made that year. To help define Ringgold's vision at this pivotal time, this essay explores how she arrived at painting the scenes she did; how she responded to other artists in the process; and what it meant that she chose to present them in that gallery on 57th Street.

## Painting the News

Ringgold began the series that culminated in the three 1967 murals back in 1963, at a time when the future of the American people looked bright. It was the year Martin Luther King Jr. stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and described his dream that, one day soon, "the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood." The civil rights movement was achieving some of its goals, and in some ways King's strategy of nonviolent protest seemed to be working. However, from the very beginning, Ringgold's paintings did not exude the optimism that King expressed. In the first painting, *American People Series #1: Between Friends* (1963) [p. 32], two women stand together—one is white; the other more than likely would have called herself a "Negro." The women do not meet each other's eyes; indeed, the

plank of wood that runs down the picture seems to separate them. Ringgold's daughter Michele Wallace describes their situation as one of "dynamic alienation."<sup>3</sup> The second painting in the series, *For Members Only* (1963) [p. 34], depicts a gang of six white men with grim expressions whose huddle forms a kind of wall excluding the presumed newcomer, who will not be let into this club on account of their race. *For Members Only* asks us to imagine a Black figure positioned in the space of the viewer, and the series's third painting works this way too. In *Neighbors* [p. 33], also from 1963, a group of sullen-looking white folks (a grandma, a couple, and their son) seem nonplussed by—or indeed hostile to—the person who has moved in next door. So much for the table of brotherhood.

These paintings were evidently set in northern cities (because in the South it was not even conceivable for Blacks to join a white club or move into a white neighborhood), and they provided a compelling representation of the real relations between the races in these places. The canvases that followed were equally intriguing, as they explored how power structures between races were internalized. *American People Series #16: Woman Looking in a Mirror* (1966) [p. 42] depicts a woman in her underwear seemingly checking out her appearance and, most importantly, her hair, which flows in waves down to her shoulders. She has possibly applied hair relaxer; she is judging herself through white ideals of beauty. This painting was made a year after the publication of Malcolm X's *Autobiography*, in which Ringgold is more than likely to have read his judgment of the "multitude of Negro men and women in America who are brainwashed into believing that the black people are 'inferior'—and white people 'superior' . . . they will even violate and mutilate their God-created bodies to try to look 'pretty' by white standards."<sup>4</sup> Another painting from 1966 is *The Artist and His Model* [p. 43]—here a Black man has chosen as a model (and presumed lover) a white woman, who stands, naked, looking over her shoulder, her straight strawberry-blond hair falling almost to her waist.

We can assume that Spectrum Gallery's director Robert Newman had seen these paintings when he offered Ringgold the opportunity not just to show works from the *American People Series* at the end of 1967 but also to use the gallery on 57th Street as her studio during the months of June, July, and August, when it was shut. He knew that Ringgold could push her subject matter further and address more explicitly the discord between

the races, a direction the artist was already contemplating. In Ringgold's memoir, she writes, "Robert wanted me to depict everything that was happening in America—the sixties and the decade's tumultuous thrusts for freedom. Maybe I would have done this anyway, but it was very comforting to have someone suggest something that is exactly what you should be doing."<sup>5</sup> Newman gave Ringgold the impetus to paint the news, and this is what she did in the three murals *American People Series #18: The Flag Is Bleeding* [pp. 44–45], *American People Series #19: U.S. Postage Stamp Commemorating the Advent of Black Power* [pp. 46–47], and *American People Series #20: Die* [pp. 48–51].

All three paintings responded to the changed landscape of race relations since 1963. Weeks after King's speech, four girls were murdered in the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. Riots and protests spread across Harlem in 1964; Malcolm X was assassinated in February 1965; the Watts Rebellion shook Los Angeles in August of the same year; and during the Long Hot Summer of 1967 when Ringgold was making the paintings, forty-three people died in race-related uprisings in Detroit, and twenty-six much closer by in Newark, New Jersey. Ringgold felt that these events were often not depicted in the print or TV news, and thus it was her responsibility to represent them. *The Flag Is Bleeding* shows a lineup of three Americans facing forward as if behind a flag: a Black man in a dark turtleneck who clutches a knife in his left hand and holds his hand to his heart with his right, a gesture of allegiance that also reads as an attempt to compress a wound; a white man, elbows bent and hands by his guns (Ringgold later said that he was "packing"<sup>6</sup>); and a white woman between them who links her arms with theirs, both bringing them together and keeping them apart. *Die* features ten adults and three children: four Black men, one Black woman, two white women, three white men, a white boy, a Black girl, and a child of ambiguous race being held out to remove them from the scene. The scene is catastrophic: guns, knives, people clutching wounds, others reaching out to help, blood everywhere.

The third mural has very different imagery. It presents a postage stamp featuring two grids with a total of one hundred faces, ninety in various pinks, salmons, and oranges that read as white, and ten, in a diagonal stretching from bottom left to top right, in shades ranging from light to dark brown that read as Black. (The 9:1 ratio reflected Ringgold's understanding of the demographics of the time.) The words "BLACK POWER" run down the other diagonal, creating a black X that becomes the dominant shape in the painting. This X pays tribute to Malcolm X's refusal of his enslaved ancestors' owner's surname. Much less noticeable are the white letters spelling "WHITE POWER," which are painted at a right angle rotation to the orientation of the painting. Once noticed, they act as a reminder of the structure of white supremacy on which America was founded. The words and numbers "U.S. POSTAGE / AIRMAIL / 10¢ / 1967" appear in red across the stamp, which is bordered with a blue serrated edge and black ground beyond.

Like the first two, this mural was also a response to recent events. A year before it was made, the first Black student to

attend the University of Mississippi was shot while attempting to complete his March Against Fear from Memphis to Jackson, Mississippi. Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee member Stokely Carmichael (later known as Kwame Ture) decided to continue his walk and, on reaching Greenwood, Mississippi, declared to his audience, "We been saying 'freedom' for six years. What we are going to start saying now is 'Black Power.'" Carmichael's words expressed the frustration of all those who felt King's approach was too patient, and following this, more and more people began to reject the nomenclature *Negro* and call themselves *Black*. When she made this painting the following summer, certainly not everyone with whom Ringgold associated had embraced the new language. Indeed, it is worth noting that in the press release for the Spectrum show, Newman referred to her as "the major American Negro artist."<sup>7</sup> We have to assume that Ringgold approved the language of the release, and this indicates that she either accepted the nomenclature or did not yet feel empowered enough to insist on changing it to *Black* and, furthermore, that Newman himself saw no contradiction in celebrating a "Negro artist" for painting *The Advent of Black Power*. He called the work "an American classic."<sup>8</sup>

As to how Ringgold decided to celebrate the advent of Black Power with a painting of a stamp as opposed to a depiction of a rally or march, it is likely she knew that in February of 1967 the US Postal Service had published a twenty-five-cent stamp commemorating the life of Frederick Douglass. Seeing this on her regular mail may have prompted her to imagine the extraordinarily unlikely event of the Postal Service honoring Carmichael's just-born movement. There is a bitter irony to her painting: a monumental imagining of a commemorative stamp whose actual publication was nearly inconceivable.

## Art Dialogues and Battles

The overt discord in these three murals is between white and Black Americans, but in making them, Ringgold was engaging in very different kinds of battles: those between herself and other artists. As much as these paintings seem to be direct responses to sociopolitical events, they are also artistic statements that are the result of several important dialogues.

The basic style of all three murals was consistent with the earlier paintings in the *American People Series*, in which Ringgold painted figures in a flat, emblematic, and deliberately naive way. Contours were simplified; faces and limbs were depicted with blocks of color rather than in gradated shades; there was no attempt to represent deep space or shadow; clothing was uniform; each "white man" and "Black man" in *Die* has very similar features to one another. Ringgold's "Super Realism," as she later called her style, shares many characteristics with heraldry and sign-painting and, indeed, communicates in a similar manner. It allows her scenes to read symbolically rather than as records of individuals or specific events. Viewers could look at the murals and understand them as depictions of a *general* condition of relations between races; this meant they could also connect the



Fig. 1  
John Wesley, *Stamp*, 1961. Duco and oil on canvas, 24 x 24 in (61 x 61 cm)

paintings to their own experience. "I had called my art 'Super Realism' because I wanted my audience to make a personal connection with its images and the message," Ringgold has written.<sup>9</sup> Had viewers felt they were seeing depictions of specific people, their own ability to connect would have been much more limited.<sup>10</sup>

Ringgold came to Super Realism on her own, even though she must have been aware of its similarities to other modes of figuration employed by her contemporaries: Andy Warhol and Robert Rauschenberg's use of silkscreening to render photographic images onto painting, Alice Neel's figures painted from life, and the photorealist painting just emerging at the time. Her other choices in making the murals were more closely determined by recent encounters with works by other artists. The most significant decision she made in 1967 was to work on a much larger scale than she had before, a result, in part, of seeing the "Large Scale American Paintings" show curated by Kynaston McShine at the Jewish Museum in New York that summer. The show convinced her that a large scale could have a purpose rather than being simply bombastic.<sup>11</sup> Though most of the work was abstract (Al Held, Jules Olitski, Ellsworth Kelly), the show also featured Alex Katz's massive *Lawn Party* (1965). Of all the well-recognized figurative painters working in New York, Katz was the artist whose style was probably closest to hers, and Ringgold would have looked on his depiction of an all-white bourgeois summer gathering and felt the need to use this scale to give her own, very different account of American people at the time.

It is possible that Ringgold put her work in conversation with other recent paintings too. She might have known that in

1961, for example, John Wesley had made the painting *Stamp* [Fig. 1] and felt that its near abstraction gave her the prompt to create something much more pointed. It is much more likely that *The Flag Is Bleeding* takes off from Jasper Johns's *Flag* (1954–55) [p. 73] and that, in creating her grids of faces in *U.S. Postage Stamp*, Ringgold deliberately departed from Warhol's grids with their repeated faces of white women, be they Marilyn, Jackie, or collectors like Ethel Scull. Ringgold's artistic dialogues were most acute in *Die*, in which Jackson Pollock's drips of paint become splatters of blood, the checkered background recalls the predominance of grid painting in modernism, and the slight variations in grays recall the work of Ad Reinhardt.<sup>12</sup> Another conversation was with Jeannine Petit, who was also showing at Spectrum and using the gallery as a studio in the summer of 1967. Little is known of Petit's work, but Ringgold recalls that she was "working on a series encompassing over two hundred canvases, with all the colors of the spectrum."<sup>13</sup> Ringgold describes Petit as her "only friend that summer," but despite their personal friendship, I suspect that Ringgold's gray grid marked a recognition that it was impossible for her to indulge in the joy of color her gallery mate was experimenting with while people were dying on the streets of Newark, less than twenty miles away from their improvised joint studio on 57th Street.

Pablo Picasso had also refused to work with color when he created *Guernica* (1937) [Fig. 2], and this was, of course, the main work with which Ringgold dialogued. *Guernica* hung at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) at the time, and Ringgold visited it regularly. Picasso's decision to protest the bombing of the Basque town with a monumental frieze inspired Ringgold to use the same format to depict the violence going on around her. The work gave her ideas about iconography (figures holding babies, screaming mouths), but more importantly, *Guernica* showed her that the most effective way to protest and memorialize violence and its victims was to take absolute care with composition. In *Guernica*, Picasso made sure that viewers followed the directions of the outstretched necks and limbs of different figures upward, laterally, and diagonally across the painting. The entire composition was drawn together and a sense of wholeness was achieved so that the viewer could be more immersed in, and moved by, the scene, rather than taking it in part by part. Ringgold also used limbs as lines to tie everything together, and, as if to recognize how many compositional lessons she gleaned from *Guernica*, she quoted parts of it—for instance, the bent knee of the Black woman to the far right references the bent knee of the woman in the bottom right corner of Picasso's painting, and the white man whose head touches the bottom edge of the painting is in almost exactly the same position as the body lying in *Guernica* with arms similarly outstretched.<sup>14</sup>

Ringgold was in conversation with Black artists as well. Just over three years before her Spectrum exhibition, she had written to Bearden to ask him if she could join the artists' group Spiral, which had formed in 1963 and which would mount its only group show in 1965. Bearden denied her request, sending her a letter calling her compositions "monotonous." "Look to the relations between the figures and/or the objects, so the eye can



Fig. 2  
Pablo Picasso, *Guernica*, 1937. Oil on canvas, 137 1/2 x 305 3/4 in (349.3 x 776.6 cm)

move in an easy way through the work," he wrote.<sup>15</sup> In her memoir, Ringgold writes that she was "crushed" and that she tried deliberately "to forget all those theories about composition and asymmetrical balance," but it's hard not to think that Bearden's counsel helped her, in part, achieve the success of *Die*.<sup>16</sup> Another older artist, Hale Woodruff, received her application in 1966 for the First World Festival of Negro Arts, held that year in Senegal, and told Ringgold that she was not ready for this platform, since her work lacked "movement."<sup>17</sup> Again, an initial reaction of dismay was followed by her taking his words in, setting a challenge for herself of creating a sense of movement, which she realized with the murals in the Spectrum show.

### Murals on 57th Street

To understand the original impact of Ringgold's three murals even more precisely, it is important to take into account the significance of their first place of presentation: Spectrum Gallery on 57th Street. Ringgold describes it as "an early cooperative gallery run by Robert Newman, a poet and critic.... There were about twenty artists in the gallery—all mainstream abstract painters and sculptors, five of whom were women, and the only black was me."<sup>18</sup> As a cooperative, Spectrum had a different business model than the other dealerships on the street—Marlborough, Pierre Matisse, and others—but it was most definitely located in the heart of the commercial art world, near the residences and offices of New York's collecting class and just four blocks away from MoMA.

Choosing this as the place to show her work was very deliberate, and it was a different decision from one the artist

had made slightly earlier. The year before the Spectrum show, Ringgold had participated in a traveling exhibition of Black artists organized by Amiri Baraka's Black Arts Repertory Theatre.<sup>19</sup> "The intent," Ringgold recalls, "was to take art to the people of Harlem by caravan, set up in parks and empty spaces."<sup>20</sup> She was pleased by its success, but while other Harlem artists continued to find ways to show their work in the neighborhood, Ringgold wanted to pursue options to insert her art into the "mainstream" circuit of Midtown galleries. Very few Black artists had work shown in such places at the time, but one was Bearden, whose *Projections* had been exhibited at Cordier and Ekstrom on Madison Avenue in 1964. The gallery also showed artwork by Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray, and Isamu Noguchi, and Bearden's achievement in exhibiting there impressed Ringgold.

Before the exhibition opened at Spectrum in December 1967, Ringgold and Newman evidently settled on the term *mural* to describe the three new paintings, since the gallery's press release refers to them that way.<sup>21</sup> The word *mural* was not commonly used to talk about large-format paintings on canvas at that time. In his *New York Times* review of the "Large Scale American Paintings" Jewish Museum show, for example, Hilton Kramer did not once use the term, instead using words like "outsize" or phrases like "immense scale."<sup>22</sup> *Mural* in reference to mobile works might have been chosen to align Ringgold's three paintings with Jackson Pollock's *Mural* (1943), made on canvas as a commission for Peggy Guggenheim's house just a few streets away from Spectrum, on 61st Street, but to my mind, the word had a much more contemporary resonance. In its December 1967 issue, published a couple of weeks before the press release was issued, *Ebony* had reported on the completion of *The Wall of Respect* [Fig. 3] on Chicago's South Side, "a mural

communicating black dignity.”<sup>23</sup> A group of cultural practitioners, calling themselves the Organization of Black American Culture (OBAC), had carefully drawn up a list of “Black heroes” organized by categories, found an exterior wall on a building, divided the wall up into sections, and set about painting musicians, athletes, writers, political activists, and dancers. Photographs of Baraka and others were attached to the wall too. A monument to Black excellence emerged, and over the next few years, several more murals would be painted on walls in Black neighborhoods across America.

Ringgold did not choose to display her new paintings from the summer of 1967 in the parks and empty spaces of Harlem, as she had in 1966, but she did choose to call her works “murals” as she hung them on the walls of the 57th Street building, claiming and communicating her politicized vision in a space usually reserved for white artists and a white audience. It is worth also noting the prominence of Ringgold’s name on the murals; she asserted her authorship at a time when many artists had stopped signing their paintings altogether. With these gestures, Ringgold was asking the questions: What if works presented on 57th Street did not just represent the racial violence of contemporary America

but celebrated Black people and the advent of Black Power? Could the presence of such works in this space help build a new Black audience? The questions could not be answered in the affirmative in 1967, but Ringgold asked them again when she presented her next body of work, the *Black Light Series*, in her show “America Black” at Spectrum in 1970, and a few years later, Linda Goode Bryant asked the same questions when she chose 57th Street as the location for her Just Above Midtown gallery.

### Keeping Faith

We can now understand Ringgold’s cultural politics and her vision at the end of 1967 more clearly. Within the context of Spectrum and its artists, who mostly worked within abstraction, Ringgold stood out as a Black woman making images about race relations. And among the Black artists interested in entering the “mainstream” circuit of Midtown galleries, Ringgold was also on her own. She saw herself as more radical than “the old men of black art” like Bearden, Mayhew, and Norman Lewis, even though she had previously sought their approval.<sup>24</sup> Whether they



Fig. 3  
*The Wall of Respect*, conceived by the Organization of Black American Culture (OBAC), Chicago, 1967



Fig. 4  
Emory Douglas, Untitled, 1967. Offset lithograph on paper, 21 5/8 x 17 1/2 in (54.9 x 44.5 cm)

worked in the legacies of Abstract Expressionism or in collage, these artists were prepared neither to address the reality of race relations through graphic imagery nor to celebrate the advent of Black Power.

However, Ringgold also took a very different path from the younger, politicized Black cultural figures and figurative artists with whom she might seem to have been aligned. These artists believed that Black Power was incompatible with American nationalism and that it did not have a future in America. Instead, the time had come to build a new liberated Black Nation. By the end of 1967, Baraka was developing this position, which he articulated in his poem “Nation Time” a couple of years later.<sup>25</sup> As he and his colleague Larry Neal developed their definitions of a Black aesthetic, they insisted that there had to be a complete rejection of a white aesthetic too. In a 1969 essay in *Ebony*, “Any Day Now: Black Art and Black Liberation,” Neal advocated for “the destruction of the white thing . . . the destruction of white ways of looking at the world.”<sup>26</sup> In other words, no more references to Picasso, no more openings on 57th Street.

Artists taking this position included the Boston-based Dana Chandler, Jeff Donaldson in Chicago, and Emory Douglas, minister of culture of the Black Panther Party in San Francisco. Chandler’s *The Beast* (1967) shows a crowd of white supremacists holding up a “White Power” sign that drips with blood. Chandler relinquished the compositional subtleties and artistic dialogues that occupied Ringgold to, in his view, concentrate better on direct communication. Donaldson, in his 1963–64 canvas *Aunt Jemima and the Pillsbury Doughboy*, painted a policeman, club in hand, attacking the Aunt Jemima figure; like Ringgold, Donaldson set this scene of violence against the American flag, but he turned its horizontal stripes on the diagonal to make a visual connection between the flag and the Nazi swastika, indicating his growing consciousness that Black people could not swear allegiance to the Stars and Stripes. Donaldson would later become the main theorist of AfriCOBRA, penning their 1970 manifesto “Ten in Search of a Nation,” at that point perhaps the clearest written attempt to formulate a Black aesthetic independent from concepts like realism, Pop, or abstraction. A couple of months before the Spectrum show opened, in an untitled work, Douglas depicted a mother in a squalid ghetto apartment, plaster cracking off the walls, seemingly encouraging her son to practice target shooting with his toy rifle, all the better to train him to become a revolutionary [Fig. 4]. This is a far cry from the woman in *Die* who pushes her child out of the scene at the far left to escape the field of bloodshed. Douglas’s gouache painting was turned into a poster, and it became the first of hundreds of such posters and newspaper back pages that were pinned to the walls of community centers and bedrooms. As Douglas wrote in 1968, “The Ghetto itself is the Gallery for the Revolutionary artist’s drawings.”<sup>27</sup>

Ringgold, in accordance with her name, kept faith. Faith in America, faith in a future where Black people would be respected in America, and faith in galleries and museums and in the kinds of art that American institutions housed. Rather than advocating for revolution and the outright replacement of white institutions, her vision as an artist was one of recognition, representation, and reform: recognize what was happening on the streets, give it representation, and reform American art and attitudes. To achieve this she sought allies, and she found one in Newman, who called *Die* an “American classic,” a phrase that would have appalled Chandler and Douglas.<sup>28</sup>

The mural paintings reveal Ringgold’s precise stance at the end of 1967. The flag bleeds because America mourns the blood spilled by its citizens. The Black man holds his hand to his heart as a gesture of allegiance to his country, even as he is wounded. The US Postal Service might one day commemorate the achievements of all citizens. American institutions like MoMA, for all their problems, can still function for an artist like Ringgold as a place to study Picasso, Pollock, and Reinhardt, so as to be able to riff off their works. And at the painting’s center, while King’s dream of little Black girls joining hands with little white boys makes way for *Die*’s nightmare of frightened children clutching each other, at least they have found one another. As for the third child, the only person in the scene with brown rather



**Fig. 5**  
*Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907) by Pablo Picasso and *American People Series #20: Die* (1967) by Faith Ringgold hang in the newly reopened Museum of Modern Art, New York, October 2019

than blond or black hair, one last conjecture is this: she is the child of love, and, held out by her white mother, she is reaching out for the protection of her wounded Black father.

#### Mural on 53rd Street

After the Spectrum exhibition, Ringgold's murals went into her collection in storage. They reemerged in 1973 for a retrospective at the Rutgers University Art Gallery in New Brunswick, New Jersey, and *The Flag Is Bleeding* was included in the 1985 exhibition "Tradition and Conflict: Images of a Turbulent Decade, 1963–1973," curated by Mary Schmidt Campbell at the Studio Museum in Harlem, but they were hardly seen for decades. In many art

history degree programs (the one where I studied, for instance), the key battle in American art dating from 1967 was between Michael Fried in "Art and Objecthood" and the Minimalists; little was said about Ringgold and her concerns.<sup>29</sup> Yet in 2010 an exhibition at the Neuberger Museum of Art in Purchase, New York, brought all three murals together, and a few years later, *Die* was shown at Tate Modern in "Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power," cocurated by Zoé Whitley and myself. *The Flag Is Bleeding* replaced it in the American venues of the exhibition and was therefore seen in Bentonville, Arkansas; Brooklyn, New York; Los Angeles; San Francisco; and Houston. In all venues, it was paired (and frequently photographed) with Elizabeth Catlett's *Black Unity* (1968). *U.S. Postage Stamp* was displayed at the Serpentine Gallery in Ringgold's exhibition in 2019.

The same year, MoMA reopened after an expansion, and *Die*, acquired for the collection in 2016, was hung in a gallery with Picasso's *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907) [Fig. 5]. Ringgold's mural had returned to Midtown, from 57th Street, where it was painted, to 53rd Street, where it will remain. The installation of *Die* and *Demoiselles* became the image of the rehang. In January 2020, *Artforum*, a magazine that devoted hardly a word to Ringgold until the mid-1980s, put *Die* on the front cover.

Of all the works of art made in America in 1967, why have Ringgold's murals become the most visible, some fifty years after they were first exhibited? Mainly it is because of their depressing resonance with the present time. For most viewers, the American flag bled throughout the Trump presidency, and the scenes of violence in *Die* spoke to the murders by police that sparked the Black Lives Matter movement in 2013 and the protests in Ferguson, Minneapolis, and indeed every major American city since. *Die* also recalls the white supremacist violence in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 2017; Portland, Oregon, in 2020; and the storming of the Capitol in Washington, DC, in 2021.

Sadly, there are few signs that Ringgold's murals will cease to resonate in this way, but the other reason they are so prominent today is the artistic choices Ringgold made. Ringgold's Super Realism ensured that her paintings could represent general conditions rather than specific events. Alongside this, her dialogues with other artists have meant that her work has been welcomed into institutions and given a platform. This was deliberate and strategic on her part. Critics skeptical about the pairing at MoMA have worried that it reduces Ringgold's politics. Chloe Wyma called the juxtaposition "awkward," writing that *Die* was instrumentalized, and she reminded readers that Ringgold's painting was "a statement of a consciously and defiantly 'black aesthetic' against the art-world etiquette of formal and political abstraction."<sup>30</sup> This rather elides the fact that form and abstraction, of a kind, were fundamental to Ringgold. Helen Molesworth worried that the juxtaposition only served to confirm Picasso's prominence. "Ringgold's epic picture does not disturb the iconicity of the Picasso—it confirms it, reiterating how powerful a force that painting is."<sup>31</sup> *Die* should remain on show for decades, Molesworth continued, but as the centerpiece around which other art in MoMA's collection is organized. This is absolutely convincing as an argument, but it is important to remember that Ringgold felt that the long-term impact of her murals was in part dependent on their ability to stand together with the works of Pollock, Picasso, Reinhardt, Katz, Johns, and Warhol in the institutions in which they are housed. Other Black artists made other choices. Ringgold believed that by working with and against the canon, she could rebuild it and create a new audience at the same time.

- 1 Faith Ringgold, *We Flew over the Bridge: The Memoirs of Faith Ringgold* (Boston: Bulfinch Press, 1995), 159.
- 2 Robert Newman, "American People: Faith Ringgold at Spectrum," press release for exhibition held at Spectrum Gallery, New York, December 19, 1967–January 6, 1968, reprinted in *The Soul of a Nation Reader: Writings by and about Black American Artists, 1960–1980*, ed. Mark Godfrey and Allie Biswas (New York: Gregory R. Miller, 2021), 79.
- 3 Michele Wallace, "American People, Black Light: Faith Ringgold's Paintings of the 1960s," in *American People, Black Light: Faith Ringgold's Paintings of the 1960s*, ed. Thom Collins and Tracy Fitzpatrick (Purchase, NY: Neuberger Museum of Art, 2010), 26.
- 4 Malcolm X and Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1999), 56–57. Ringgold has recalled that when she was teaching at a school in Harlem in 1968, everyone else wore Afros while she was still wearing her hair straightened; she was beginning to feel that those around her looked at her as if she were "not black enough." Ringgold, *We Flew*, 225.
- 5 Ringgold, *We Flew*, 156.
- 6 As Ringgold herself has emphasized: "In the painting, the one who has the gun is the white man." Faith Ringgold and Hans Ulrich Obrist, "Conversation," in *Faith Ringgold* (London: Serpentine Galleries and Koenig Books, 2019), 33.
- 7 Newman, "American People."
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Ringgold, *We Flew*, 147.
- 10 Another way of understanding Ringgold's style was suggested in the first review of her work to appear in the *New York Times*, a review of a retrospective of hers at Rutgers, in which the critic Piri Halasz wrote that "Miss Ringgold's inspiration is the stark, primitive masks and votive sculptures of her ancestral continent." Piri Halasz, "Rutgers Shows Harlem Artist's Work," *New York Times*, March 11, 1973, 93.
- 11 In her memoir, Ringgold recalls that "I came away with the idea that there was more to a big canvas than its size; that there had to be a good reason for taking up so much space if the painting was to be more than merely expensive wallpaper." Ringgold, *We Flew*, 157.
- 12 See Anne Monahan, *Faith Ringgold: Die* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2018), 20–31.
- 13 Ringgold, *We Flew*, 156–57.
- 14 For further discussion of Ringgold's approach to Picasso, see Anne Monahan's account of the preparatory drawings for *Die*. Monahan, *Faith Ringgold: Die*, pp. 26–30.
- 15 Romare Bearden, letter to Faith Ringgold, November 8, 1964, quoted in Ringgold, *We Flew*, 150.
- 16 Ringgold, *We Flew*, 152.
- 17 This is Ringgold's memory of Woodruff's comment as recounted in her conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist. Ringgold and Obrist, "Conversation," 32.
- 18 Ringgold, *We Flew*, 154.
- 19 Baraka was known at the time as LeRoi Jones.
- 20 Ringgold, *We Flew*, 152–53.
- 21 Newman, "American People."
- 22 Hilton Kramer, "Abstraction and Empathy," *New York Times*, July 23, 1967, D13.
- 23 "Wall of Respect: Artists Paint Images of Black Dignity in Heart of City Ghetto," *Ebony*, December 1967, 48.
- 24 Ringgold writes in her memoir, "They were 'the old men of black art,' as the painter Vivian Browne used to call them affectionately." Ringgold, *We Flew*, 150.
- 25 Baraka later wrote a text about Ringgold, in which he argued that Ringgold showed the "real USA." The paintings "must be preserved. They should be in the schools, so that the real USA. emerges. Instead of school prayer, let Americans have their children contemplate *Die* or *Black Power*. . . . Then they will be raised on the real side." Amiri Baraka, "Faith," in "Contemporary Black Visual Artists," special issue, *Black American Literature Forum* 19, no. 1 (Spring 1985): 12. See also pp. 52–53 of this volume.
- 26 Larry Neal, "Any Day Now: Black Art and Black Liberation," *Ebony*, August 1969, 55.
- 27 Emory Douglas, "Position Paper 1: On Revolutionary Art," *Black Panther*, October 20, 1968, 5.
- 28 Newman, "American People."
- 29 Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," *Artforum*, Summer 1967, 12–23.
- 30 Chloe Wyma, "Loose Canon," *Artforum* online, October 21, 2019, <https://www.artforum.com/slant/chloe-wyma-on-the-reopened-moma-81076>.
- 31 Helen Molesworth, "The Kids Are Always Right," *Artforum*, January 2020, <https://www.artforum.com/print/202001/helen-molesworth-on-the-reinstallation-of-the-permanent-collection-81623>.

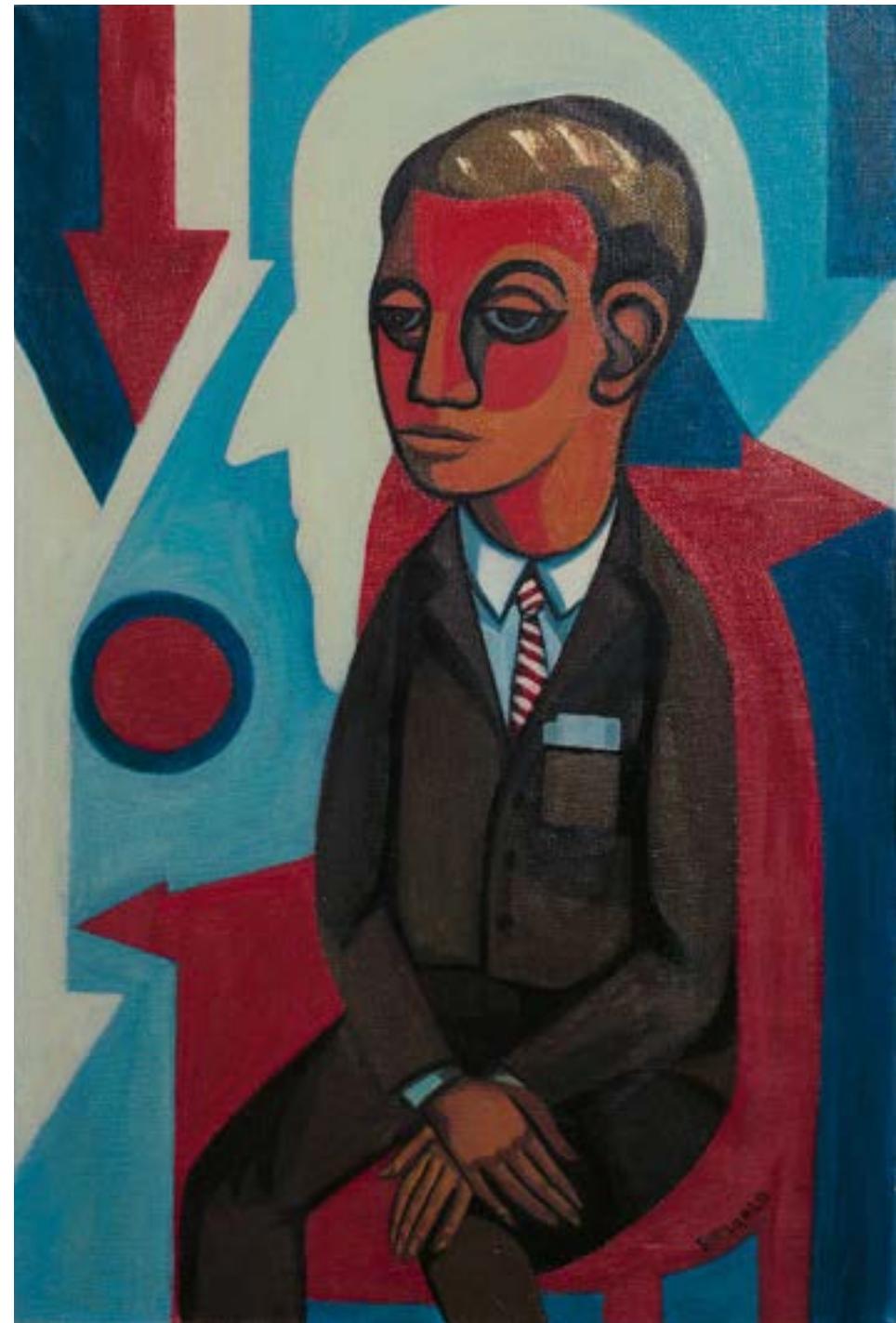
## American People

X



American People Series #13: God Bless America, 1964

Oil on canvas  
31 x 19 in (78.7 x 48.3 cm)



American People Series #14: Portrait of an American Youth, 1964

Oil on canvas  
36 x 24 in (91.4 x 61 cm)

X

X



American People Series #1: Between Friends, 1963

Oil on canvas  
40 x 24 in (101.6 x 61 cm)

X



American People Series #3: Neighbors, 1963

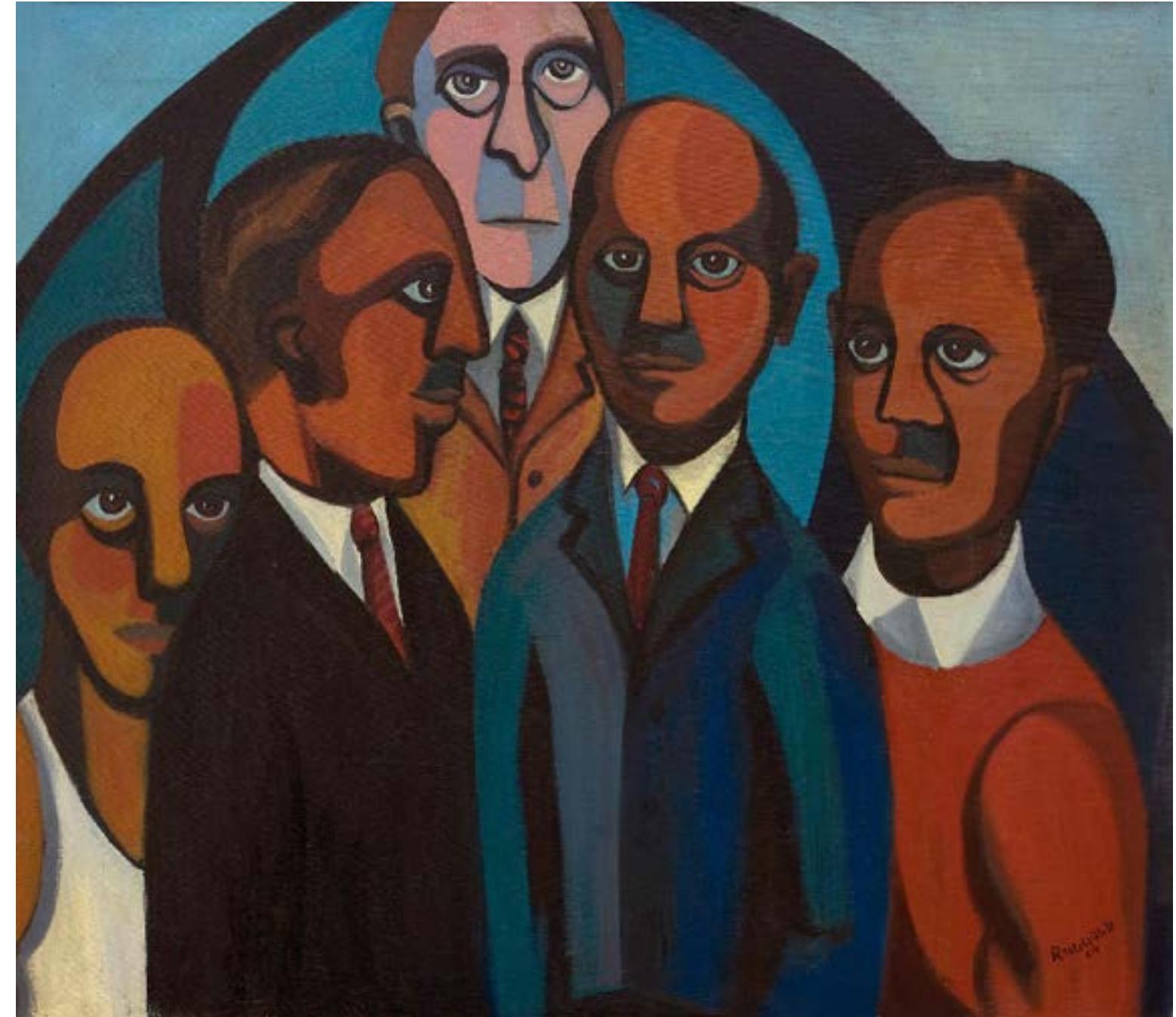
Oil on canvas  
41 1/8 x 24 1/4 in (106.4 x 61.6 cm)

X



American People Series #2:  
For Members Only, 1963  
Oil on canvas  
36 x 40 in (91.4 x 101.6 cm)

X



American People Series #4:  
The Civil Rights Triangle, 1963  
Oil on canvas  
36 1/8 x 42 1/8 in (91.8 x 104.5 cm)

X



American People Series #5:  
Watching and Waiting, 1963

Oil on canvas  
36 x 40 1/8 in (91.4 x 101.9 cm)

X



American People Series #6: Mr. Charlie, 1964

Oil on canvas  
33 1/8 x 18 1/8 in (84.1 x 46 cm)

X



American People Series #8: The In Crowd, 1964

Oil on canvas  
48 x 26 in (121.9 x 66 cm)



American People Series #10: Study Now, 1964

Oil on canvas  
30 1/8 x 21 1/8 in (76.5 x 53.7 cm)

X



American People Series #15:  
Hide Little Children, 1966

Oil on canvas  
26 x 48 in (66 x 121.9 cm)



American People Series #16:  
Woman Looking in a Mirror, 1966  
Oil on canvas  
36 x 32 inches (91.4 x 81.3 cm)

42



American People Series #17:  
The Artist and His Model, 1966  
Oil on canvas  
30 x 24 in (76.2 x 61 cm)

43



American People Series #18: The Flag Is Bleeding, 1967

Oil on canvas  
72 x 96 in (182.9 x 243.8 cm)

X



American People Series #19: U.S. Postage Stamp  
Commemorating the Advent of Black Power, 1967  
Oil on canvas  
72 x 96 in (182.9 x 243.8 cm)



American People Series #20: Die, 1967

Oil on canvas, two panels  
72 x 144 in (182.9 x 365.8 cm)



# Faith

Amiri Baraka

Faith Ringgold's works have existed within the parameters of "American Art" but have never been squashed by the exclusion and denial of reality that American art sometimes is. Faith's work is not the art of the drawing room, so that you have to ask those coming in and out of the drawing room (the servants) where stuff is "really at." Faith is able to be in the drawing room; that is, to be included in the spectrum of what exists, from the bully's point of view, as far as that is ever possible. Their seeing, on the one hand, is itself a kind of diminution of the world—like they want us all to think our real role models are beasts and murderers, talentless pimps on loan from scary movies. Yet, Faith is coming and going, marching through the drawing room, not waiting on the guests—though some of that is absolutely obligatory . . . for instance, if someone mentions your name up under the latest talentless nepotistic or screw-famous phenom to grace the pages of the most recent white racist Lie. No, she, Faith, is marching back and forth, on the way in and out of the drawing room, in and out of the house. She, when we can get close enough to check what she's about, is carrying news of the Field.

That is the shock of Faith's work, that she has elaborated the art of the Field (the widest range, the unkept slaves' open-air studio, where the research is, etc., *not* the way the house slave might, from an unblinded window, see down, and just off, the small figures of the field slaves break dancin' with that cotton). We get the sense—it is brought up to and by our senses—that Faith has actual news. Word from Bird. The sight, the sound, the breathing, the blood, the mindset of the rebellious field slave.

This is what the political posters and paintings create for us: a connection with the insurgents, the insurgency to come. This is why her early *Die* (1967) [pp. 48–51], a violent confrontation between slave and slave master in the modern American streets (which has come, is coming, will come again), terrorized gallery directors and house *nogrews* too. They didn't want to be associated with such violence. They certainly did not want to be the objects of it.

This is why figurative, realistic, expressionistic work, such as Faith's, and that of so many other progressive artists whose approach and theme is critical realist (the real and its willed change), is opposed by the rulers of the society (the shapers of the "aesthetic"), because it reveals too much of the actuality of this place, the terrors of its relationships.

America has always been *violence* and *blood* for Africans and African Americans! So Faith's *Atlanta* chess pieces (1981) [Fig. 1], evoking the never really solved murders of twenty-eight Black children between 1979 and 1981, speaks of the present (and, unfortunately, the future) and obviously about the past. Any piece of it. You mean slavery? The Klan? The Destruction of the Reconstruction? American Apartheid—Separate But Equal? Lynchings? Segregation? Race Riots? Red Summer? Don't Buy Where You Can't Work? David Walker—Murdered? Fred Douglass, an escaped Slave? Du Bois, indicted as an Agent of a foreign power? Or Malcolm, Martin, Fred Hampton, Medgar, Ralph Featherstone, Bobby Hutton—All Murdered? What are you talking about? These are the questions the politics of these paintings and posters keep marching past us. Word from the field. How that life of rhythm and blood is being fought for and against. How that life is struggle and that struggle, life.

Like the historical circumstance of the whole of the African-American Liberation Movement, we can learn by the confrontation, if we are not consumed (as its enemy or as the mind of its enemy). The Black Movement, basically a struggle for democracy within a hypocritical racist society, has continuously linked itself up with the "suffragette" movement, the fight of the women of this society for equality. And like Harriet Tubman or Fred Douglass raising those two questions, anti-slavery and anti-women's oppression, together (as they should be), as two parts of the struggle for democracy, Faith's work has long included the substance and strength of the Women's Movement, particularly from a Black woman's perspective. And this is important, because the Black woman remains at the bottom of the bottom, "the slave's slave."

Faith's political posters *Women Free Angela* (1971) [p. 80] and *Woman Free Yourself* (1971) [p. 78] should have the status of modern classics by now. Long before the current craze of the moneymakers to "help the struggle" by making money from it, Faith was on it!

*The Flag Is Bleeding* (1967) [pp. 44–45] and *Flag for the Moon: Die Nigger* (1969) [p. 61] are paintings that speak of the real USA. (No, not the Union of South Africa, the other one!) And Faith can be and usually is very wry and sardonic in her informed graphics and in her Idea Painting, *U.S. Postage Stamp Commemorating the Advent of Black Power* (1967) [pp. 46–47], like all of her reflections on The Flag, is precious. They must



Fig. 1  
Faith Ringgold, *Atlanta*, 1981. Mixed media, 30 × 40 × 15 in (76.2 × 101.6 × 38.1 cm)

be preserved. They should be in the schools, so that the real USA emerges. Instead of school prayer, let Americans have their children contemplate *Die* or *Black Power* or the terrifying poster *Save Our Children in Atlanta* (1981) [p. 86]. Then they will be raised on the real side.

The substance of these works is political because this is the real substance of all our lives. Particularly for the oppressed, politics is an overriding passion, because finally, it is the will to change the sound poet Margaret Walker speaks of in "I Hear a Rumbling":

There's a rumbling in the air  
There's a lightning in the skies  
There's a rumbling and a grumbling  
And the walls of prisons breaking<sup>1</sup>

Faith's political posters and paintings always bring us that rumbling. That is the word from the Field. It is, in fact, a Field rumbling.

This essay was adapted from its original publication in "Contemporary Black Visual Artists," special issue, *Black American Literature Forum* 19, no. 1 (Spring 1985): 12–13.

<sup>1</sup> Margaret Walker, "I Hear a Rumbling," in *This Is My Century: New and Collected Poems* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2013), 172.

X

Black Light

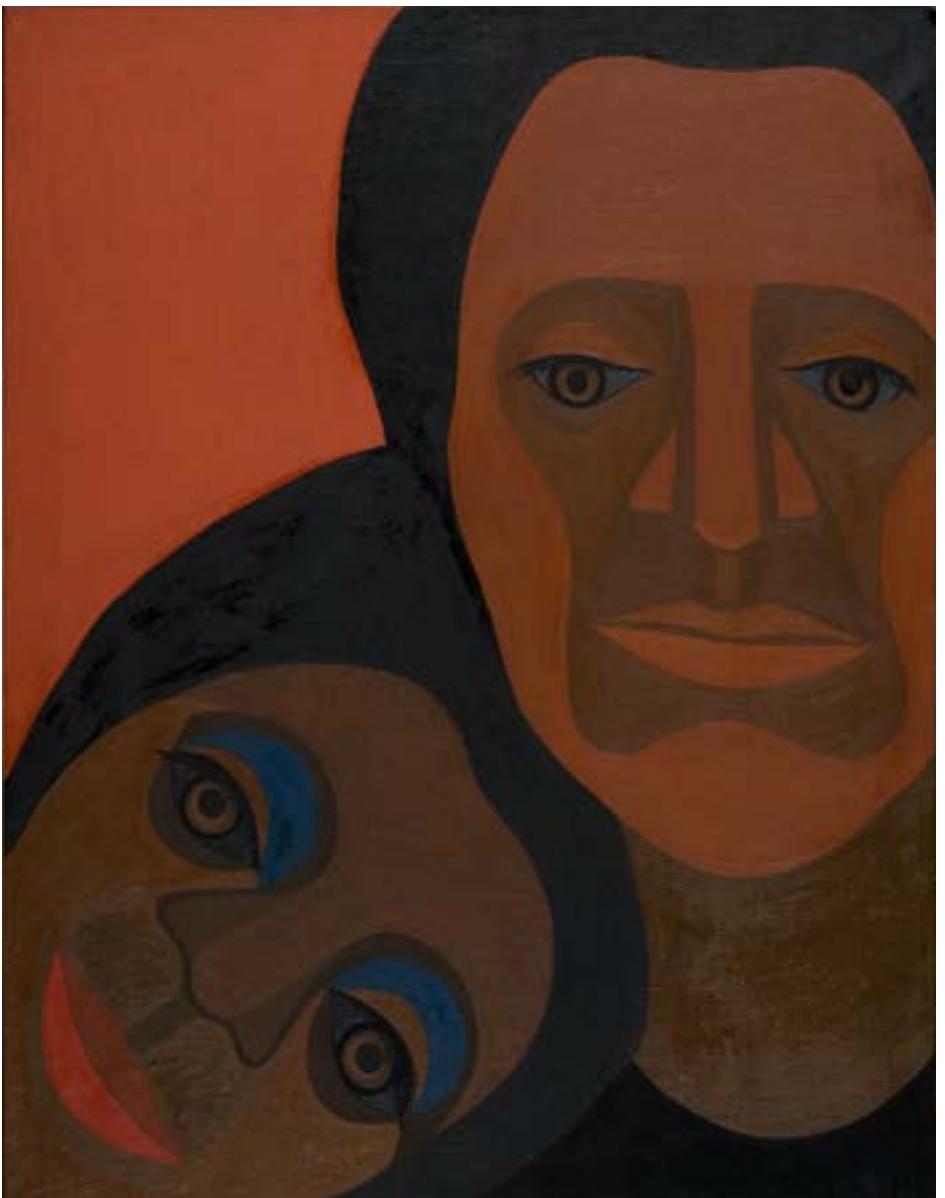


Black Light Series #2: Man, 1967  
Oil on canvas  
 $30\frac{1}{8} \times 24\frac{1}{8}$  in ( $76.5 \times 61.3$  cm)

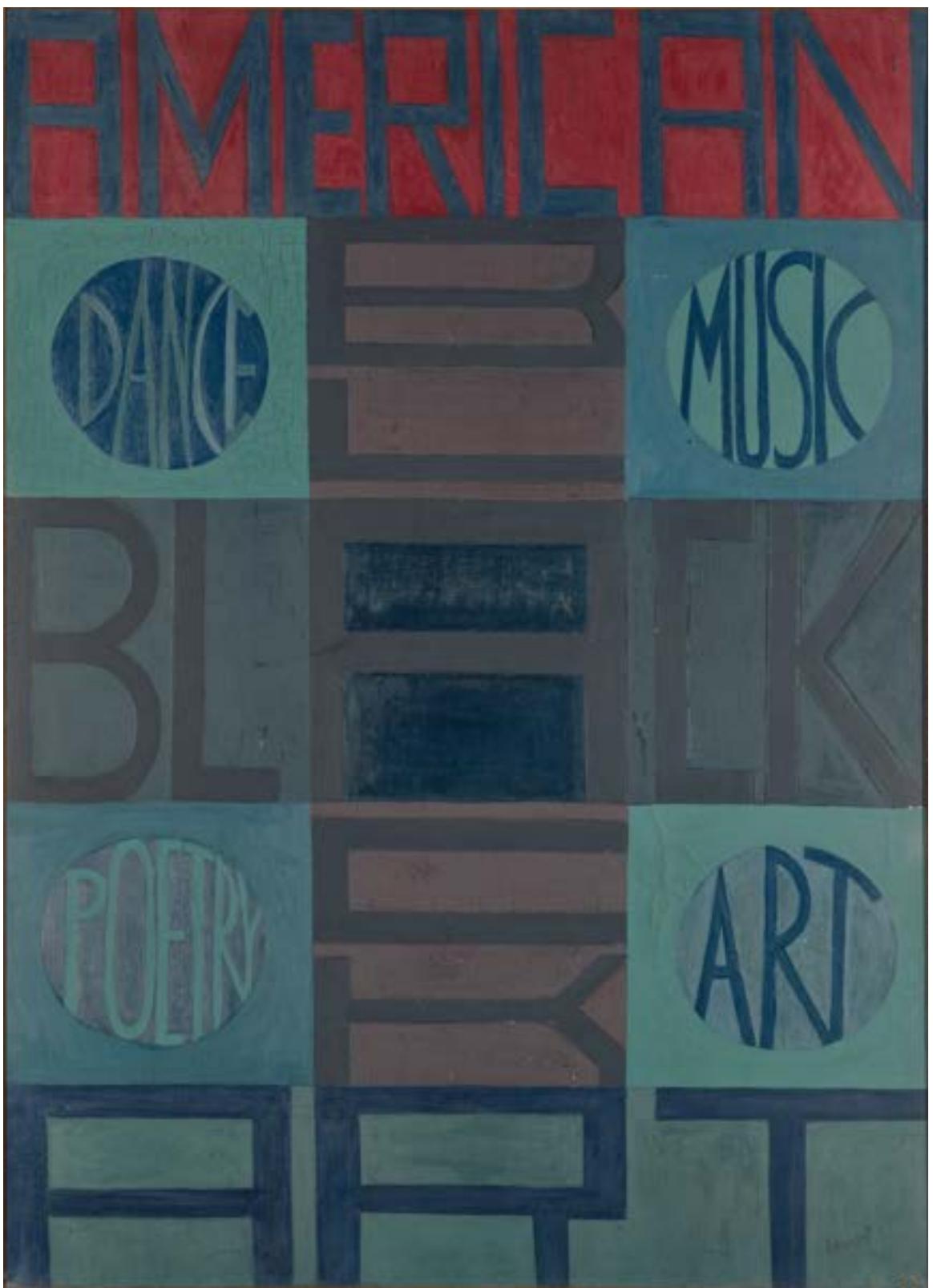


Black Light Series #1: Big Black, 1967  
Oil on canvas  
 $30\frac{1}{4} \times 42\frac{1}{4}$  in ( $76.8 \times 107.3$  cm)

X



Black Light Series #4: Mommy and Daddy, 1969  
Oil on canvas  
30 x 24 1/4 in (76.2 x 61.6 cm)



Black Light Series #5: Black Art Poster, 1969  
Oil on canvas  
50 x 36 in (127 x 91.4 cm)

X

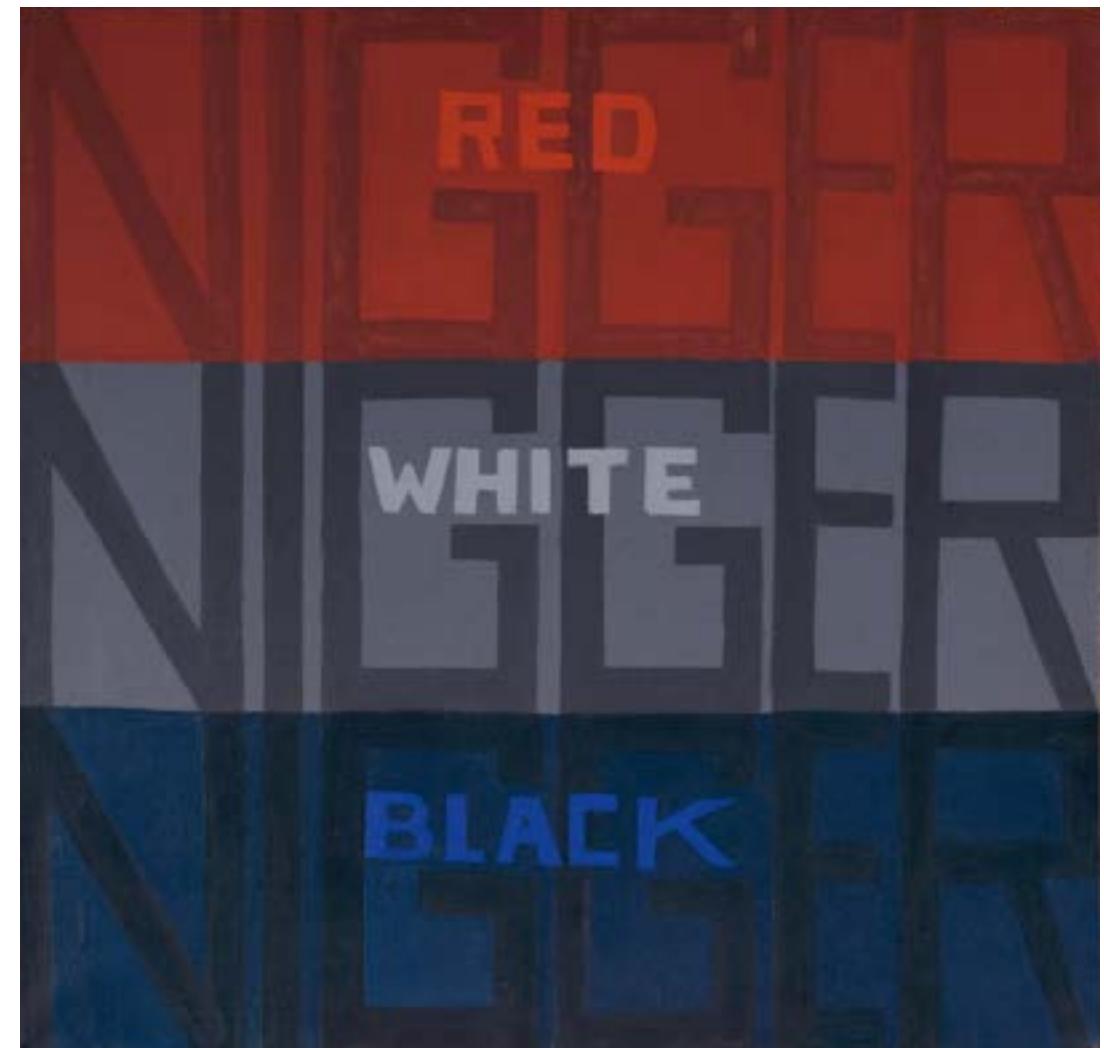
X



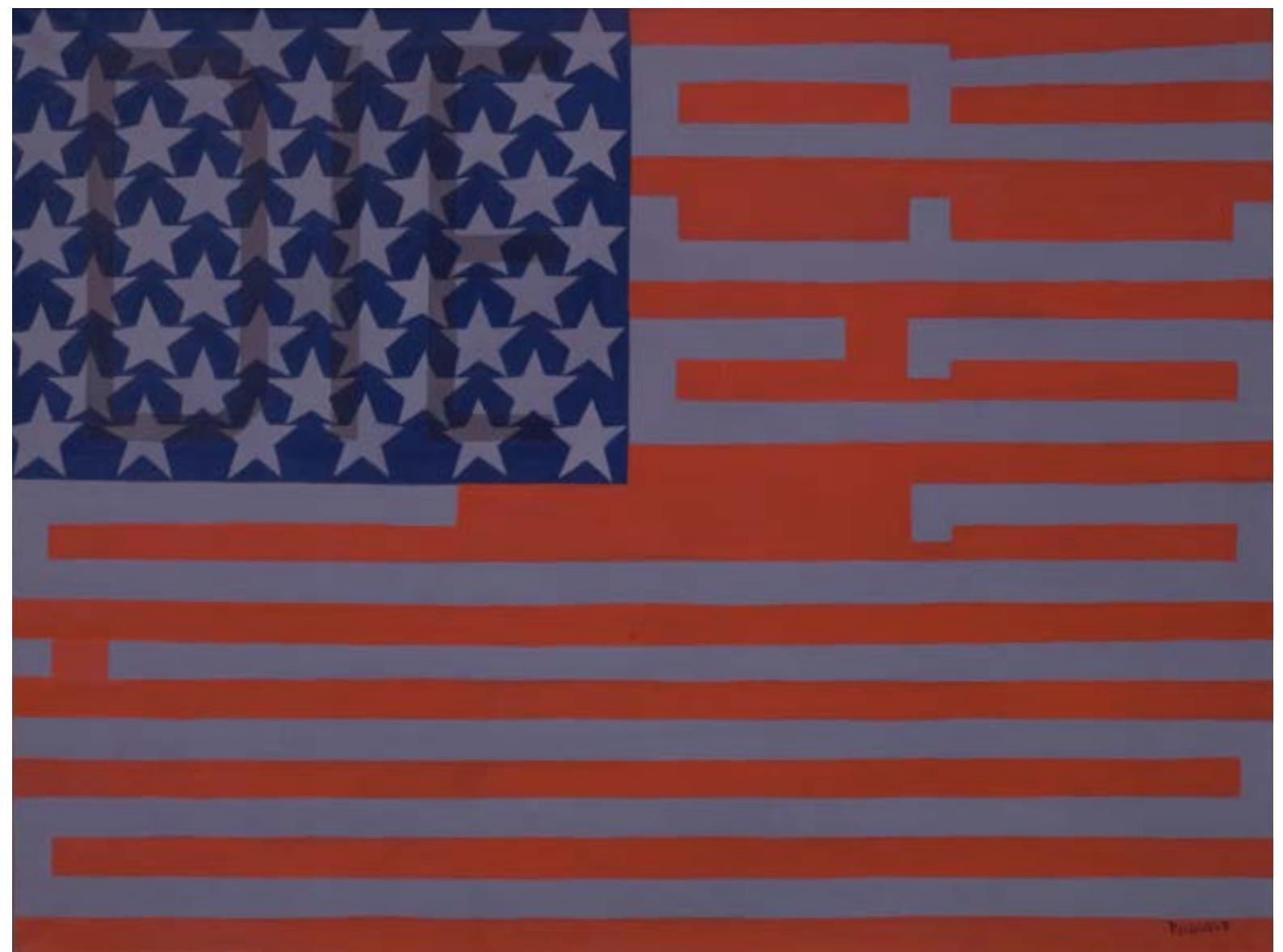
Black Light Series #7: Ego Painting, 1969

Oil on canvas  
30 x 30 in (76.2 x 76.2 cm)

X



Black Light Series #8: Red White Black Nigger, 1969  
Oil on canvas  
24 x 24 in (61 x 61 cm)



Black Light Series #10: Flag for the Moon:  
Die Nigger, 1969  
Oil on canvas  
36 x 50 in (91.4 x 127 cm)

X



Black Light Series #9: The American Spectrum, 1969

Oil on canvas  
18 x 72 in (45.7 x 182.9 cm)

X



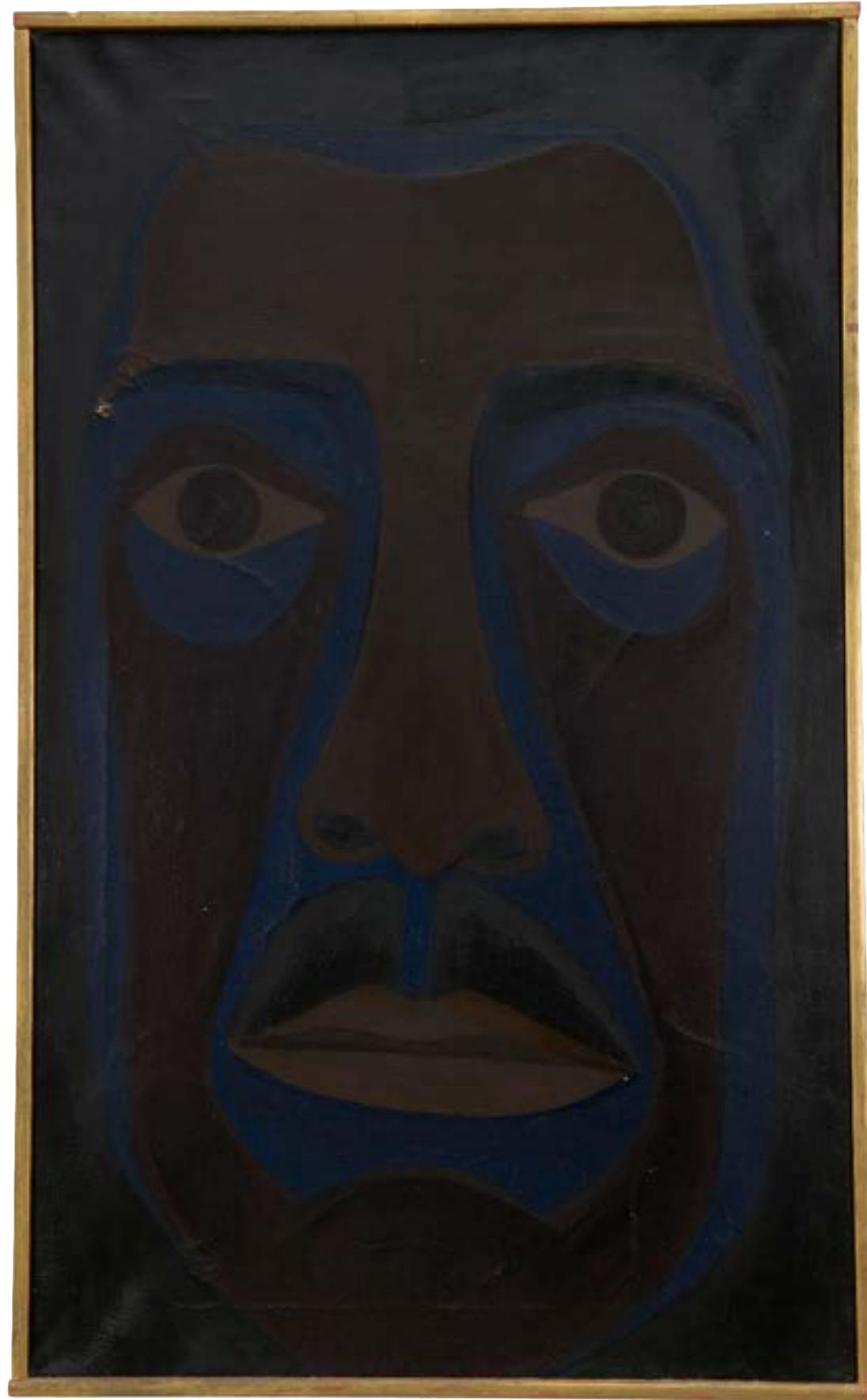
Black Light Series #11: US America Black, 1969  
Oil on canvas  
60 × 84 in (152.4 × 213.4 cm)

X



Black Light Series #12: Party Time, 1969  
Oil on canvas  
59 ¾ × 84 in (151.8 × 213.4 cm)

X



Black Light Series #3.1: Invisible Man #1, 1968  
Oil on canvas  
60 × 84 in (152.4 × 213.4 cm)

X



Black Light Series #3.2: Invisible Woman #1, 1968  
Oil on canvas  
60 × 84 in (152.4 × 213.4 cm)

# The People's Flag Show

LeRonn P. Brooks

On November 13, 1970, Faith Ringgold, along with artists Jean Toche and Jon Hendricks, was arrested for her participation in "The People's Flag Show" exhibition, which was shut down by police that day, at Judson Memorial Church in New York's Greenwich Village. As a member of the Independent Artists "Flag Show" Committee, which had organized the show, Ringgold was in line with the seemingly ubiquitous spirit of mass protest against the ongoing war in Vietnam and then president Richard Nixon's increasingly authoritarian style of governance. But more specifically, by using the American flag as the show's theme, the committee, and over a hundred artists who participated in the exhibition, was exploring the diminishing protections of the First Amendment in a metaphorical proxy war, here in the United States. The years of antiwar protests and Black rebellion, and the assassinations of Black revolutionaries during the 1960s, are essential parts of the context for the raid of the "Flag Show" and the arrest of Ringgold, Toche, and Hendricks: the Judson Three.

In April 1967, for example, the Spring Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam organized an antiwar march of hundreds of thousands of demonstrators, including Martin Luther King Jr. and Harry Belafonte, from New York's Central Park to the United Nations. And in San Francisco, a simultaneous march of thousands (attended by Coretta Scott King) was also held, as a way to unite the antiwar movement by gathering both coasts in a common cause. Draft cards were burned, and the streets were filled with outrage "protected" by the First Amendment. In October of the same year in Washington, DC, the same committee (which had changed its name to the National Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam) organized the March on the Pentagon, rallying near the Lincoln Memorial and then in the Pentagon's parking lot. A year later, in 1968, the committee organized thousands to protest the Democratic National Convention in Chicago; the protesters were met with violent police retaliation in the streets.

Such violence and civic dissension were especially acute for African Americans within the civil rights and Black Power movements and arts activism who exercised their right to protest without the guarantee of protection under the First Amendment. For Black activists, the consequences for challenging the government's failure to live up to democracy's promises have always been severe. For example, starting in May 1961 the Freedom Riders

protested the South's unlawful refusal to desegregate interstate travel on buses by riding into the southern states in mixed racial groups to challenge local laws that enforced segregation in seating. The activists in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (including John Lewis and, later, Diane Nash) and Congress of Racial Equality, who comprised the Riders, were beaten, with one nearly killed by white supremacist mobs under the protection of the local police (while the federal government refused to intervene) and later imprisoned in the Mississippi State Penitentiary in Parchman. In June 1963, civil rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer was arrested in Winona, Mississippi, after sitting in a "whites only" section of a bus station restaurant and was nearly beaten to death by officers at the county jail. In March 1965, during the fifty-four-mile Selma-to-Montgomery march known as Bloody Sunday, Alabama state troopers tear-gassed marchers while beating them with nightsticks at the foot of the Edmund Pettus Bridge.

A month before, in Harlem, el-Hajj Malik el-Shabazz (formerly known as Malcolm X) was assassinated while under surveillance by the FBI and local police. In April 1968 King was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee, also while under federal and local surveillance. In December 1969 Fred Hampton, a revolutionary socialist who was a prominent organizer and chairman of the Black Panther Party's Illinois chapter, was killed by the Chicago Police Department, while being monitored by the FBI.<sup>1</sup> And after a warrant was issued for the arrest of Black Power activist and teacher Angela Davis in August 1970, FBI director J. Edgar Hoover included her in the agency's list of ten most-wanted fugitives. Davis, knowing of the many assassinations of prominent activists before her, feared for her life and went into hiding.

Prominent Black Panther Party leader Kathleen Cleaver lamented the dangerous proximity, and vulnerability, of Black activists—such as her then husband Eldridge Cleaver and Black Panther Party member Bobby Hutton—to agents of the state empowered to use deadly force. "Everywhere you turn you're encaged," she said at the Oakland, California, memorial service for Hutton, who was killed by policemen. "The very same police force that murdered Bobby Hutton in cold blood, deliberately, provided a funeral escort to the cemetery. The very same police force that attempted to assassinate Eldridge Cleaver is lining the highways from here to Vacaville, stacked deep."<sup>2</sup>



Fig. 1  
Faith Ringgold at the opening of "The People's Flag Show," Judson Memorial Church, New York, November 9, 1970

The sixties were mean but intriguing, wonderful but alienating, inspiring and godawful, productive but self-destructive, enlightening and confusing, informative and contradictory. We were all together and all apart. Everybody was a leader and everybody else was to follow. Everybody felt threatened. Many people couldn't keep up with the changes, and they were frightened by the rhetoric: "Get your shit together," "Niggers, are you ready?" and "Black is beautiful." We had never been called beautiful before. It was fashionable to be politically chic—"Have a Panther benefit at your cocktail party." This was a time when many people who thought their freedom was guaranteed found out that it just might depend on being able to afford the right lawyer and on how many people could be rallied in the street to make sure the media carried the story on the six o'clock news. "The Revolution will not be televised" was an early politically chic rap song, but even that was on television.  
—Faith Ringgold<sup>3</sup>

In 1969 the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition, a group of prominent African-American cultural figures, protested "Harlem on My Mind: The Cultural Capital of Black America, 1900–1968," an exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. The group's primary goal was to advocate, and agitate, for more African-American representation in the galleries, collections, and offices of the major art institutions that define and display what is considered the canon of American art. According to scholar and cultural critic Bridget R. Cooks:

At the center of one of the most controversial exhibitions in U.S. history were the Met's decisions to reject Harlem residents from participating in the exhibition planning and to exclude artwork by Harlem's thriving artist community from its galleries. Near the end of the Civil Rights Movement and the beginning of the Black Power Movement, Black culture emerged in the Metropolitan not as creative producer but as ethnographic study. The decisions to display African American people through oversized



Fig. 2  
Abbie Hoffman at the opening of "The People's Flag Show," Judson Memorial Church, New York, November 9, 1970

photo-murals and to dismiss their input and artwork as unworthy of being in the museum made *Harlem on My Mind* a site for racial politics and debates about artistic quality and art versus culture in the United States.<sup>4</sup>

The same could be said for the Whitney Museum of American Art a year earlier, when Ringgold was prominent among the artists protesting the exhibition "The 1930s: Painting and Sculpture in America." Entire eras of African-American (i.e., *American*) art were excluded from the exhibition, including Aaron Douglass and the entirety of the Harlem Renaissance, as well as artists working in the Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Project during the Great Depression, such as Augusta Savage, Richmond Barthé, and Charles Alston. What's more, the museum had yet to hire a Black curator. "Not one black artist was in the show, not even Jacob Lawrence, whose work was in the Whitney's permanent collection," Ringgold remembers. "The black art community was outraged, but they had been outraged before. What would they do now that the public protest demonstration was the new means of social expression in America? Just sit, or get off the pot?"<sup>5</sup>

Ringgold's words capture the urgency of the moment. Black activists who carried the Black radical tradition were being assassinated. Black communities in Harlem, Detroit, St. Louis, and every other city at the end of the Great Migration

north were increasingly disproportionately affected—socially, economically, and politically—by the failure of city, state, and federal governance to create equitable policies. Black artists, cultural workers, and their advocates took to the streets like those protesting the Vietnam War, continuing a war between Black people and systemic racism that dates back centuries, to the first of their ancestors who rebelled against institutional racism, then in the form of enslavement. For Ringgold, an artist and a teacher, institutional and canonical exclusion affected the very means by which she, and those she taught, survived. If governance did not live up to the promises of this democracy, why shouldn't it be the right of the artist to challenge it, to charge it, to take control of it and transform? And if the most brilliant Black activists were being murdered and jailed in the name of democracy, why not use the radical Black imagination to find solutions to these crises?

On Sunday, November 17, 1968, Ringgold stood with her daughters, Barbara and Michele Wallace, and some thirty other protesters (including artists Romare Bearden, Tom Lloyd, William T. Williams, and Black Emergency Cultural Coalition members Benny Andrews and Camille Billops) outside the Whitney, on Madison Avenue and 79th Street, with picket signs made at Ringgold's Spectrum Gallery a few blocks away. There were signs that demanded a Black art show at the museum, others that called for a show of works by Bearden, and one made by Ringgold that carried the insurgent spirit of Black Power: "Black Is Beautiful."

The climate in the States was changing in 1967 from the Civil Rights period to the beginnings of the Black Revolution. Clayton Powell Jr. and Stokely Carmichael had yelled and proclaimed, "Black Power!" And everybody went crazy: "What do you mean, 'black power'? We'd never heard of it. Black? How could black have power?" It was a very exciting time, when we realized that you're not going to get anywhere in this world unless you have power. It was recognizing a freedom of identity that we had never had before. Even though we were only ten percent of the population, a very small group, it did not matter. What's wrong with black power? It's good. And then it was "Black Power, every hour!" We were saying those words and I can remember at that time the word "black" was feared by many black people. We all got very excited because America was the land of freedom and so on, we had so many strong leaders who were really willing to give their lives to achieve freedom and many of them did.

—Faith Ringgold<sup>6</sup>

Ringgold had been using the American flag in her paintings since 1964 to protest racism and sexism, troubling issues with real world consequences, lying at the very root of American democracy. In "The People's Flag Show," she exhibited three paintings: *American People Series #13: God Bless America* (1964) [p. 30], *American People Series #18: The Flag Is Bleeding* (1967) [pp. 44–45], and *Black Light Series #10: Flag for the Moon: Die Nigger* (1969) [p. 61]. Each work offers a particular vision of



Fig. 3  
Supporters of the Judson Three (Faith Ringgold, Jean Toche, and Jon Hendricks) picket US flag desecration laws outside the Federal Court Building at Foley Square in New York, February 16, 1971

organized to raise money for our defense; people sent letters; and there were petitions of support from art communities all over the world."<sup>8</sup>

When they were found guilty the following year, they were required to pay a fine of one hundred dollars each or serve a thirty-day sentence in jail. Eventually, all charges were dropped, thanks to assistance from the American Civil Liberties Union. While there had been more "offensive" works included in the show—one with the flag immersed in a toilet, and another where it covered a penis [Fig. 2]—as co-organizers of the exhibition, they had clearly been targeted, and their arrest was meant to make a statement, if not a threat. While Ringgold, Hendricks, and Toche had intended for the show to call attention to, and contest, flag desecration laws, they now found themselves prosecuted under them.

Ringgold's painting *Flag for the Moon: Die Nigger* gets to the heart of the matter. The painting expresses the artist's exasperation and concern regarding the billions of dollars spent on the US space program while millions of Americans lived in poverty. What's more, placed within the flag's stars is the word "die," and within the stripes, the word "nigger" can be read. With its bitter juxtaposition of a symbol of liberty and words of hate, the work is simultaneously existential and true to anyone with an understanding of the treatment of African Americans in this country, from the Middle Passage to hundreds of years of chattel slavery, through legal segregation, and extending to the 2020 murders of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd.

Gil Scott-Heron's spoken-word poem "Whitey on the Moon," released in 1970, a year after Ringgold made her painting, presents a series of striking contrasts of African-American life within this democracy, covering issues such as medical debt, poverty, bills, inequitably rising inflation, and pestilence.

A rat done bit my sister Nell.  
(with Whitey on the moon)  
Her face and arms began to swell.  
(and Whitey's on the moon)

I can't pay no doctor bill.  
(but Whitey's on the moon)  
Ten years from now I'll be paying still.  
(while Whitey's on the moon)

The man just upped my rent last night.  
('cause Whitey's on the moon)  
No hot water, no toilets, no lights.  
(but Whitey's on the moon)

I wonder why he's upping me?  
('cause Whitey's on the moon?)  
I was already paying him fifty a week.  
(with Whitey on the moon)

Taxes taking my whole damn check,  
Junkies making me a nervous wreck,



Fig. 4  
The Judson Three (from left: Jean Toche, Jon Hendricks, and Faith Ringgold) at the benefit to repay the costs of their defense, Leo Castelli Gallery, New York, February 4, 1972

The price of food is going up,  
And as if all that shit wasn't enough:

A rat done bit my sister Nell.  
(with Whitey on the moon)  
Her face and arm began to swell.  
(but Whitey's on the moon)

Was all that money I made last year  
(for Whitey on the moon?)  
How come there ain't no money here?  
(Hmm! Whitey's on the moon)

Y'know I just about had my fill.  
(of Whitey on the moon)  
I think I'll send these doctor bills,  
Airmail special  
(to Whitey on the moon)<sup>9</sup>

Each stanza is an indictment of the discrepancies between the dream of space travel and the harsh realities of racism and poverty here on Earth. During the late 1960s, the US government, between the Cold War and COINTELPRO, sponsored wars abroad and at home, and by the end of the decade, the Johnson administration was aggressively funding the space program (an extension of Cold War-era competition), all while many Americans were thinking about their empty stomachs. On July 16, 1969, five months before Hampton was assassinated in Chicago, Apollo 11 launched from Cape Kennedy, Florida. The total cost of the Apollo program was \$25.4 billion at a time when twenty-four million Americans were living below the poverty line, African Americans comprising a disproportional percentage of this number.<sup>10</sup> Ringgold was arrested for telling the truth.

While the Apollo capsule was navigating the blackness of space, Black people were navigating the inherent biases and legacies of slave and segregationist laws. What does it mean for a people who were not considered lawful human beings to think the flag would, or will, protect them as citizens? And what does it mean for a Black person to pledge allegiance to that flag? What loyalty are we assuming, and exactly what loyalty was being shown to Black people? The flag is but a collection of memories, stars bound together as metaphors for the remembrance of the fraught unity of disparate laws and land. The 238,900 miles between Earth and the Moon is psychically no longer than the last stretch of field for the enslaved between slave and free states. Ringgold's flag represents a topography of the caste America has placed African Americans in, as well as a Jim Crow sound impression ("Die, nigger!") of the racism ingrained in the nation's psyche, dating back to the first of the enslaved who arrived on the colonial shores of Virginia in 1619.

*Flag for the Moon: Die Nigger* is part of the *Black Light Series*, in which Ringgold explores the notion of Black Power as a painterly aesthetic. As Michele Wallace notes, Black militancy became more and more of a theme after the murder of Martin Luther King Jr.: "King's death served to inspire a hardening of positions among many black progressives and the tendency to disassociate themselves from peaceful means of protest and passive resistance."<sup>11</sup> While Ringgold wanted to capture a "black is beautiful" sense of ourselves, she, in line with this spirit of protest, also sought to revolutionize the formal aspects of representing Black people in painting by creating a technique in which different combinations of black pigment, rather than white, became sources of light.<sup>12</sup>

By translating the cultural significance and revolutionary import of radical Blackness as an approach to color theory, the artist was also able to create a space for herself in the Black Power movement as a Black woman. "My own need to feel a sense of personal as well as public power was in direct contrast to a world that ignored women of all races," she remembers. "For me the concept of Black Power carried with it a big question mark. Was it intended only for the black men or would black women have power, too?"<sup>13</sup> Ringgold, in creating an answer to this question, was able to summon tensions between colors to address the societal tensions between civil rights and Black Power activists and against forms of social, legal, and institutional racism—utilizing the very aesthetic traditions of paintings that privileged Europeans and the representation of lighter skin to empower portrayals of Black people, aesthetically and culturally. Ringgold invented mixtures of paint that evoked the stark Black Power rhetoric that brought community-based concerns and "presences" to the fore (think of the tension in Heron's poem and the frank tonal colors of Davis's many speeches).

With *Flag for the Moon: Die Nigger*, Ringgold was also in conversation with Jasper Johns and his own paintings based on the American flag [Fig. 5]. As she states about Johns's influence on her earlier work *The Flag Is Bleeding*, but which is also relevant here: "I was partially inspired by Jasper Johns's flag series for two reasons—I liked the regularity of the position of the



Fig. 5  
Jasper Johns, *Flag*, 1954–55. Encaustic, oil, and collage on fabric mounted on plywood, three panels, 42 1/4 x 60 5/8 in (107.3 x 153.8 cm)

color, generates an effect that complements, and brings out, the complex undertones within dark skin. Ringgold, through research and developing this new painterly technique, uses skin tonality as a narrative tool to invite a more complex reading of character. In an era of intense civil rights activism, and just a few years removed from de jure Jim Crow segregation, *US America Black* reveals Ringgold's understanding and witnessing of Black life that centers emotional vulnerability as a form of radical power and provocation. Ringgold's version of social revolution was born of her own experiencing of the world, as well as participation in real world protests and the creation of an aesthetic that made room in the antiwar and Black Power movements no one expected her to take.

1 Jeffrey Haas, *The Assassination of Fred Hampton: How the FBI and the Chicago Police Murdered a Black Panther* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2019), 176.

According to Haas, "Although Hoover consistently sought to defame and discredit Dr. King and other black leaders and organizations, it was the Panthers whom Hoover labeled 'the biggest threat to the security of the United States. We had copies of the FBI memos in which Hoover ordered FBI agents to attack the Panthers with 'hard-hitting programs to destroy, disrupt, and neutralize' them. These directives, including using local police to achieve their aims, were contained in the FBI documents released by the antiwar protesters who carried out the burglary of the FBI's office in Media, Pennsylvania. . . . We understood that Fred, with his charismatic appeal, bringing hundreds of young blacks into the movement, was a threat. Why wouldn't Hoover perceive that as well? Of course he did. The question was what he did do to 'neutralize' Fred?"

2 Kathleen Cleaver, speech delivered at the memorial service for Bobby Hutton, Merritt Park, Oakland, CA, April 12, 1968, transcript, <http://americanradioworks.pubicradio.org/features/blackspeech/kcleaver.html>.

3 Faith Ringgold, *We Flew over the Bridge: The Memoirs of Faith Ringgold* (Boston: Bulfinch Press, 1995), 165.

4 Bridget R. Cooks, "Black Artists and Activism: Harlem on My Mind (1969)," *American Studies* 48, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 5–6.

5 Ringgold, *We Flew*, 165–66.

6 Faith Ringgold, "Hans Ulrich Obrist in Conversation with Faith Ringgold," in *Faith Ringgold* (London: Serpentine Galleries and Koenig Books, 2020), 33.

7 Ringgold, *We Flew*, 181.

8 Ibid., 186.

9 Gil Scott-Heron, "Whitey on the Moon," track 9 on *Small Talk at 125th and Lenox*, Flying Dutchman Records, 1970.

10 U.S. Department of Commerce/Bureau of the Census, "24 Million Americans: Poverty in the United States: 1969," *Current Population Reports*, series P-60, no. 75 (Washington, DC, 1969): 1.

11 Michele Wallace, "American People, Black Light: Faith Ringgold's Paintings of the 1960s," in *American People, Black Light: Faith Ringgold's Paintings of the 1960s*, ed. Thom Collins and Tracy Fitzpatrick (New York: Neuberger Museum of Art), 38.

12 Lisa E. Farrington, *Faith Ringgold*, vol. 3, *The David C. Driskell Series of African American Art* (San Francisco: Pomegranate, 2004), 33. As Farrington notes, "Through *The Black Light Series*, Ringgold investigated ways in which to use black pigment as a metaphor for race, or as she said, as 'a way of expressing on canvas the new 'black is beautiful' sense of ourselves.'"

13 Ringgold, *We Flew*, 158.

14 Ibid.

Posters

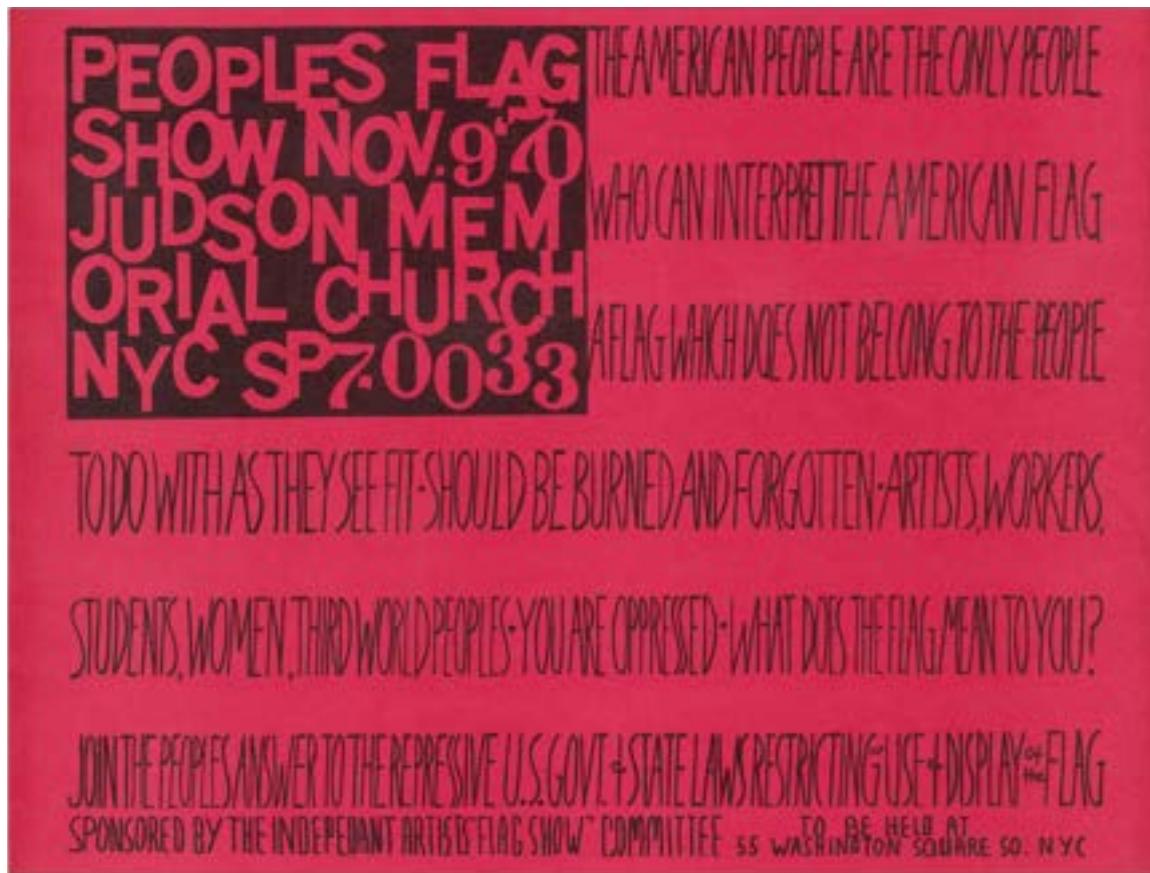


Committee to Defend the Panthers, 1970  
Cut-and-pasted colored paper, pencil, and presstype  
on paper  
33 ¾ x 27 ¾ in (85.7 x 70.5 cm)



All Power to the People, 1970  
Cut-and-pasted colored paper, pencil, and presstype  
on paper  
30 x 20 in (76.2 x 50.8 cm)

X



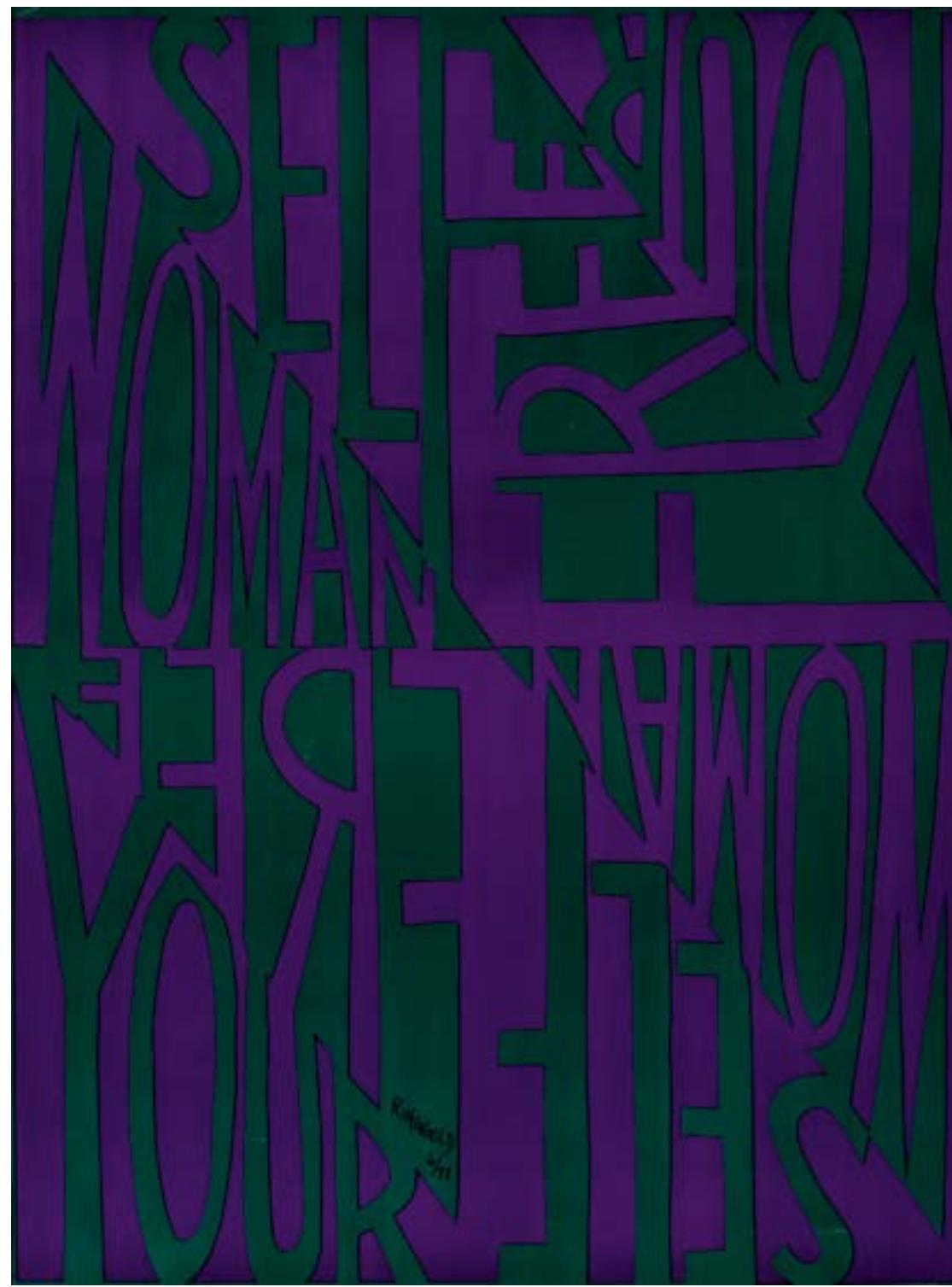
People's Flag Show, 1970  
Offset lithograph  
18 x 24 in (45.7 x 61 cm)



The Judson 3, 1970  
Offset lithograph  
18 x 24 in (45.7 x 61 cm)

X

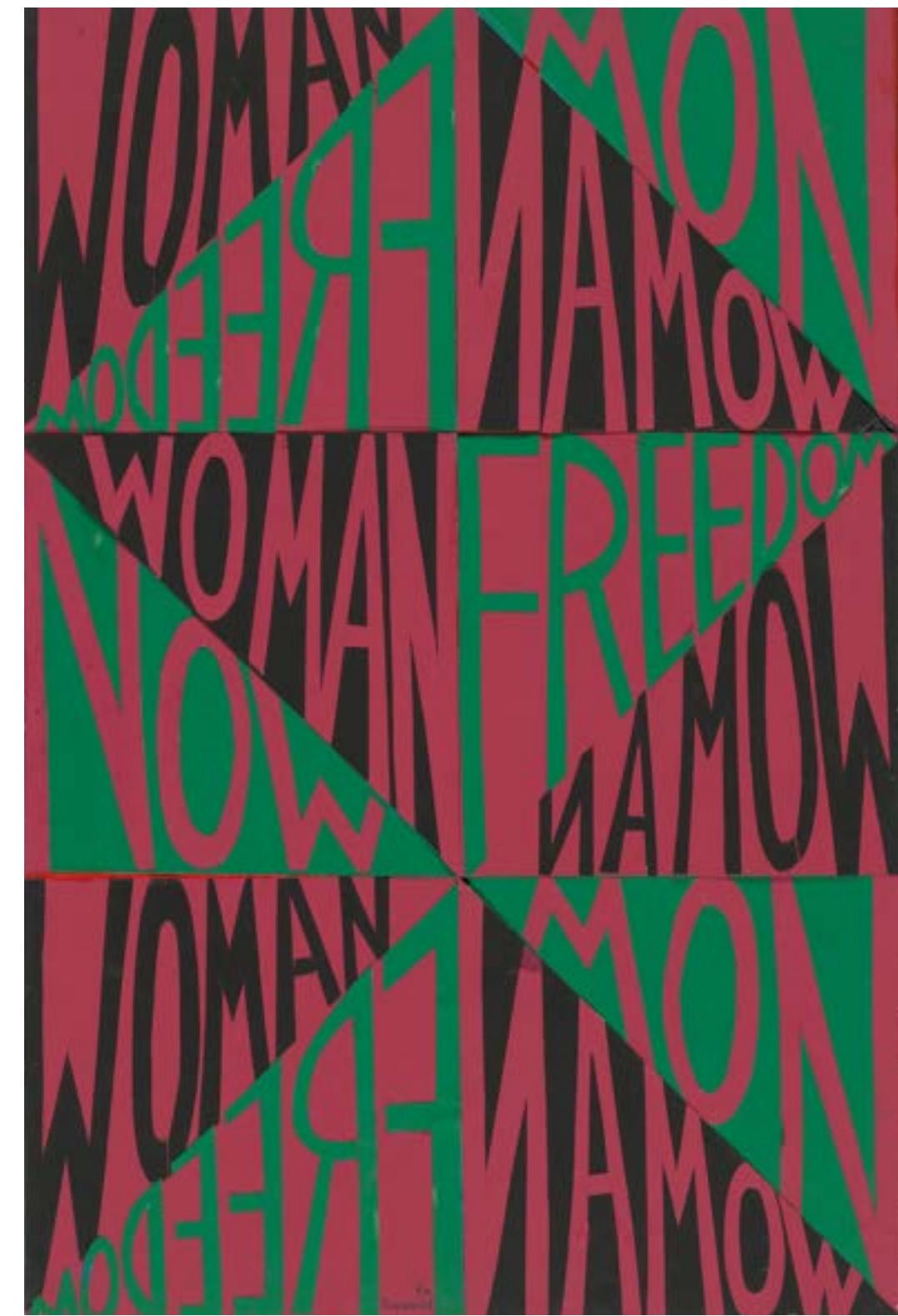
X



Woman Free Yourself, 1971

Offset lithograph  
24 1/8 x 18 1/8 (61.3 x 46 cm)

X



Woman Freedom Now, 1971

Cut-and-pasted colored paper on board  
30 x 20 in (76.2 x 50.8 cm)

X



Women Free Angela, 1971

Offset lithograph  
30 x 20 in (76.2 x 50.8 cm)

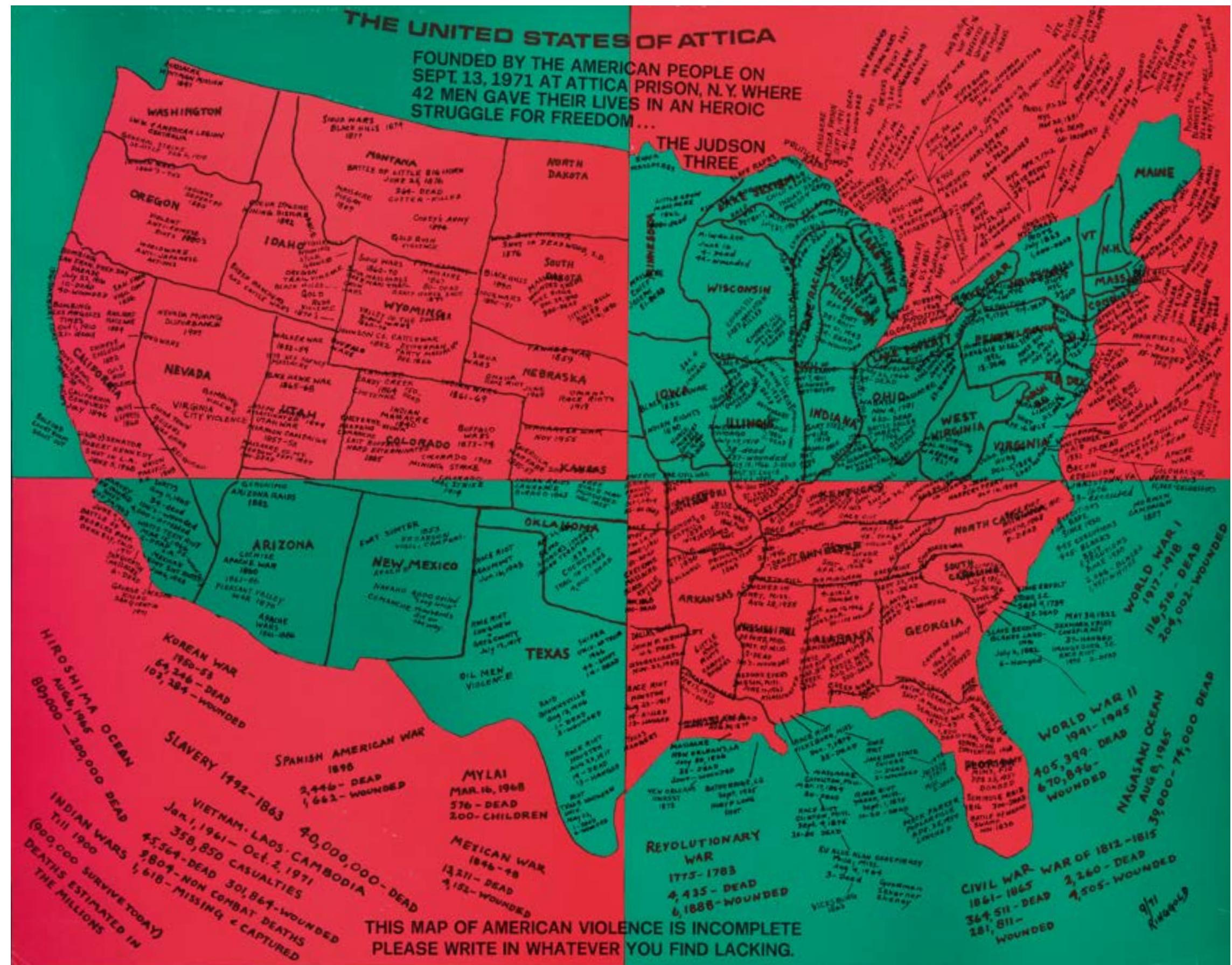
X



America Free Angela, 1971

Offset lithograph  
30 x 20 in (76.2 x 50.8 cm)

X



#### **United States of Attica, 1972**

#### Offset lithograph

Offset lithograph  
21 5/8 x 27 3/8 in (54.9 x 69.5 cm)

For the Women's House



For the Women's House, 1971

Oil on canvas  
96 x 96 in (243.8 x 243.8 cm)

# For a Children's Revolution

Julia Bryan-Wilson

In 1981 Faith Ringgold created one of the graphically striking posters that—alongside her sculptures, quilts, and paintings—she has become globally known for. Regardless of medium, Ringgold's work since the 1960s has consistently addressed pressing concerns related to Black feminism, and her posters are charged with the special task of conveying specific information about timely issues. In bold, all-caps text, "SAVE OUR CHILDREN IN ATLANTA" [Fig. 1] runs down the central column of the work, in which Ringgold carefully lists the names and ages of the twenty-eight Black children and young people who were murdered during a terrifying two-year span in Atlanta, from 1979 to 1981. (Though Wayne Bertram Williams was convicted of two of these murders, much about this brutal killing spree remains unknown.) Under the final name in this tragic list, a handwritten text states, "This is a commemoration to all those wantonly slain in the dawning of life. Make it impossible for the sins of hate and indifference to persist in America. Stop child murders!"

These textual elements are incorporated into a gridded design that includes a photograph of a mixed-media sculpture by Ringgold, *Atlanta* [p. 53], also from 1981, that includes over twenty small stuffed wire-wrapped figures. Their mournful dark faces with white features, drawn from the visual language of African diasporic masking traditions that have long been important to Ringgold, are turned upward, with fearful-seeming eyes and plaintive open mouths. Each figure has an attached tag with a name and photo of one of the Atlanta child murder victims, and the artist has positioned them on the black squares of a black-and-white checkerboard, as if the children are manipulated like pawns in a game.

Ringgold has highlighted children and youth in her work from the very beginning of her career as an artist. From her lauded work as a prolific children's book author and illustrator, to her production and marketing of dolls, to her depictions of children in many of her artworks, Ringgold's multifaceted address to young people takes place both within and outside the exclusionary spaces of the museum/gallery nexus, and has ramifications far beyond the fine art world. Not only do young girls and boys appear frequently as a subject or theme within her art, but she has also nurtured children as some of her primary witnesses. There is no other contemporary artist who has so insistently and seriously cultivated children as viewers,



Fig. 1  
Faith Ringgold, *Save Our Children in Atlanta*, 1981. Poster, 20 × 14 in (50.8 × 35.6 cm)

understanding them as a crucial, and political, audience for her artistic practice.

This essay explores how the figure of the child within Ringgold's work is decidedly racialized and gendered, as the artist takes what Patricia Hill Collins calls a "Black women's standpoint on mothering."<sup>7</sup> Further, shifting away from a purely iconographic reading, I also propose that the child/mother relationship to which Ringgold persistently returns is essential to the artist's theories about spectatorship, and her approach to art as a critical agent of change has motivated an expanded sense of what "art" is that includes forms of making and distribution that have been understudied within art history, including dolls

and kid's books. Within this wide-ranging oeuvre, children are positioned as vulnerable subjects in need of protection due to their age but simultaneously as full-fledged, powerful individuals who are capable of catalyzing social movements. For Ringgold, motherhood and childhood are potentially revolutionary forces; these "parental politics," to use her phrase, are part and parcel of her wider commitments to gendered labor, Black feminist caretaking, maternal epistemologies, and intergenerational pedagogy, which have shaped her work from the outset.<sup>2</sup>

## Maternal Pedagogies

In her 1995 memoir *We Flew over the Bridge*, Ringgold writes, "We are a family of teachers," and she gives a detailed history of her grandfather's lifelong dedication to education.<sup>3</sup> Her own experience as a teacher included decades working in the New York public school system, teaching art classes for children as young as second grade, as well as fifteen years spent as a professor at the University of California, San Diego, from 1987 to 2002. At the same time that she invested in such institutional forms of training, her own art education was a mix of formal and informal; she holds a degree from the City College in New York and learned to sew from her mother, Willi Posey, using their old-school foot-pedal Singer machine. Posey worked during World War II in a defense factory sewing jackets for the military and made extra money creating clothes for friends after-hours at home; she later became a respected fashion designer in Harlem at the forefront of Black women's self-determination through garments.<sup>4</sup>

As Ringgold recounts, "Mother would give me scraps of fabric or pieces of patterns she had discarded and I would sew them together in an attempt to make outlandish-looking shoes and pocket-books."<sup>5</sup> This passing down of knowledge between women, from grandmother to mother to girl, is common for the transmission of textile techniques, and these at-home educational models are as crucial for keeping handicraft skills alive as are credentialed art programs or home economics courses. Later Ringgold collaborated with her mother on several textile-based art projects, starting when Posey created the intricate patchwork borders for Ringgold's groundbreaking *tankas*, begun in 1972, which were inspired by sacred Tibetan paintings. These fabric-backed works were appealing to the artist for practical as well as aesthetic reasons—she found she could fold up, pack, and transport her paintings as easily as she could her daughter's clothing.<sup>6</sup>

The *tanka* format was extended in Ringgold's *Slave Rape* series from 1972 [pp. 96–99], which also included Posey's patchwork fabric borders. The series recognizes how, because of the slave trade, Black motherhood has often been marked by violence, coercion, and dehumanized commodification but can also be for Black women artists a source of tremendous power. In her book *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery*, Jennifer L. Morgan demonstrates that the economic and ideological structures of slavery were dependent upon Black

women's labor in both senses of the word—both their working bodies in the fields and their reproductive capacities.<sup>7</sup> Of the *Slave Rape* series, Lisa Farrington states, "Ringgold is able to acknowledge the vulnerability of these African women while simultaneously asserting their active resistance to victimization."<sup>8</sup> Their bodies occupy the frames of the pieces, and some stare back out at the viewer; even more assertively, in *Slave Rape #3: Fight to Save Your Life* [p. 99], a woman wields an ax that hangs just below her rounded pregnant belly.

Posey also sewed many of the outfits—what the artist calls costumes—for Ringgold's mask sculptures, such as the *Family of Woman Mask Series* begun in 1973 and her 1975 "portrait masks" of Adam Clayton Powell Jr. and Martin Luther King Jr. Her mother's example continued to be integral to Ringgold's development as an artist throughout the 1970s as she experimented with incorporating her mask pieces into live performance and when she traveled to Africa for the first time in 1976. In 1979 Posey and Ringgold worked together to produce and sell a series of dolls wearing an array of culturally distinctive clothing called *Sew Real Soft Sculpture*. Their outfits include African-American styles, "Asian dolls and Latino dolls and African ones," as well as ones sporting Iranian outfits.<sup>9</sup> Given that the racialized "doll test" (in which Black children expressed preference for white dolls) was central to *Brown v. Board of Education*'s desegregation of US schools in 1954, Posey and Ringgold setting out to make Black dolls—and Asian dolls and Latinx dolls and Iranian dolls—desirable for children of any race is a pointedly political act. These collaboratively made dolls were produced in part to expand Ringgold's audience; as she states, she was "determined to find a stable market for my art."<sup>10</sup> Such a stable market was eluding her due to the persistent devaluation of her art as a Black woman who had to fight against both racism and sexism. In response, she sought to make her creations more broadly accessible outside the realm of high art; they were also meant to convey simple but important lessons in cross-racial understanding as they enhanced children's appreciation of, and respect for, international differences in self-fashioning. However, because the dolls were labor- and time-intensive to produce by hand, they cost a couple of hundred dollars each, out of reach for many who wanted them, and the venture did not ultimately succeed in the large-scale popularizing of Ringgold's work that she had envisioned.

Posey and Ringgold's dolls echo objects made by Black women artists who likewise geared their work toward different audiences, including young people. For instance, Alma Thomas—who, like Ringgold, began her career teaching art—made elaborate marionettes that served as teaching tools for her high school students. In 1934 Thomas wrote her Columbia University master's thesis on puppet theater as a pedagogical tool, entitled "The Marionette Show as a Correlating Activity in the Public Schools."<sup>11</sup> She utilized a range of skills to construct these lively figures, including sculpting their component parts, handmaking their clothing, and engineering their assembly. Thomas and her students staged productions such as *Alice in Wonderland* with the marionettes, which served dual purposes, demonstrating her many



Fig. 2  
Benny Andrews with his child at the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition protest at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, January 31, 1971

artistic proficiencies across genres and serving a pedagogical role as well.<sup>12</sup>

Growing out of their shared labor on the dolls, Ringgold's famed quilts started as a collaboration with her mother in 1980, with the piece *Echoes of Harlem* [p. 114]; after Posey's death, Ringgold commenced making acrylic-on-canvas and pieced-fabric story quilts, beginning with one dedicated to the fraught motif of Aunt Jemima, *Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima?* (1983) [p.115]. Using a checkerboard pattern to organize the story told in text and images, the artist describes a fully fleshed-out life and family of the titular businesswoman, Jemima Blakey, shifting the discourse away from perceiving the figure as a flat, denigrating stereotype and recasting her as a working mother. Farrington discusses how Ringgold's work differs from that of other Black artists who have appropriated the image of Aunt Jemima, because she endeavors to flesh out an imagined life for her.<sup>13</sup> And it is important to recognize that Ringgold not only inserts Jemima into a larger genealogy of mothers, but also pays homage to Black maternity in her art by incorporating her mother's own handiwork when she developed her story quilts.

### Political Education

Along with absorbing her mother's lessons, within her artwork Ringgold thematized the extrainstitutional fine art education she gave to her own daughters when they were growing up. In story quilts such as *Dancing at the Louvre* (1991) [p. 185] from *The French Collection* (1991–97) [pp. 185–207], a series that cumulatively tells a fictional tale of a Black woman in Paris, Ringgold intentionally utilizes folkloric styles and craft techniques to challenge hierarchies of "high" versus "low" culture, hierarchies that have long perpetuated bias against non-white forms of making and women's work. In *Dancing at the Louvre* Ringgold tells a story in which the main character of the series, Willia Marie Simone, is taken to the Louvre by a friend who has three daughters. Dancing together under a trio of canonical Western paintings by European men, including Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* and versions of Madonna and child, the five joyous Black females provide a counternarrative to the representations of white femininity on offer in the museum. (For an insightful account of Ringgold's relationship to museums, see Bridget R. Cooks's essay in this volume, "Inside and Outside the Museum" [pp. 124–29].) Instead of portraying the care of children as strictly the purview of mothers, Ringgold articulates a more capacious and collaborative vision of maternal love that includes extended familial formations outside the normative couple. The quilt centers a Black girl as the focal point of the image, and her smiling face and outstretched arms—her legs swinging in the air as she is kept aloft between two women—serve as a marked contrast to the inscrutability and framed bodily reserve of the *Mona Lisa*.

For Ringgold the site of the museum was an ideological battleground upon which she waged fights about legitimacy and access, particularly for Black women. Her well-known and influential art world activism starting in the late 1960s included her leadership in many pivotal organizations and protest efforts against the white supremacist policies of the Whitney Museum of American Art and New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), such as the Art Workers' Coalition (AWC), the United Black Artists' Committee, the Ad Hoc Women Artists' Committee, and Women Students and Artists for Black Art Liberation (WSABAL), which Ringgold created with her daughter Michele Wallace.

Ringgold began her activism in earnest when she picketed the Whitney's 1968 exhibition "The 1930s: Painting and Sculpture in America," a show that included not one Black artist. She was pivotal to this organizing effort, speaking at rallies, making signs, alerting the media, attending protests and meetings, and more. As she remarks in her memoir, "I knew, and many others also knew, that I was the originator of the first black demonstration against a major museum in New York City."<sup>14</sup> She went on to participate in the AWC while also agitating against the fact that the group was overwhelmingly composed of white men.<sup>15</sup> With artist Tom Lloyd, she decried the outrageous dominance of white male artists within museum walls and pressed for lasting structural change that included more Black curators and a disinvestment of museum boards from corporations that



Fig. 3  
Emory Douglas, *We Shall Survive Without a Doubt*, 1971

supported the Vietnam War. In November 1970, a letter from MoMA director John Hightower to Ringgold admitted, "I can say that you and Tom Lloyd . . . have made an enormous difference in the outlook of the Museum of Modern Art."<sup>16</sup> Because of Ringgold's efforts to have the AWC include more planks related to gender and race that were sensitive to working mothers, it successfully urged MoMA to expand its offerings of children's educational programming.

Ringgold was also a central player in one of the most high-profile art events to happen during the Vietnam War—"The People's Flag Show" of November 1970, which was organized by a large committee of more than two hundred artists, at Judson Memorial Church in New York. Ringgold had long used the US flag as a critical motif in her own work, and she participated in this open-call, unjuried exhibition as part of her commitment to free expression and to protest ongoing US aggression abroad. It was meant to be a provocative exhibition: on opening night, a version of Yvonne Rainer's famed dance *Trio A* was performed, and the dancers tied flags over their otherwise naked bodies. On November 13, 1970, Ringgold was arrested,

along with Jon Hendricks and Jean Toche of the Guerrilla Art Action Group, and the three were charged with desecrating the flag. Ringgold was not initially targeted by the local police; her daughter Michele was, but Ringgold intervened, telling them, "She's a minor and I'm her mother."<sup>17</sup> Once again maternity was pivotal to her history. The so-called Judson Three quickly became a cause célèbre, raising thousands of dollars for their defense—they were each fined one hundred dollars, a penalty that was later thrown out—but Ringgold "felt like a scapegoat" and turned her attentions more decisively to finding sustaining collaborations and solidarity with other Black women.<sup>18</sup>

WSABAL was founded in part to address the fact that many white women refused to acknowledge the racism within their own ranks. "There is racism in the Women's Movement and black women should be attacking it," Ringgold declared in a 1976 *Ms. Magazine* article by Lucy R. Lippard.<sup>19</sup> As this demonstrates, Ringgold has always had an insistently intersectional approach to her analysis and her activism. She and Wallace as a mother-daughter team were at the forefront of picket lines, letter-writing campaigns, and demonstrations in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In this vision of political parenting, Ringgold was not alone. Other Black artists affiliated with groups like the AWC, including Lloyd and Benny Andrews, brought their children with them to museum protests [Fig. 2], nourishing new, radical circuits of social reproduction.

Along with agitating for such restructuring, Ringgold also actively sought alternatives to the mainstream art world and was a founding member of the Where We At collective of Black women artists, a feminist group that grasped the interconnected struggles faced by women of color. When Where We At issued a six-point list of demands at "Are Museums Relevant to Women?", a 1971 event that Ringgold co-organized at the Brooklyn Museum, the collective's second point (after demanding more exhibitions by Black women artists) was that "the museum should provide day-care centers or children's workshops so that mothers can attend classes."<sup>20</sup> In other words, Where We At pressed museums to offer a far more comprehensive support system for the work of women that included acknowledging the labor they perform as mothers. These organizing efforts were a critical component of Ringgold's far-reaching efforts to insist upon Black motherhood as a space of resistance, despite some men in the late 1960s insinuating that "mother was the undisputed enemy of all revolutionary ideas."<sup>21</sup>

Considering her singular efforts to redefine art to include the "women's work" of craft-based textiles and her crucial role in redefining who an "art worker" might be, Ringgold, perhaps more than anyone else, redefined artistic labor in the United States in the late twentieth century. In my own research on the AWC and on textiles, Ringgold has been a vital presence, and it is not overstating the case to say that her work has underpinned entire theorizations of artistic labor, insisting upon a classed, raced, gendered conception of what artistic effort and valuation look like. Modern Western art history has been shaped by sexist and racist assumptions about what can and cannot be defined as art, and Ringgold's defiant assertion of her *tankas* and story

quilts as art challenged prevailing ideas that quilts (mostly made by women) were inferior as aesthetic objects. In this she was at the forefront of a larger conversation within the feminist art movement. With items like her mass-market dolls, she also importantly sought out realms of making whose principal addressees were not found in the gallery or museum.<sup>22</sup> Through her art practice and activism, she advocated for a redefinition of work that includes the physical skills inherent to textile craft, the collective struggles of those who occupy a subjugated position within an exploitative economic system, and the labor of motherhood.

### Black Childhood Matters

The “child” for Ringgold is not a simplistic universal category of innocence and purity. Rather, childhood is a pivotal, transitory life stage in which young people experience a wealth of sensory input, test boundaries, and learn how to reshape themselves within ever-changing environments. Her teacherly commitment to and respect for the whole child, one who is capable of complex emotions and high-level thinking, can be seen in works such as *American People Series #15: Hide Little Children* (1966) [pp. 40–41]. In this painting, created the year her daughters started attending a new school, Ringgold thematized her “concern for our safety in the context of integration in the North,” Wallace writes. Peering from within a thicket of green foliage are the faces of children—two Black and three white. Though they are smiling, their smiles are somewhat tight and unreadable, and the title suggests a lingering atmosphere of menace. Wallace continues:

When this painting emerged and [my mother] explained that it was about us and our white friends, it gave me a good feeling because I read its message as highly protective. Our play and thus our relationships were hidden from view in an idyllic landscape, but as in William Blake’s notion of childhood and innocence, it wasn’t going to be possible to grow up, venture out and hold on to that innocence at the same time.<sup>23</sup>

Ringgold and Wallace both have a keen grasp of the ways that children in the United States are ruthlessly stratified and classified by race and gender, with Black children “adultified” by racist policing and racist school systems that persistently refuse them their youth.

Though in his book *No Future*, the white male queer theorist Lee Edelman famously scorned the fetishization of “the child” as the horizon for reproductive hope—hailed as the potential for future generations—his focus is almost exclusively on the white child. Edelman’s argument does not adequately take into account class stratifications and racial differences that make the “child” designation complex and unevenly applied.<sup>24</sup> For who gets to be a child? Not Trayvon Martin. Not Tamir Rice. Not the Black boys and girls who are treated as threats, conscripted at an early age into the categories of “man” and “woman,” with

all the responsibilities and none of the privileges. Theorist Christina Sharpe writes about the deadly “adultification” of African-American children in the aftermath of slavery, noting that “because Black children are not seen as children and the corral of ‘urban youth’ holds them outside of the category of the child, they are offered more trauma by the state and state actors. . . . And they are certainly not offered the new world or ways toward imagining it that their, that our, circumstances demand.”<sup>25</sup> Ringgold’s work offers ways toward imagining what Sharpe calls “the new world,” and in order to do so, she meets children—not least Black children—where they are, not only in her utilization of so-called naive figurative styles that she consciously deploys for the sake of readability for all ages, but also in her creation of inexpensive toys and books.

For Ringgold, art can be linked to revolutionary politics only if it reaches beyond the usual audiences for art. As she stated in her comments at the opening of “The People’s Flag Show” in 1970, “All of the arts . . . is trying (feeble in most instances) to be relevant, and in so doing, artists must “begin to politicize, to revolutionize their art, to embrace the people in the street.”<sup>26</sup> “The people in the street” is key here: art must be populist, widely available and legible to all. One facet of this commitment to “the people in the street” has been Ringgold’s repeated return to the poster as a genre. The first poster she ever made, from July 1970, was for the Committee to Defend the Black Panthers [p. 74], but it was never reproduced, since she mistakenly included the organization’s local address when the group was trying to remain undercover. Her support for the Panthers is notable since that organization, too, believed strongly in the political power of the child and pioneered free breakfast programs for children, health clinics for families, and educational initiatives such as after-school study as vital components of Black organizing and community care.<sup>27</sup> Black Panther minister of propaganda Emory Douglas likewise utilized children in many of his designs for the Panthers’ newspaper; for example, in his now-iconic collage *We Shall Survive Without a Doubt* (1971) [Fig. 3], a young Black boy with sunglasses and a radiant grin is juxtaposed with other photographs of children receiving support from the organization’s services. The child might be presented as an emblem of endurance and hopeful promise for the future, but he is also tethered to present conditions of drastic inequality.

Some of Ringgold’s works depict charged moments of cross-racial interaction involving children in which they, too, are inextricably woven into the fabric of society, with all its damages and violence. Two children, one white and one Black, cling to each other in the midst of the bloody mayhem of *American People Series #20: Die* (1967) [pp. 48–51]; they huddle together for mutual comfort as the adults rampage across the canvas. To witness the brutality of this work is its own kind of education, and in her memoir Ringgold reproduces a photograph of schoolchildren in front of her painting, confronting its imagery. And in *The Flag is Bleeding #2: The American Collection #6* (1997) [p. 220], two Black girls, their fragility emphasized because they are naked, cling to the skirt of a woman as blood gushes from her breasts. Ringgold’s many iterations of the US flag connect

to her work with political textiles and also to her interest in pedagogy—for pledging allegiance to the flag is a central scene of a child’s education, illustrating how kids are subject to ideological training from the moment they step into a classroom.

The landmark 1991 publication of Ringgold’s award-winning children’s book *Tar Beach* began a different chapter in her innovative career; to date she has written and illustrated a total of seventeen books for children that offer significant lessons in African-American and US history. Featuring beautifully rendered scenes in which Black children are founts of fantasy and imagination, her books touch on topics such as the Underground Railroad (*Aunt Harriet’s Underground Railroad in the Sky*, 1992), immigration (*We Came to America*, 2016), and the Harlem Renaissance (*Harlem Renaissance Party*, 2015). In a return to the strategy of making widely available dolls that she and her mother had attempted in 1979, she designed a doll to accompany *Tar Beach*, materially extending its portrayal of Black family life filled with love, abundance, and adventure to a toy that can be cherished and cared for. Within her books and artworks, Ringgold elaborates upon how childhood is a threshold to adulthood, and her experiments with narrative in the story quilts, as well as their unique visual style, are honed to be accessible to audiences across various developmental stages.

For Ringgold, children are not just passive vessels ready to be filled. She recounts how she was first made aware of the works of James Baldwin through one of her students (Baldwin’s younger sister) in a New York junior high school.<sup>28</sup> Toward the conclusion of *We Flew over the Bridge*, Ringgold discusses the revolutionary education that her own work (whether encountered in a museum or a toy store) passes on to children. She writes,

I now have the sweet good fortune of an audience of children who will grow up knowing that an artist does not have to be white or male. This alone will change the art world in the next decade. These young people will be our next artists, museum directors, curators, collectors, art critics, and teachers of art. They will be inspired by, collect, exhibit, and write about the art that they have learned as children to see as beautiful.<sup>29</sup>

For Ringgold, *children also teach adults*, and in fact, they have many profound lessons to offer.

1 Patricia Hill Collins, “Black Women and Motherhood,” in *Motherhood and Space: Configurations of the Maternal through Politics, Home, and the Body*, ed. Sarah Hardy and Caroline Wiedmer (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 149–59.

2 Faith Ringgold, *We Flew over the Bridge: The Memoirs of Faith Ringgold* (Boston: Bulfinch Press, 1995), 81.

3 Ibid., 69.

4 Ibid., 26.

5 Ibid., 71.

6 For more on Ringgold’s *tanka* work, see my *Fray: Art and Textile Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

7 Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

8 Lisa E. Farrington, “Faith Ringgold’s Slave Rape Series,” in *Skin Deep, Spirit Strong: The Black Female Body in American Culture*, ed. Kimberly Wallace-Sanders (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 137.

9 Ringgold, *We Flew*.

10 Ibid. I wanted to reproduce an image of one of these dolls, but no documentation was available.

11 Alma W. Thomas, “The Marionette Show as a Correlating Activity in the Public Schools” (master’s thesis, Columbia University, 1934).

12 For more on Thomas’s marionettes, see Seth Ferman and Jonathan Frederick Walz, *Alma W. Thomas: Everything Is Beautiful* (Columbus, GA: The Columbus Museum, 2021). I am grateful to Thomas J. Lax for this connection.

13 Farrington, “Faith Ringgold’s Slave Rape Series.”

14 Ringgold, *We Flew*, 168.

15 For more on the Art Workers’ Coalition, see my *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

16 Letter from John Hightower to Ringgold, from the artist’s archives, quoted in Lisa E. Farrington, *Faith Ringgold*, vol. 3, *The David C. Driskell Series of African American Art* (San Francisco: Pomegranate, 2004), 30.

17 Ringgold, *We Flew*, 183.

18 Ibid., 185.

19 Quoted in Lucy R. Lippard, “Faith Ringgold Flying Her Own Flag,” *Ms. Magazine*, July 1976, 34.

20 Kay Brown, “Where We Are’ Black Women Artists,” *Feminist Art Journal* 1, no. 1 (April 1972): 25.

21 Ringgold, *We Flew*, 84.

22 The literature around the art/craft divide in the US is extensive; one important book is Elissa Auther’s *String, Felt, Thread: The Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

23 Michelle Wallace, “Hide Little Children by Faith Ringgold,” *Ringgold in the 1960s* (blog), September 20, 2009, <http://ringgoldinthe1960s.blogspot.com/2011/01/hide-little-children-by-faith-ringgold.html>.

24 Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004). A more nuanced account of childhood from a queer theory and critical race perspective is found in Kathryn Bond Stockton’s *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).

25 Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 89.

26 Faith Ringgold, “Black Women Art Is Political,” typewritten speech delivered at the opening of “The People’s Flag Show,” Judson Memorial Church, New York (December 9, 1970), Judson Memorial Church archives, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University.

27 For more on the health-related initiatives of the Black Panther Party, see Alondra Nelson, *Body and Soul: The Black Panther Party and the Fight against Medical Discrimination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

28 Ringgold, *We Flew*, 219.

29 Ibid., 269.

Feminist Series

X



Feminist Series #6: There Was One of Two Things, 1972

Acrylic on canvas, fabric  
46 ½ x 34 in (118.1 x 86.4 cm)

X



Feminist Series #12: We Meet the Monster, 1972

Acrylic on canvas, fabric  
50 x 32 ½ in (127 x 82.6 cm)

X



Feminist Series #14: Men of Eminence..., 1972/1993

Acrylic on canvas, fabric  
48 x 30 in (121.9 x 76.2 cm)

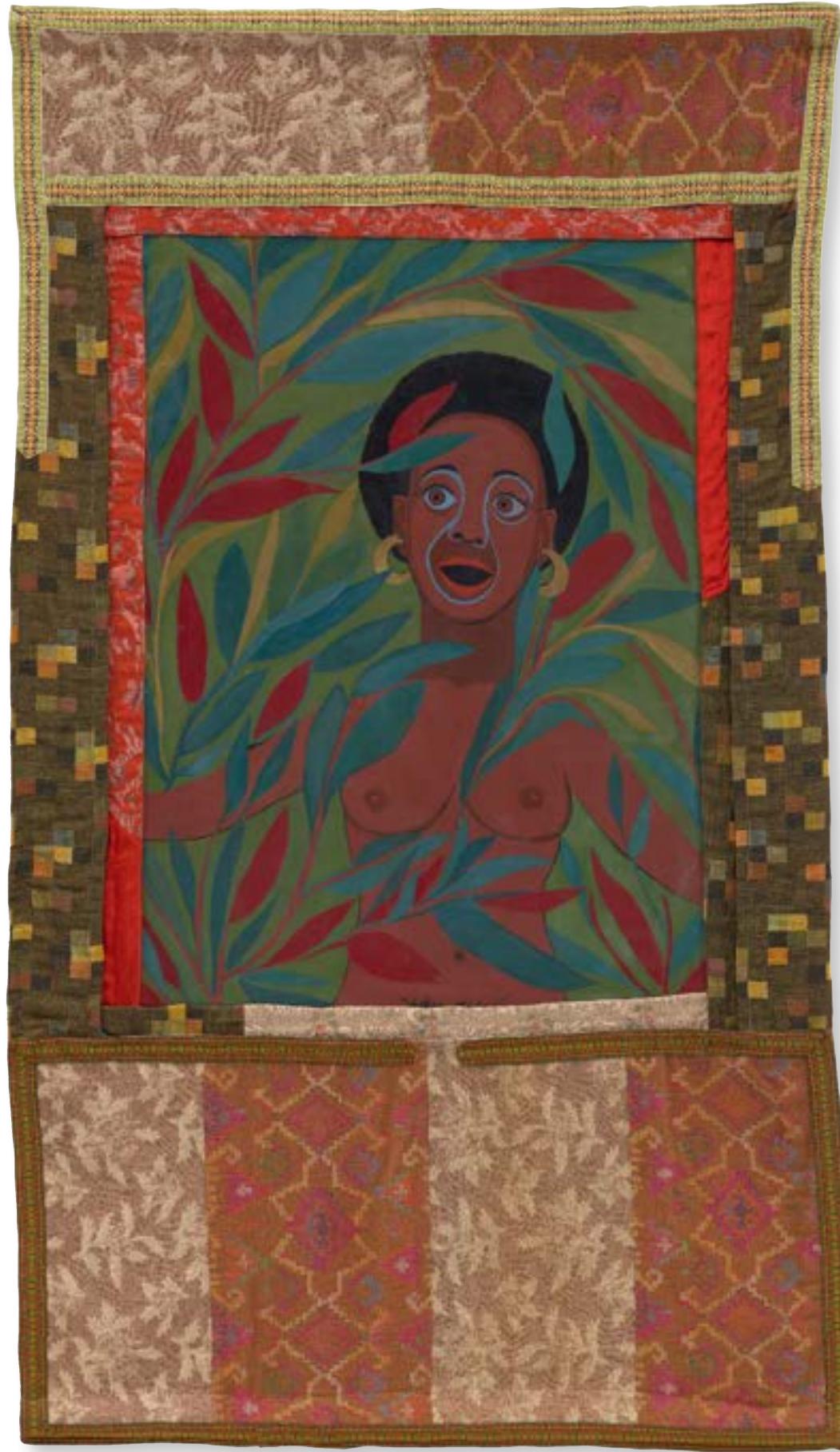
X



Feminist Series #18: "Mr. Black Man  
Watch Your Step...", 1973/1993

Acrylic on canvas, fabric  
56 x 26 1/2 in (142.2 x 67.3 cm)

Slave Rape



Slave Rape #1: Fear Will Make You Weak, 1972

Oil on canvas, fabric  
89 1/2 x 51 in (227.3 x 129.5 cm)



Slave Rape #2: Run You Might Get Away, 1972

Oil on canvas, fabric  
92 3/8 x 52 3/8 in (234.6 x 133 cm)



Slave Rape #3: Fight to Save Your Life, 1972

Oil on canvas, fabric  
92 × 50 ½ in (233.7 × 129.2 cm)

X



Windows of the Wedding #1: Woman, 1974  
Acrylic on canvas, fabric  
63 x 27 in (160 x 68.6 cm)



Windows of the Wedding #9: Life, 1974  
Acrylic on canvas, fabric  
67 1/2 x 29 in (171.5 x 73.7 cm)

X



Windows of the Wedding #3: Woman, 1974

Acrylic on canvas, fabric  
82 1/2 x 36 in (209.6 x 91.4 cm)

X



Windows of the Wedding #7: Small Talk, 1974  
Acrylic on canvas, fabric  
 $82\frac{1}{2} \times 20$  in (209.6 × 50.8 cm)

104



Windows of the Wedding #10:  
Family, 1974  
Acrylic on canvas, fabric  
 $74\frac{1}{2} \times 18$  in (189.2 × 45.7 cm)



Windows of the Wedding #12:  
Love and Peace, 1974  
Acrylic on canvas, fabric  
 $76\frac{1}{2} \times 17\frac{3}{4}$  in (194.3 × 45.1 cm)

X

105

Dah

Dah #1, 1983

Acrylic on canvas  
74 x 58 in (188 x 147.3 cm)

106

X



107

X



California Dah #1, 1983  
Acrylic on canvas, fabric  
 $86\frac{1}{2} \times 35\frac{1}{4}$  in ( $219.7 \times 89.5$  cm)

X



California Dah #2, 1983  
Acrylic on canvas, fabric  
 $83\frac{1}{2} \times 36\frac{1}{4}$  in ( $212.1 \times 92.1$  cm)

X



California Dah #3, 1983

Acrylic on canvas, fabric  
86 ½ × 35 ¼ in (219.7 × 89.5 cm)

X



California Dah #4, 1983

Acrylic on canvas, fabric  
83 ½ × 36 ¼ in (212.1 × 92.1 cm)

Mother's Quilt, 1983

Acrylic, appliquéd and embroidered fabric, and sequins  
58 × 43 ½ in (147.3 × 110.5 cm)



X



Echoes of Harlem, 1980

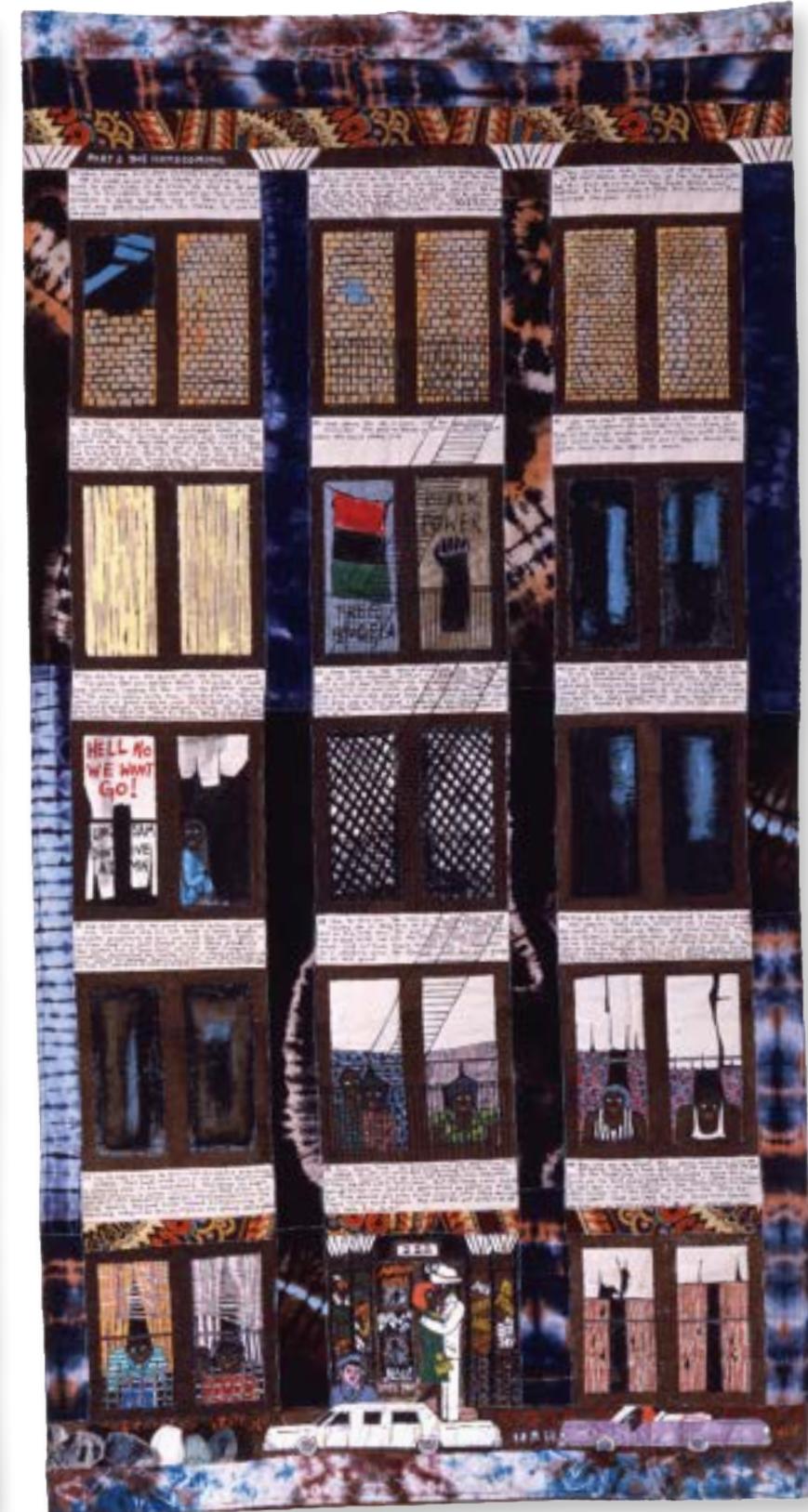
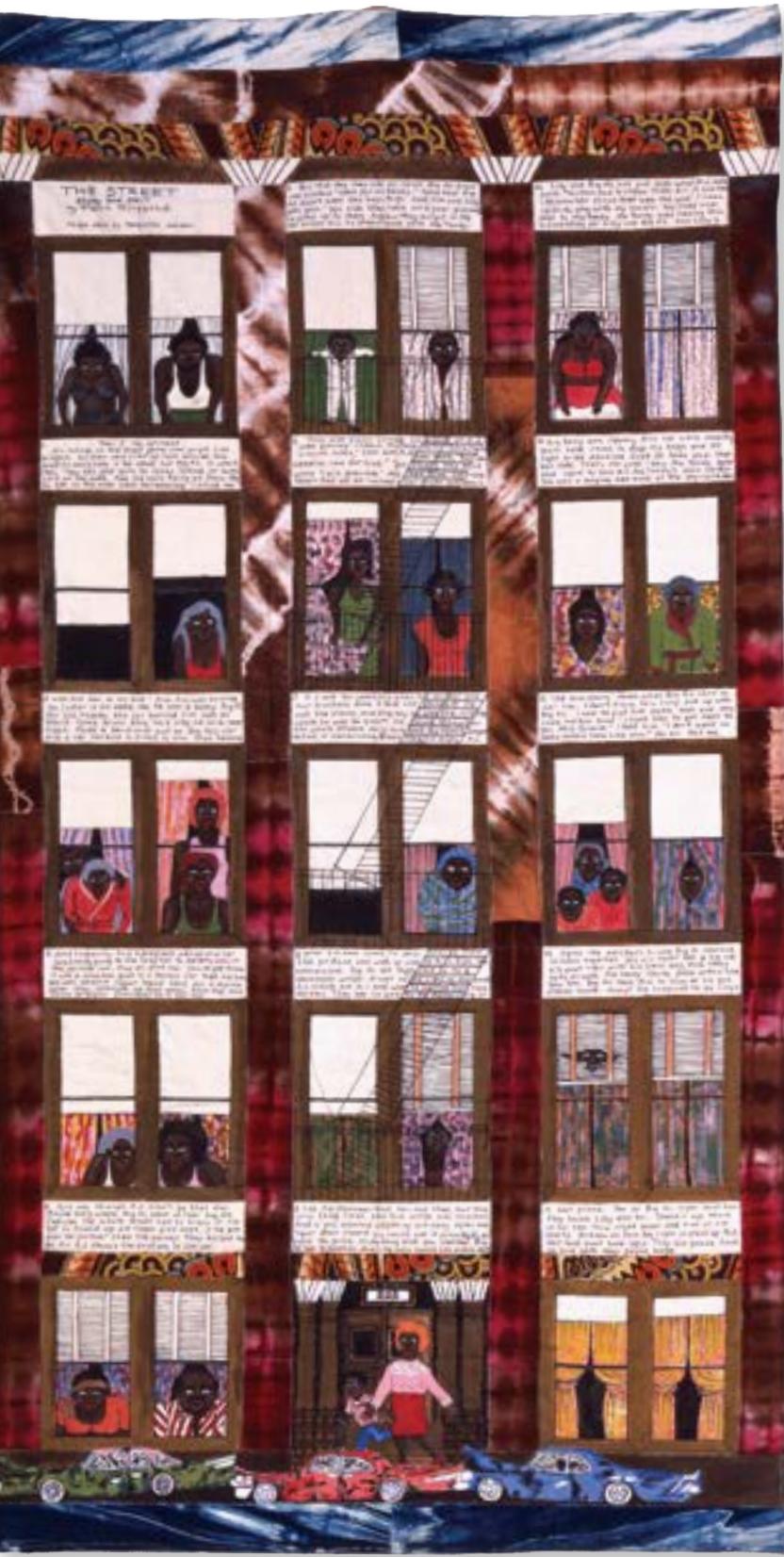
Printed and pieced fabrics and acrylic on cotton canvas  
89 ½ × 80 ½ in (227.3 × 204.5 cm)



Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima?, 1983

Printed and pieced fabrics and acrylic on cotton canvas  
90 × 80 in (228.6 × 203.2 cm)

X



Street Story Quilt, Parts I-III: The Accident, the Fire, and the Homecoming, 1985

Cotton canvas, acrylic paint, ink marker, dyed and printed cotton, and sequins, sewn to a cotton flannel backing  
Overall 90 x 144 in (228.6 x 365.8 cm)

X



Church Picnic, 1988

Tie-dyed, printed fabrics and acrylic on cotton canvas  
 $74\frac{1}{2} \times 75\frac{1}{2}$  in (189.2 x 191 cm)



X



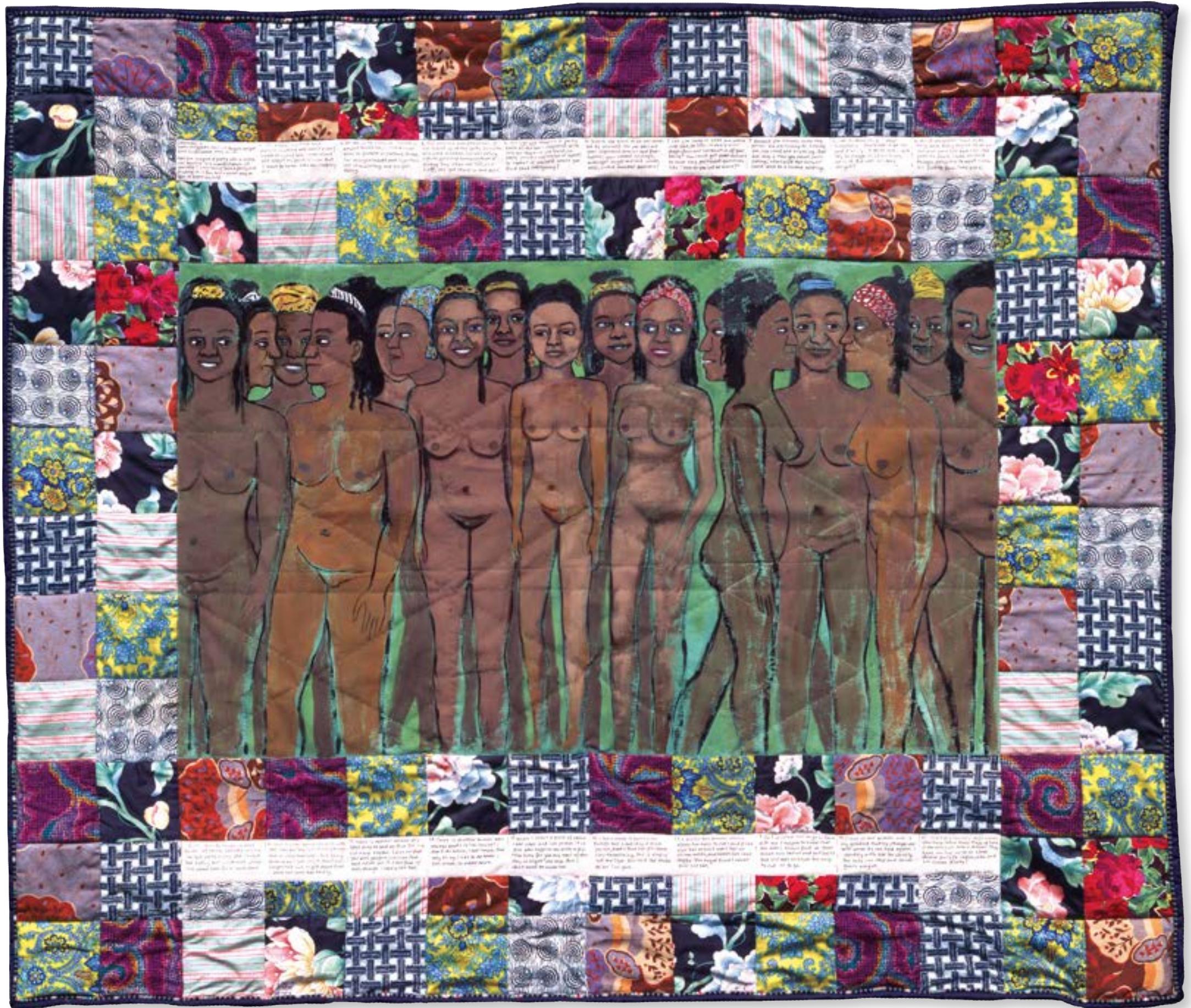
Change: Faith Ringgold's Over 100 Pounds Weight  
Loss Performance Story Quilt, 1986

Photoetching on silk and cotton with printed and pieced fabric  
57 x 70 in (144.8 x 177.8 cm)



Change 2: Faith Ringgold's Over 100 Pounds Weight  
Loss Performance Story Quilt, 1988

Photoetching on silk and cotton with printed and pieced fabric  
68 x 68 in (172.7 x 172.7 cm)



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

Acrylic on canvas with pieced fabric border  
68 × 68 in (172.7 × 172.7 cm)

# Inside and Outside the Museum

Bridget R. Cooks

Faith Ringgold is a storyteller. The subjects of her varied narratives are based on her personal experiences as a Black woman artist in the United States and her ability to imagine a different world with limitless possibilities. When Ringgold expresses her desires for change, women fight for freedom. In her imagination, Black girls can fly. The heroes of her stories own the worlds she creates. They confidently comment on topics that range from art history's exclusionary past to the politics of the present. For their own pleasure and survival, they practice self-care in order to escape the stresses of everyday life.

Through her figurative and abstract paintings, Ringgold has created a space for herself inside the permanent collections of America's greatest art museums. At the same time, her acts of resistance outside the art museum have made space for her and other women artists in art history. Because Ringgold has persistently protested against the art world's anti-Black and sexist traditions, her career reveals the difficulties that confront a Black woman artist. She has pushed for the freedom "to say what I please."<sup>1</sup>

As an artist and activist, Ringgold creates works that inherently function as institutional critiques. This is evident in the paintings from her *American People Series* (1963–67) that depict tense moments in interracial social settings in the conservative corporate world. Her Black and white characters are well-dressed in business suits for meetings and cocktail attire at parties. The tone is dark; the figures appear to be gathered in the shadows of tight, airless spaces. In all of these paintings, the corporate world is shady.

In *American People Series #1: Between Friends* (1963) [p. 32], a brown-skinned woman and a white woman fill two sides of the composition. Their bodies are framed by a foreboding red cross that creates a visual barrier between and above them. The cross matches the dress of the dark woman on the left, who smiles pleasantly and looks directly at the woman before her. Her arched eyebrows make her look surprised and perhaps interested to see her "friend." In contrast, the older white woman looks straight ahead, avoiding the Black woman's gaze. Her downturned mouth and furrowed brow make her appear unfriendly and uninterested in engaging with the Black woman. Ringgold's painting prolongs this fleeting moment, and viewers can only speculate about the specific context in which this encounter takes place. But by depicting the snub—what

would be called a "microaggression" today—Ringgold conveys a sense of antagonism. The satirical title of the work suggests a wasted opportunity: what could have been an alliance of sisterhood between women of different races is instead an acrimonious relationship. Through the symbolism of the red cross, Ringgold shows that what keeps these women from being friends is a bloody history of hate, persecution of innocence, and bitterness. For now, the Christian promise of forgiveness is a long way off.

The pleading Margaret Keane-like eyes of the single Black man in *American People Series #7: The Cocktail Party* (1964) can only be interpreted as a cry for help. Off-center in an over-crowded room with a martini glass in hand, the man is nearly identical to the people around him except for his race. He looks out at the viewer for recognition and an understanding of his painfully uncomfortable position—he will never belong to this club. The Black man appears again in *American People Series #8: The In Crowd* (1964) [p. 38], along with a second Black man in the bottom half of the painting. For this composition, Ringgold moved away from showing the white figures' passive-aggressive behavior. Instead, she chose to depict a hierarchy of figures more clearly through an expressive display of power emphasized by the canvas's vertical format. Under the arch of a red double arrow reminiscent of the red cross in *Between Friends*, the white man at the top of the pile wraps his arms around the heads of two men below. The gesture is both possessive and condescending. One hand pushes a white man's head down, and the other hand grazes the forehead of a Black man. Another white man in the center of the painting repeats the top man's gesture by pushing the head of a man of ambiguous race who is muted by the bottom edge of the painting. He uses his other hand to silence the second Black man by covering his mouth. Ringgold effectively reveals the group dynamic of this interracial men's club and critiques the limits of racist liberalism and the liberal conception of integration. Although the members all don the uniform of the corporate world, there is an order in which domination, complicity, and humiliation are at play.

As in *The Cocktail Party*, the lone Black man stands facing the viewer in *American People Series #5: Watching and Waiting* (1963) [p. 36]. In the back corner of the room, he is marginalized from the three white men sitting around a table in the center of the painting. Each of the four men looks in a different



Fig. 1  
Bob Thompson, *Fearful Insider #2*, 1958. Oil on Masonite, 60 × 48 in (152.4 × 121.9 cm)

direction, and no conversation takes place. They seem to be waiting for a decision to be made by the man seated on the left, who looks dissatisfied. Although the Black man is a businessman, his position behind the others makes him appear to be a servant.<sup>2</sup> The only person who acknowledges him is the figure in the hanging portrait on the right; from his dark orange frame, his gaze directs the viewer to see the shadowy figure. In this composition, the Black man's presence is equivalent to that of an inanimate object—an absent presence that recedes into the background.

Ringgold's paintings that illuminate the discomfort of Black people in white spaces resonate with Bob Thompson's *Fearful Insider #2* (1958) [Fig. 1]. Both artists express the social and institutional tensions that arise when Black people are unwelcome and isolated in the upper-class ranks of white society. Because Ringgold and Thompson were young Black artists making a name for themselves when they created their paintings,

it is possible that what they depict actively reflects their own experiences in the art world. The exclusivity of that world is a theme to which Ringgold returns again and again. She dared to paint white people as the perpetrators of racism and discrimination—an uncommon approach to critiquing inequity for American artists of any race at the time. For example, *American People Series #2: For Members Only* (1963) [p. 34] presents a gathering of six blue-eyed men facing forward with bodies that overlap, as if posing for a class picture. Despite the use of bright and warm colors, the tone of the scene is somber. Wearing different colors of the same style of shirt, the men appear as a unified group in the shallow foreground of the composition. Their confrontational solidarity clarifies that viewers with *other* social positions, like Ringgold's, are not welcome to join this exclusive white male fraternity. (Given their glum expressions and sour faces, who would want to join such a group anyway?)

The same clarity of social order appears in *American People Series #3: Neighbors* (1963) [p. 33], in which a white family unit of four clusters protectively in the foreground. Ringgold's combination of peachy pigments shaped by curved blue hues emphasizes the sallow complexion of the adults. The bright turquoise used to form shadows on the boy's face gives him a creepy, unnatural look. Ringgold painted this work at life-size scale, making the encounter all the more realistic as a standoff between us and them. She makes it easy to imagine the single source of light in the scene radiating from the flames of a cross burning on the lawn of a neighbor who was not welcome in the community. In reality, in 1963 Black families commonly faced redlining and racist housing covenants, as well as acts of intimidation and violence by white residents.<sup>3</sup> The words of James Baldwin (particularly his 1963 book *The Fire Next Time*), Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King Jr. motivated Ringgold to paint the *American People Series*. In her memoir, she explains that

all over this country and the world people were listening to these black men. I felt called upon to create my own vision of the black experience we were witnessing. I read feverishly, especially everything that James Baldwin had written on relationships between black and white in America. Baldwin understood, I felt, the disparity between black and white people as well as anyone; but I had something to add—the visual depiction of the way we are and look. I wanted my painting to express this moment I knew was history. I wanted to give my woman's point of view to this period.<sup>4</sup>

In 1964 Ringgold painted *American People Series #6: Mr. Charlie* [p. 37]. Titled after a euphemism for a racist white man who expects to be respected by Black people, the painting is a caricature of an old grinning figure who embodies the empty rhetoric of American liberals of the 1960s, who in no way challenged white supremacy. The title also resonates with Baldwin's 1964 play *Blues for Mister Charlie*, which, like Ringgold's painting series, explores bitterness and mistrust between Black and white Americans.



Fig. 2  
Michele Wallace (center) and Faith Ringgold (right) at the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition protest at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, January 31, 1971

After the *American People Series*, Ringgold began using organized activism to fight for greater inclusivity in the art world. The 1970s was a signal time for her Black feminist actions that sought to make museums change their de facto policies. With her daughter, the scholar Michele Wallace, Ringgold started Women Students and Artists for Black Art Liberation (WSABAL), an organization that pushed for the artists in the 1970 Venice Biennale to be “not only white male ‘superstars’ but ‘50% women’ and ‘50% people of color.’”<sup>5</sup> In 1971 Ringgold participated in an Ad Hoc Women Artists’ Committee protest in which she, art historian Lucy R. Lippard, and artists Brenda Miller and Poppy Johnson, among others, demanded that 50 percent of the artists included in the 1970 Whitney Annual be women and of them 50 percent artists of color. That same year, Ringgold participated in “The Black Artist” panel for the Art Students League’s ART 71 discussion series and cofounded the Black women artists group Where We At. From these platforms she objected to the absence of women—and women of color in particular—in mainstream art galleries and museums. Scholar Salah M. Hassan has demonstrated that these organizations were a significant part of the Black Arts Movement, which also included several other visual artist collectives, such as AfriCOBRA and Weusi.<sup>6</sup> Artist groups were part of a broader national movement in which Black people of diverse backgrounds organized to create stronger networks and affirm their existence as humans with inherent value. For instance, in 1974 a group of Black feminists established the Combahee River Collective to combat “racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression” to improve the quality of their lives.<sup>7</sup> Ringgold was instrumental in building this type of network of Black feminist artists.

Ringgold also participated in unapologetically political exhibitions, to confront the art world’s complicity in the Vietnam War and inaction regarding the civil rights and Black Power movements. During this time, she put her body on the front line in support of her beliefs. In an eyewitness account, Wallace describes her mother’s arrest at the 1970 exhibition “The People’s Flag Show” at New York’s Judson Memorial Church:

I was the first arrested, along with Jean [Toche] and Jon [Hendricks] for desecration of the flag on the night the U.S. Attorney General’s office closed down the show. I thought it was all very exciting until I was actually arrested. Then, as I watched, Faith persuaded the officers to trade her arrest for mine, took her diamond ring and her wedding band off her fingers and gave them to me, and was taken away to jail, to “The Tombs.” That was one of the most frightening nights of my life. I called everybody I could think of until she was released and the rings were safely back on her fingers. Faith, then known as one of the Judson Three, had always been more radical than I was.<sup>8</sup>

In this life-altering moment, Wallace watched her mother’s personal and political sacrifice play out in the public sphere.

She summarizes the life lessons she learned while still a teenager from her artist/activist mother: “In this society, it is still common to dichotomize and polarize motherhood and art, reproduction and politics, but the mother who is a politically active artist cannot. Is it, then, glass ceiling time or time to rewrite the rules?”<sup>9</sup>

Ringgold was one of fourteen African-American women who organized the 1971 exhibition “Where We At” Black Women Artists” at the Acts of Art Gallery in Greenwich Village, and she helped to produce an accompanying catalogue.<sup>10</sup> This was the first exhibition of work by all Black women artists in New York, and it included artists who were not allowed to participate fully in Black male-dominated artist collectives.<sup>11</sup> That year she also helped form Art Without Walls, a multiracial group of men and women who offered workshops to inmates in the Women’s House of Detention on Rikers Island.<sup>12</sup> Regarding her work at this time, Ringgold explains:

But let me say this to you, that when in 1968, the first demonstration at a museum by a group of black artists was done—this was out in front of the Whitney Museum—the people at the Whitney asked that question: “Oh, how many black artists are there?” Nobody was even thinking about women in those days. “How many black artists are there?” And the black artist was constantly in the position of trying to number and say how many there are. Well, what happened is that when the opportunities increased for the black artist—it was really the black male artist—I thought I was included in that. But I found out later that they really meant men. . . . If black women artists were to be able to exist that way, I believe that more black women artists—who have long ago put down their brushes or their sculpture materials—would pick them up and decide that they could continue on and do their art.<sup>13</sup>

In the early 1970s, Ringgold began creating explicitly feminist art; she produced pieces with Black women’s well-being in mind. As Wallace explains, Ringgold, using her signature Black Light palette of purple, gray, green, black, brown, red, and blue hues, created “the aesthetic accompaniment to the Black Power movement.”<sup>14</sup> In 1971 she created the Op art-influenced poster *Woman Freedom Now* [p. 79], whose composition is organized into triangles, each bearing a word from the title in the Black Power colors of black, red, and green. The repetition of colors and text creates a pulsating visual effect. The graphic work is one in a series of dynamic, vibrant paintings made in an effort to activate the role of Black women in the movement. She used this visual and conceptual approach in another Op art poster, *Woman Free Yourself* (1971) [p. 78], in which the alternating backward and forward directions of the text delays its legibility. The rhythmic design requires viewers to linger and consider the message of the text while reading. With this palette Ringgold explored her realization and appreciation of Black Light—an alternative approach to defining white as the only source of illumination.<sup>15</sup>



Fig. 3  
Tom Lloyd’s son at the Art Workers’ Coalition and Black Emergency Cultural Coalition protest at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, May 2, 1970

After depicting the racial anxieties surrounding integration, protesting the discriminatory policies of the contemporary art world, and creating text-based graphics designed to inspire Black women to strive for freedom, Ringgold combined elements of all three in the works for which she is best known. In the 1980s she began creating quilts that allowed her to tell a wide range of stories about memories, heroes, fantasies, and speculative futures. In these works, Ringgold combines text, image, and design while challenging the denigration of quilts as "women's work." In the story quilt format, she developed a mature style.

Of all the story quilts, her arsenal of skills works together most critically in *The French Collection* (1991–97) [pp. 185–207], a twelve-piece series in which Ringgold takes on the field of art history and its colonial partner, the museum, as its subject. In his essay about the series in the catalogue of the New Museum exhibition "Dancing at the Louvre: Faith Ringgold's French Collection and Other Story Quilts" (1998), art historian Richard J. Powell explains the artist's institutional critique: "The truths Faith Ringgold visually plies us with are (1) that women and men of African descent significantly figure in matters of art and art history, and (2) that audiences are capable of embracing not only an elitist, museum-sanctioned 'high art' but also a 'people's art' that knows no class boundaries or social distinctions."<sup>16</sup> Ringgold accomplished this through the invention of Willia Marie Simone, the protagonist of the series. A young Black woman who travels to Europe to become an artist, Willia Marie is a participant in the development of modernism; she guides the viewer through Ringgold's revisionist art history. It is through Willia Marie's encounters that Ringgold rejects the enforced invisibility of Black women in art history. Ringgold shows her own skills by copying artworks of canonical modern European painters and, in the process, subordinates the canon in service of the critical development of a more inclusive contemporary art.

Each quilt in *The French Collection* features a large rectangular scene in the center. Borders on the top and bottom edge are filled with handwritten text in discrete rectangles numbered in order of narrative sequence. The text strips are sewn within a concentric border of the same proportion made from an assortment of richly patterned fabrics. The entire quilt is set within two narrow printed borders that frame the finished work. Through this painted quilt format, Ringgold engaged in the creative destruction of the barrier between fine art and craft. As art historian Cheryl Finley notes, "Deeply embedded in the American craft tradition, the African and African Diaspora textile tradition, and the mythology of the Underground Railroad, the quilt became a palette on which Ringgold not only shares her talent as an artist, but also her experiences as a black woman."<sup>17</sup> In *The French Collection*, Ringgold becomes Willia Marie and Willia Marie becomes Ringgold. The text, in the form of letters from Willia Marie to her Aunt Melissa, is written from a first-person perspective; like the captions in Elizabeth Catlett's *I am the black woman* series (1946–47) [Fig. 4], this intimate form of communication personalizes the viewers'

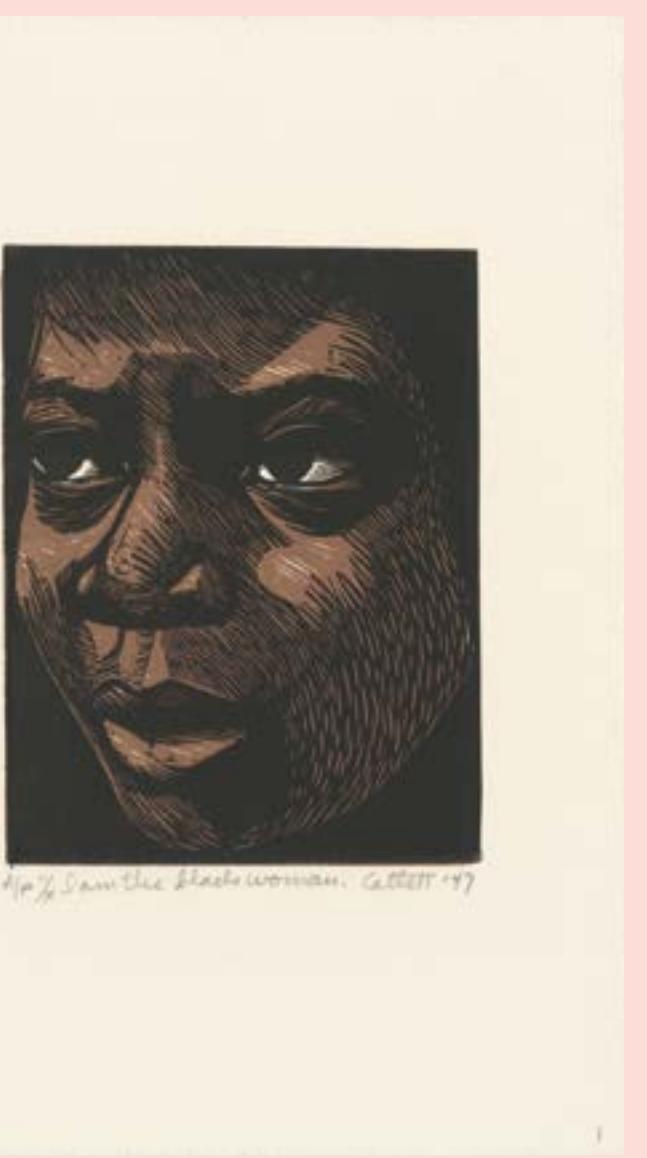


Fig. 4  
Elizabeth Catlett, *I am the black woman*, 1946–47 (printed 1989).  
Ink and graphite on paper, image with title: 5 1/2 x 4 in (14 x 10.2 cm);  
image: 5 1/8 x 4 in (13 x 10 cm); sheet: 9 3/4 x 6 5/8 in (24.6 x 16.8 cm)

engagement with the work by inviting them to witness the artist's own testimony. In both artists' series, the impact of the image with text demonstrates how the personal is political for Black women artists. As narrated in her letters, Willia Marie shares different roles that Ringgold has played, including model, student, artist, and expatriate. Other aspects of Willia Marie's stories are composites of experiences of other Black women, such as artists Edmonia Lewis, Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller, Barbara Chase-Riboud, and Augusta Savage, and performer Josephine Baker.

As an artist, Willia Marie resurrects the great modernist painters Vincent van Gogh, Henri Matisse, and Claude Monet, who appear, along with copies of their art, in a few of the story quilts. In *Picasso's Studio: The French Collection Part I*, #7 (1991) [pp. 196–97], Willia Marie hears the whispers of the masks and paintings collected in Picasso's studio while she models for him during his Cubist period. Impatient and bored, she also hears the voice of her aunt saying, "You was an artist's model years before you was ever born, thousands of miles from here in Africa somewhere. Only you'all wasn't called artist and model. It was natural that your beauty would be reproduced on walls and plates and sculptures made of your beautiful black face and body."<sup>18</sup> Indeed, Ringgold uses Willia Marie to embody the Black presence in modernism, narrating a history of Black inspiration and colonial desire that art museums discredit.

In her conversations with great artists and writers in cafés, fields of flowers, and dinner parties, Willia Marie explores the possibilities of her life and how to navigate the challenges she faces. In a letter to her Aunt Melissa sprinkled with newly learned French words, she writes:

You asked me once why I wanted to become an artist and I said I didn't know. Well I know now. It is because it's the only way I know of feeling free. My art is my freedom to say what I please. N'importe what color you are, you can do what you want avec ton art, with your art. They may not like it, or buy it, or even let you show it; but they can't stop you from doing it.<sup>19</sup>

Ringgold tells her truth about belonging and exclusion in the art world through characters painted in familiar and speculative dilemmas. Her stories inspire the interrogation of the past and reimagining of the future. She has used her freedom to define the Black presence in art history and inspire others to imagine how to make the art world a place where Black artists belong.

<sup>1</sup> A phrase written by her fictional artist character Willia Marie Simone, the protagonist in Ringgold's series of story quilts *The French Collection* (1991–97). The quote comes from *Picasso's Studio: The French Collection Part I*, #7 (1991) [pp. 196–97].

<sup>2</sup> Ringgold clarifies that he is a businessman in her description of the painting: "A black man stands at the door as if waiting for an invitation to sit down. (People often mistake the black man for a waiter, even though he is dressed in a business suit.)" *Faith Ringgold, We Flew over the Bridge: The Memoirs of Faith Ringgold* (Boston: Bulfinch Press, 1995), 145.

<sup>3</sup> These practices were documented in the arts and the popular press, as in, for example, Lorraine Hansberry's iconic Broadway play *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), whose 1961 film adaptation was viewed by millions. For a discussion of the legacies of these practices, see Paul L. Street, *Racial Oppression in the Global Metropolis: A Living Black Chicago History* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007); Kevin M. Kruse, introduction to *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); and Sarah Patton Boyle, *The Desegregated Heart: A Virginian's Stand in Time of Transition* (New York: William Morrow, 1962).

<sup>4</sup> Ringgold, *We Flew*, 146.

<sup>5</sup> Michele Wallace, "Feminism, Race, and the Division of Labor," in *Division of Labor: "Women's Work" in Contemporary Art*, ed. Anastasia Aukeman (New York: Bronx Museum of Art, 1995), 59. The organization was created in response to Edmund B. Gaither's 1970 exhibition "Afro-American Artists: New York and Boston," held at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and the Museum of the National Center of Afro-American Artists, in which nine of the seventy-two artists were women, none of whom were from New York. Faith Ringgold, oral history interview by Doloris Holmes, 1972, transcript, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-faith-ringgold-11488>.

<sup>6</sup> Salah M. Hassan, "Remembering the Black Arts Movement," *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, no. 29 (Fall 2011): 4. AfriCOBRA members included Jeff Donaldson, Jae Jarrell, Wadsworth Jarrell, Barbara Jones-Hogu, Gerald Williams, Napoleon Henderson, Nelson Stevens, Sherman Beck, Omar Lama, Carolyn Lawrence, and Howard Mallory Jr. See Mark Godfrey and Zoé Whitley, eds., *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power* (New York: D.A.P./Distributed Art Publishers, 2017), 88. Formed in 1967, Weusi (Swahili for Black) was a group of young emerging artists interested in abstraction based on African forms and rhythms, as well as Black nationalist ideology: Abdullah Aziz, Falcon Beazer, Kay Brown, Gaylord Hassan, Bill Howell, Rudy Irwin (Saba Kachenga), Otto Neals, Ademola Olugebefola, Okoe Pyatt, James Phillips, James Sepyo, Taiwo Shabazz, and Nii Ahene Mettle-Nunoo from Ghana. Kay Brown, "The Weusi Artists," in *Weusi, the Movement: A Renaissance in Retrospect* (New York: Jamaica Arts Center, 1995), 8.

<sup>7</sup> Combahee River Collective, "A Black Feminist Statement," in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writing by Radical Women of Color*, ed. Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, 4th ed. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2015), 210.

<sup>8</sup> Wallace, "Feminism, Race," 59.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>10</sup> Artists included were Dindga McCannon, Kay Brown, Ringgold, Jerri Crooks, Charlotte Kā (Richardson), and Vivian E. Browne. The catalogue was titled "*Where We At*" *Black Women Artists: A Tapestry of Many Fine Threads*. Hassan, "Remembering."

<sup>11</sup> Ringgold had hoped to join the Black artist collective Spiral in 1964. She received a critical but encouraging letter from cofounder Romare Bearden, who did not invite her to join the group. Spiral included one woman artist, Emma Amos, in its membership. Other members included Calvin Douglas, Perry Ferguson, Felrath Hines, Alvin Hollingsworth, Richard Mayhew, Earl Miller, Billy Pritchard, James Yeargans, and Ralph Ellison. See Bridget R. Cooks, "Richard Mayhew: A Sense of Place," in *The Art of Richard Mayhew* (San Francisco: Museum of the African Diaspora), 43; Ringgold, *We Flew*, 150–53; and Jeanne Siegel, "Why Spiral?," *ARTnews*, September 1966, 48.

<sup>12</sup> Ringgold, *We Flew*, 262.

<sup>13</sup> Ringgold, oral history interview.

<sup>14</sup> Michele Wallace, "America Black: Faith Ringgold's Black Light Series," *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, no. 29 (Fall 2011): 52.

<sup>15</sup> Ringgold's first experiments with the Black Light palette were in *Early Works #20: Black and Blue Man* (1964) [p. 16] and *Black Light Series #1: Big Black* (1967) [p. 55]. Wallace, "America Black," 52–54. In 2020 New York's Museum of Modern Art and Vans shoes collaborated to make Ringgold's *Woman Free Yourself* and *Woman Freedom Now* posters into a pair of shoes. Each poster is presented in an allover print design on each shoe.

<sup>16</sup> Richard J. Powell, "Introduction: Faith Ringgold's French Connection," in Dan Cameron et al., *Dancing at the Louvre: Faith Ringgold's French Collection and Other Story Quilts* (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 1–2.

<sup>17</sup> Cheryl Finley, "Visual Legacies of Slavery and Emancipation," *Callaloo* 37, no. 4 (2014): 1031.

<sup>18</sup> Text panel two in *Picasso's Studio: The French Collection Part I*, #7 (1991).

<sup>19</sup> Text panel four in *Picasso's Studio: The French Collection Part I*, #7 (1991).

X



Mrs. Jones and Family, 1973  
From Family of Woman Mask Series  
Sewn fabric and embroidery  
74 x 69 in (188 x 175.3 cm)

X



The Wake and Resurrection of the  
Bicentennial Negro, 1975–89

Mixed media installation  
90 × 80 in (228.6 × 203.2 cm)

X



Auntie Mask, 1973  
Mixed media  
Dimensions variable

134

X



Bena, 1973  
Mixed media  
Dimensions variable

135

X



Bubba Mask, 1973  
Mixed media  
Dimensions variable



X



Child's Mask #1, 1973

Mixed mediums  
Dimensions variable

X



Child's Mask #2, 1973

Mixed mediums  
Dimensions variable



Dance Mask #1, 1973  
Mixed media  
Dimensions variable

X



Dance Mask #2, 1973  
Mixed media  
Dimensions variable

X



Dance Mask #3, 1973  
Mixed media  
Dimensions variable

X

X



Moma Mask, 1973  
Mixed media  
Dimensions variable

X



Pop Mask, 1973  
Mixed media  
Dimensions variable

X



Mourner's Mask #1, 1973

Mixed media  
Dimensions variable

X



Mourner's Mask #2, 1973

Mixed media  
Dimensions variable

# Summoning Ancestors, Inspiring Descendants: Faith Ringgold and Literature

Zoé Whitley

I have a story to tell you that is both a museum story and the best children's story I know.

—Faith Ringgold<sup>1</sup>

It started with a poster. That's one way to begin this true story. Bernice Steinbaum Gallery held an exhibition of Faith Ringgold's artworks, "Changes 2: Painted Story Quilts," in New York from November 5 to December 3, 1988. Arguably, Ringgold's most recognized genre innovation is conceiving the "story quilt," a combination of painting, vernacular quilting, and patchwork traditions, overlaid with African-American storytelling. According to Ringgold, quilts, being "so intimately connected with women's lives, could become a most effective vehicle for telling the stories of their lives."<sup>2</sup> The story quilts, whose narrators are always women, served as a means for Ringgold to share aspects of her own life. They enabled her to convey her personal journey of weight loss and retell family histories through imagined characters, such as Aunt Connie, a great artist based in Sag Harbor, New York, whose character mirrors Ringgold's own. Just as Aunt Connie's artworks took on lives of their own, Ringgold's painted and quilted compositions have proliferated to encompass the artist's literal and metaphorical journeys, channeled through alter egos so as to reflect the universality of those same experiences in the lives of many others.

Another beginning to this tale might start: Once upon a time, there lived an artist named Faith. The youngest of three children, she spent countless days at home in bed convalescing from childhood asthma. During these spells, she dedicated herself to "picturing [her] small world and the people in it," spending time drawing, coloring in, and making little creations from her mother's fabric scraps, because each activity required minimal physical strain. "I would read, write, and draw and color in my books. I can't remember a time when I was not doing some form of art. Having asthma was perfect for making art. I could sit in my room without exerting myself and draw and make things with bits of cloth my mother would give me. I got a chance to do all the things I really liked to do and I can't recall a time I missed anything of consequence, including important exams at school. Like magic, I was always well enough just in time."<sup>3</sup> As she grew as an artist, so too did the world she depicted, from Harlem rooftops to aerial views of the George Washington Bridge to Sag Harbor dinner parties, via gravity-defying, often time-traveling excursions.

That Ringgold was working with transforming cloth through creative acts from a young age places her firmly within the tradition of African-American clothes-makers and quilters. A source of pleasure for the artist and an enjoyable pastime, quilting, historically, was in fact born out of necessity. "The work of black women quilters needs special feminist critical commentary which considers the impact of race, sex, and class," cultural critic bell hooks reminds us. "Many black women quilted despite oppressive economic and social circumstances which often demanded exercising creative imagination in ways radically different from those of white female counterparts, especially women of privilege who had greater access to material and time. Often black slave women quilted as part of their labor in white households."<sup>4</sup> Ringgold's lineage includes this history of forced servitude and also the more immediate influence of her mother Willi Posey's work and agency as a couture fashion designer. The artist's great-great-grandmother Susie Shannon was expert at handling textiles through weaving, quilting, and sewing. She taught these skills to her daughter, dressmaker Betsy Bingham, who, in turn, instructed her daughter Ida Matilda Bingham Posey, mother of Willi Posey. With each successive generation, skills and knowledge were shared, family stories preserved, and creativity flourished.

A close relation to the story quilts is one of Ringgold's most popular, beloved, and culturally impactful innovations, if far less well-known in the art world: her award-winning children's books. One could say the books were birthed by the forty-four by thirty-eight-inch poster-mailer for Bernice Steinbaum Gallery's 1988 exhibition. The poster's scale was sufficient to accurately convey in photographic reproduction something of the minute detail and grand ambition in Ringgold's original *Tar Beach* (1988) [pp. 165–67]. The first of five quilts in her *Woman on a Bridge* series, *Tar Beach* builds a rich narrative around a wondrous night in 1939, on a blue ground that Ringgold painted across an un-gessoed, finely woven cotton duck canvas.

*Tar Beach*'s title derives from the common practice of city dwellers ascending to their rooftops on sweltering summer nights to escape the oppressive heat of apartment buildings. Ringgold's husband, Burdette, reminded her of this shared reference point and the proliferation of such "beaches" across New York in the 1930s and '40s, during their formative (and pre-air-conditioning) years as children and young adults.

The Harlem rooftop scene in the story quilt depicts two adult couples playing cards, while two young children, Cassie and Be Be, stretch out nearby on a mattress and a patterned blanket covering the asphalt. The lights of George Washington Bridge twinkle like the stars above them. In the foreground, laundry hangs motionless in the still evening air. Next to the card table stands another, with the remnants of their meal on it, including fried chicken, freshly roasted peanuts, and half a ripe watermelon calling invitingly for them to indulge in second helpings. Unbeknownst to the grown-ups, immersed as they are in playing their hands, the star-gazing girl, hair in three plaits, takes flight in the night sky above. Ringgold's composition shows Cassie lying on the mattress on the roof next to her little brother, while the girl is also depicted a second time soaring with arms outstretched.

In order to clearly designate which upholstery fabrics would appear in which sequence, the artist carefully numbered the border of the work, which applies the structure of patchwork quilting. (That same diligent numbering system would inform how image and text coexisted on the printed page in book form.) So alluring, textured, and atmospheric is the scene, even in reproduction, that the poster caught the eye of literary agent and children's book editor Andrea Cascardi, who was then working at Crown Publishers. Cascardi urged Ringgold to adapt the story of *Tar Beach* into a children's book.

Writing and illustrating children's books kind of sneaked up on me in a delightful way. What a joy not to struggle against interminable odds, to have the freedom to write and illustrate . . . with the greatest of ease. My stories and illustrations are a tribute to the endless beauty and creativity of children.

—Faith Ringgold<sup>5</sup>

*Tar Beach*'s heroine is Cassie Louise Lightfoot, who the narrator explains was born in 1931, on the very day the George Washington Bridge was opened (October 24). Since Ringgold was likewise born in October (but in 1930), a persuasive case can be made for Cassie serving as Ringgold's avatar. "During slavery, it was said that some slaves were able to fly to freedom," Ringgold observes in the preface to her memoir. "*Tar Beach* is about a little girl named Cassie, and writing and illustrating the story constituted my own metaphorical flight to freedom."<sup>6</sup>

Cassie appears in not only *Tar Beach* but also subsequent books in the series aimed at very young readers to learn numeracy and vocabulary words. Beyond these pedagogical purposes, Ringgold also instills profound observations about growing up with self-assurance and an understanding that the world can be improved. For instance, she doesn't shy away from the economic hardships that children are subject to. In her memoir, she writes, "When Cassie believes she can fly, it is not because she wants to go to Florida to see her grandma, but rather because she envisions a better life for her family. Already at eight years old she wisely recognizes that all good things start with a dream. So flying is about achieving

a seemingly impossible goal with no more guarantee of success than an avowed commitment to do it."<sup>7</sup> Soaring through the sky, Cassie delightfully lays claim to the ice cream factory as an indulgent treat to ensure her family can have a sweet ending to every dinnertime. More poignantly, she also claims the union building with the affirmation, "Well, Daddy is going to own that building, 'cause I'm gonna fly over it and give it to him. Then it won't matter that he's not in their old union, or whether he's colored or a half-breed Indian, like they say."<sup>8</sup> At Cassie's tender age, she is already aware of inequality and abusive epithets overheard in adult conversation and the bitter irony that her father's skill can help erect the twenty-four-story building to house a workers' union, while he is barred from joining the organization's membership himself.

Ringgold's own father was a member of the Teamsters Union, but the artist was acutely aware that her family's economic status was not shared by everyone. She therefore foregrounded in this story a reference to the systemic barriers she knew other families of color faced in terms of employment prospects—specifically, racist union labor practices that excluded African Americans based on legacy. Ringgold's artistic mission as an African-American artist is to "give our lives the broad context and not limit ourselves to somebody else's picture of who we are."<sup>9</sup> This nuance of Cassie's not-unionized father integrates racial identity into the fabric of American working-class identification and asserts the still underacknowledged contributions of Black people in literally building the country.<sup>10</sup> *Tar Beach* affords Ringgold scope to reflect upon her own life and upbringing. "I have choices, but that's me," she says. "That's not everybody. I had some things that a lot of people that I grew up with didn't have. I mean there weren't a lot of African-American people going to college when I went. I never realized that until later. I realized there were none in my class, but I didn't really realize how unusual that was, to be my age with degrees. I don't feel personally limited."<sup>11</sup> Freeing herself from externally imposed limitations is a goal Ringgold achieves, then extends to her viewers and readers.

Concurrently with developing the *Tar Beach* book, in 1990 Ringgold undertook an artist residency at the Fabric Workshop and Museum in Philadelphia, where she produced *Tar Beach II* [p. 169] in an edition of twenty-four new quilts, each bordered with unique fabrics. This time, the rooftop scene was printed on silk rather than painted on canvas, the palette simplified to render the sprawl of the populous city in primary shades of red and yellow, along with complementary tones of grass green and pale plum. In a clever play on the image reversals inherent in many forms of printmaking, the card game players and reclining children appear as if mirror images of their *Tar Beach* selves, and the laundry line shifts from foreground to background. In this version, the skyward Cassie appears three times, joined in the air by her flying brother (who threatened to tattle if he was left behind) and the double of her father, finally standing triumphant atop the union building. In many ways, *Tar Beach II*, more than the original quilt, served as the model for what would become the children's book.<sup>12</sup>

Ringgold laid the book's pages out on a wall to structure the story progression. This process was a natural extension of working with quilter and painter Lisa Yi, who hand applied the text to the story quilts. Ringgold recalls that

we made the dummy book first and then added the words. You get your story and then you put it on the pages. I know how many pages I want text on before I start the story. And that's the same thing I do with the quilts. I know exactly how many frames I have to write: it's six at the top and six at the bottom. I know it's six frames, I know how deep the frames are—six twelve-inch-by-three-inch blocks—then I find out how many words I can fit in there. It's very technical. The woman [Yi] who does the writing for me always complains, "You're putting too many words here, I can't get them in." And if she makes a mistake, we're dead, so everything has to be very carefully calculated.<sup>13</sup>

The storybooks lack none of the precision, pacing, and structure of the original paintings, though Ringgold's multiaward-winning children's books have eluded more critical focus from both the literary establishment and art cognoscenti. But far from being a deviation from Ringgold's fine art paintings and soft sculptures aimed at adult audiences, the children's books are in every respect an extension of Ringgold's expansive visual arts engagement, which includes her years spent in the classroom as an art teacher. "As I searched for a way to voice my new awareness as an African-American woman, teaching African art to little children turned out to be a useful vehicle for me: I could watch the little masters work, and they always gave me inspiration and ideas."<sup>14</sup> One such idea was the translation of Ringgold's soft sculptures into the Ringgold Doll Kit. In 1981 the artist created a limited-edition series of materials sufficient to create a family of four soft figures not unlike the nuclear family who would later become the main characters in *Tar Beach*: Mommy (eighteen inches high), Daddy (eighteen inches high), Little Brother (fifteen inches high), and Little Sister (thirteen and a half inches high). The kits sold for ten dollars apiece (forty dollars for materials for the entire family) and included a recto-verso pattern printed on unbleached muslin, fifteen pastel dye sticks, and directions provided as "4 Quick and Easy Steps" with "helpful coloring hints and suggestions." True to her roots as a teacher, Ringgold's mail order slip included the encouraging message

IF YOU CAN COLOR A CHILD'S COLORING BOOK  
AND USE A NEEDLE AND THREAD  
YOU CAN MAKE A RINGGOLD DOLL

The children's books and doll making aimed at young audiences are wholly in keeping with the artist's wider strategies and art-making methods, bearing all of the hallmarks of the strong female protagonist, integrated autobiography, social commentary, and vital self-insertion into the art historical

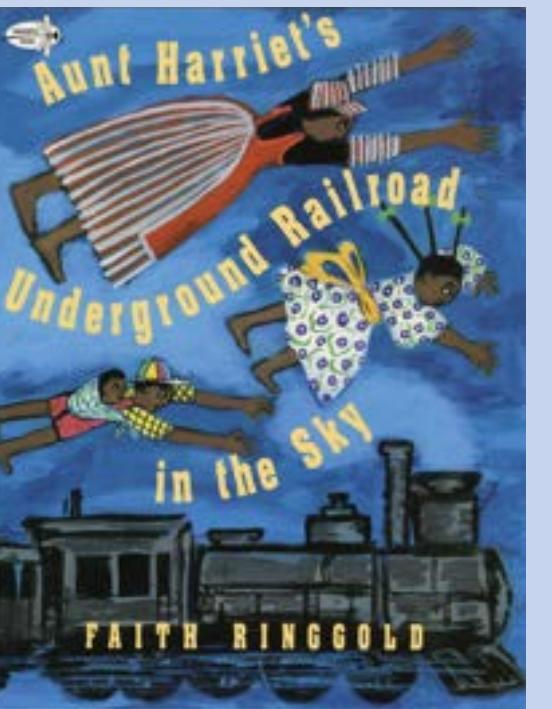


Fig. 1  
*Aunt Harriet's Underground Railroad in the Sky* (1992)  
by Faith Ringgold



Fig. 2  
*The Invisible Princess* (1999) by Faith Ringgold

canon. In 1994, Melody Graulich and Mara Witzling collectively asserted that "Ringgold deserves more attention as a writer."<sup>15</sup> While Ringgold finally found a publisher for her autobiography, *We Flew over the Bridge*, a year later, their statement alludes to the discomfort and fundamental mistrust the art world demonstrates toward protean practices that spill over the conventional classifications of painting or sculpture into more populist realms of expression. Ringgold's refusal to accept the status quo, or to meekly ask for permission, extends to her characters, in whom she bestows the unwavering belief that anything is possible. Her young protagonists all possess the belief that they can one day be presidents, property owners, opera singers, time travelers, and, above all, that they can take flight.

Not long after business executive and accessories designer Judith Leiber donated Ringgold's original *Tar Beach* quilt to New York's Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in 1988, it became one of the institution's most requested permanent collection artworks.<sup>16</sup> Not only did other museums seek to borrow the work for temporary display; children visiting New York with their parents clamored for it, since *Tar Beach*'s reputation was cemented for young audiences following Crown's publication of the storybook in 1991.

In an interview with Graulich and Witzling, Ringgold describes her second publication, *Aunt Harriet's Underground Railroad in the Sky* (1992) [Fig. 1], as "the first text I've written for children." From her point of view, *Tar Beach* was written for a general audience of indeterminate age, but likely already some

way into maturity, "to help recall childhood."<sup>17</sup> *Aunt Harriet's Underground Railroad in the Sky*, recipient of the 1993 Jane Addams Children's Book Award for promoting peace and social justice, transports Cassie and her brother on an epic journey led by abolitionist Harriet Tubman retracing a route from bondage to freedom. Ringgold writes in her memoir, "These children's books seek to explain to children some of the hard facts of slavery and racial prejudice, issues that are difficult but crucial to their education. But my books are even more about children having dreams, and instilling in them a belief that they can change things."<sup>18</sup>

Ringgold's belief in young people's ability to effect change was expressed in earlier paintings, such as *American People Series #20: Die* (1967) [pp. 48–51], in which the only two people left physically unscathed by racial violence are the small blond boy and Black girl who cling to one another, huddled in a protective embrace. That kernel of hope is embedded within a scene that could otherwise be read as the cruelty of individuals irredeemably entrenched in their racial animosity.

Their unlikely coming together—a bond from having witnessed trauma and not wanting to perpetuate it—prefigures the bond that blossoms in Ringgold's 1999 book *The Invisible Princess* [Fig. 2]. The title character is the daughter of an enslaved couple called Mama and Papa Love. Her presence is cloaked in invisibility by spirits, lest the cruel slave master Captain Pepper sell her or disperse her family to other plantations. Ringgold interweaves magical realism with harrowing historical facts of

families being sold apart. Patience, Pepper's blind daughter, can see the Invisible Princess and warns her about what her father is capable of. The Invisible Princess responds to her friend, "I am not afraid of Captain Pepper, because his power to destroy is no match against the creative powers of the Prince of Night, the Giant of the Trees, the Dream Queen, the Sun Goddess, the Sea Queen, the Great Lady of Peace, the Queen of Bees, and all the other wonderful Powers of Nature who have come to help us."<sup>19</sup>

A crazy quilt story is one that can jump back and forth in time, work on many different levels, and one that can include myth.

—Alice Walker<sup>20</sup>

In 1964, relatively early in her career as an artist, Ringgold wrote a letter to eminent painter and collagist Romare Bearden. She was eager to connect and spend time with other Black artists. Bearden's response was by turns professorial and patronizing, directing her to the German Expressionists for compositional suggestions and expressing his disbelief that someone of Ringgold's "petite" build could create such robust scenes as hers. Bearden closed his letter with some arms-length encouragement, "let me hope that your paintings will eventually find their own friends," before a more fortifying "don't despair, just continue to work hard."<sup>21</sup> By the point at which Ringgold contacted Bearden, she was no longer seeking to imitate European artists firmly enshrined in the Western canon. Indeed, moving beyond imitation was a form of exorcism, driven by a spiritual need to purge models of excellence so removed from her own cultural points of reference. "Degas, Utrillo, Cézanne . . . were the masters that we were made to emulate," Ringgold says in the interview with Graulich and Witzling. "Those artists were in me, and I had to get that out. That can be very deadly, you know, that probably finished off a lot of people, not being able to get those artists out of their heads."<sup>22</sup>

Ringgold found a practical application for Bearden's call for her paintings to "find their own friends" and did indeed cultivate her own audience, of all ages. With experience that came directly from her years teaching in Harlem public schools, she knew the value of reflecting Black history and celebrating our cultural contributions. Ringgold's experiences as an activist for women's equal rights and racial equality threw into relief the ways in which both movements all too frequently underserved Black women's advancement and visibility. When recollecting her activities to desegregate the collections of art museums in New York, Ringgold wryly noted that the furtherance of racial equity too often slipped into patriarchal patterns. "The idea was I was supposed to be working for the boys, for the African-American men to get ahead, not for women. And I was doing that in the beginning, until we demonstrated at the Museum of Modern Art and who got the show? [The boys.] So I said, now wait a minute, this doesn't make any sense."<sup>23</sup> Referring to this as "giving my soul and getting no freedom out of it," Ringgold shifted her activist tactics thereafter. In creating story quilt characters such

as Willia Marie Simone, in *The French Collection* (1991–97) [pp. 185–207], Ringgold could contend with the canon of Western art and re-center the story of modern art to conform to the needs of a Black woman. Willia Marie's spirited statement reads on the seventh quilt of the series, *Picasso's Studio* [pp. 196–97], "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."

In 1986 Ringgold completed her story quilt *The Dinner Quilt*, setting twelve places at a sumptuous feast for great women in history, all of them African American. Clockwise from the head of the table are placemats stitched in honor of Madam C.J. Walker, Harriet Tubman, Maria Stewart, Bessie Smith, Mary McLeod Bethune, Augusta Savage, Billie Holiday (at the opposite head of the table), Zora Neale Hurston, Dorothy Dandridge, Marian Anderson, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Sojourner Truth. Notably, Truth was the only Black woman included with a seat at the table of Judy Chicago's feminist installation of thirty-nine place settings, *The Dinner Party* (1974–79) [Fig. 3], though other names are inscribed on the work's less acknowledged Heritage Floor.<sup>24</sup>

The dedication page of Ringgold's children's book *Dinner at Aunt Connie's House* (1993) [Fig. 4] acknowledges both of her parents, Andrew Louis Jones Sr. and Willi Edell Posey, as well as her maternal uncle, Cardoza Bunion Posey. While making clear her father was "no feminist," she mentions how Jones conferred greatness upon select women worthy of his admiration. Ringgold observes how those women had in common independence and risk-taking.<sup>25</sup> *Dinner at Aunt Connie's House* introduces readers to a great artist, Aunt Connie, her young



Fig. 3  
Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party*, 1974–79. Mixed media, 36 × 576 × 576 in (91.4 × 1463 × 1463 cm)

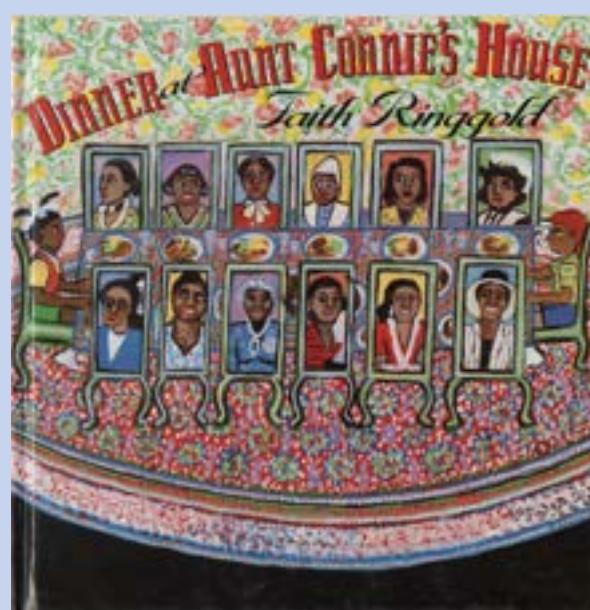


Fig. 4  
*Dinner at Aunt Connie's House* (1993) by Faith Ringgold

niece Melody, and Connie's adopted son Lonnie, Melody's new cousin. Prior to Connie's annual meal and reveal of new artworks, Connie's portraits come to life and lure Connie and Melody upstairs to share their stories. Eleven of the twelve sitters are women from *The Dinner Quilt*'s settings, with Rosa Parks replacing Billie Holiday in the storybook. (Parks is also Ringgold's historical heroine in her 1999 children's book *If a Bus Could Talk* [Fig. 5].) Each woman details her name, birth year, significant accomplishments, and exceptional life. Melody and Lonnie as young children discover who has shaped the past and therein find inspiration to chart ambitious courses for themselves. Lonnie decides to become an opera singer like Marian Anderson, knowing his path was made easier by her sacrifices. Melody vows to become president of the United States in order to "change some of the things that make people's lives so sad. I know I can do it because of these women."<sup>26</sup>

In *Bonjour, Lonnie* (1996) [Fig. 6], the young boy whom readers first met in *Dinner at Aunt Connie's House* is transported to Paris in order to learn who his birth parents are. France is represented through the architecture of Notre Dame, the Eiffel Tower, and the Arc de Triomphe, but the references to visual artists include neither Cézanne, Monet, nor Matisse but a portrait of Marcus Garvey and an evocation of Aaron Douglas's strong graphic sensibility. Even in her reenvisioning of wartime Paris—Lonnie time travels to the time his birth parents meet—Ringgold is inscribing Black people in the halls of culture throughout the storybook's pages rather than reinscribing the traditional French canon.

Each of Ringgold's stories contains moments of childlike wonderment and awe, and encourages a consistent ability to sus-

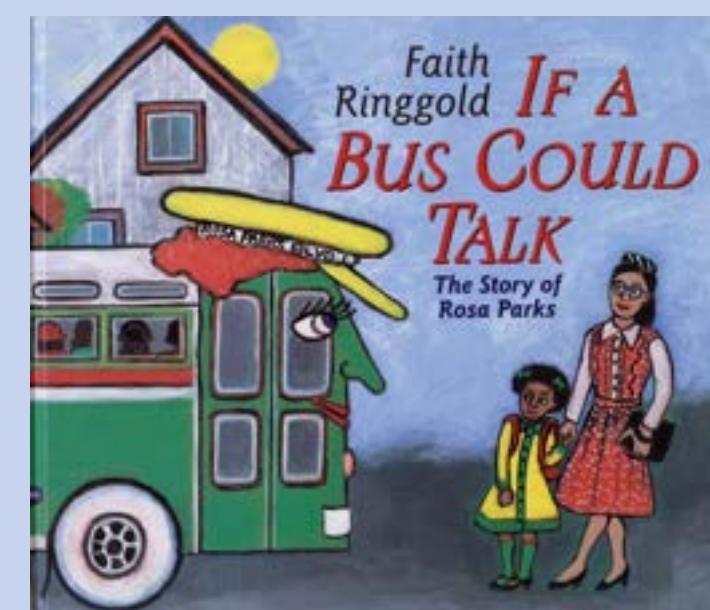


Fig. 5  
*If a Bus Could Talk: The Story of Rosa Parks* (1999)  
by Faith Ringgold

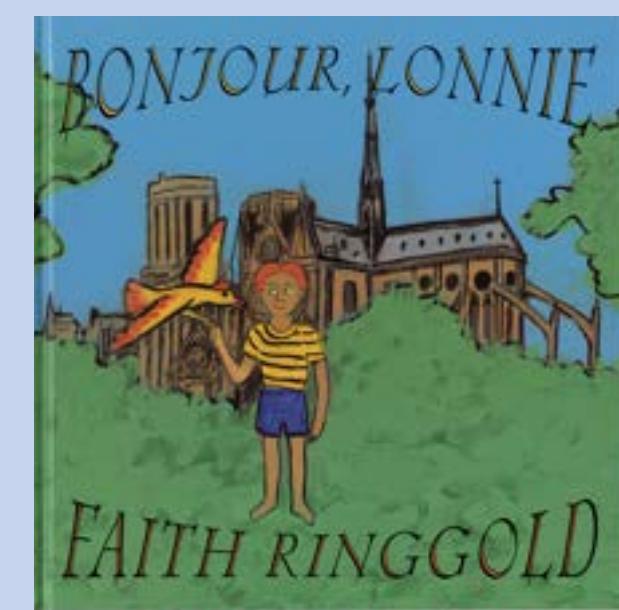


Fig. 6  
*Bonjour, Lonnie* (1996) by Faith Ringgold

pend disbelief, even in the face of violent realities and difficult circumstances. In this way, Ringgold proposes creativity as fuel that can propel children through illness and adversity if lifelong engagement in the arts is nurtured from a young age. Ringgold remarks, "I think it's exceedingly important for children to have art when they are very, very little. It's the one thing they can do all their life."<sup>27</sup> We, her viewer-readers, are fortunate that the age in which Faith Ringgold lives is now and that her children's books, numbering seventeen titles, vastly expand the worlds our children can hope to see and contribute to, long into the future.

- 1 Faith Ringgold, *We Flew over the Bridge: The Memoirs of Faith Ringgold*, 2nd ed. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 269.
- 2 Thalia Gouma-Peterson, "Faith Ringgold's Narrative Quilts," in *Faith Ringgold: Change: Painted Story Quilts* (New York: Bernice Steinbaum Gallery, 1987), 10.
- 3 Ringgold, *We Flew*, 9.
- 4 bell hooks, "Aesthetic Inheritances: History Worked by Hand," in *The Object of Labor: Art, Cloth, and Cultural Production*, ed. Joan Livingstone and John Ploof (Chicago: School of the Art Institute of Chicago; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 329.
- 5 Ringgold, *We Flew*, ix.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Ringgold, *We Flew*, 261.
- 8 Faith Ringgold, *Tar Beach* (New York: Crown, 1991), n.p.
- 9 Melody Graulich and Mara Witzling, "The Freedom to Say What She Pleases: A Conversation with Faith Ringgold," *NWSA Journal* 6, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 12, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4316306>.
- 10 Herbert Hill, "The Problem of Race in American Labor History," *Reviews in American History* 24, no. 2 (1996): 189–208, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30030646>.
- 11 Graulich and Witzling, "Freedom to Say," 14.
- 12 *Tar Beach* would go on to win the 1992 Coretta Scott King Award for illustration,

and it also became a Caldecott Honor Book that year. The coinlike seals of these two awards have appeared on every *Tar Beach* book cover since.

- 13 Graulich and Witzling, "Freedom to Say," 9.
- 14 Ringgold, *We Flew*, 225.
- 15 Graulich and Witzling, "Freedom to Say," 4.
- 16 Ringgold, *We Flew*, 269.
- 17 Graulich and Witzling, "Freedom to Say," 9.
- 18 Ringgold, *We Flew*, 261.
- 19 Faith Ringgold, *The Invisible Princess* (New York: Crown, 1999), n.p.
- 20 Alice Walker, in *Black Women Writers at Work*, ed. Claudia Tate (New York: Continuum, 1983), 176.
- 21 Romare Bearden, letter to Faith Ringgold, November 8, 1964, in Ringgold, *We Flew*, 150–51.
- 22 Graulich and Witzling, "Freedom to Say," 7.
- 23 Faith Ringgold, interview by Carol Jenkins, *Black America* episode "Art & Activism with Faith Ringgold," taped January 18, 2017, in New York, first aired January 25, 2017, CUNY TV, video, 10:31, <https://tv.cuny.edu/show/blackamerica/PR2005943>.
- 24 Judy Chicago responded to criticism about limited representation in *The Dinner Party* in the *New York Review of Books*: "The Dinner Party is a symbolic history of women in Western civilization . . . the 'Heritage Floor' . . . provides the literal and metaphoric foundation for the table. To focus only on 'who's at the table' is to over-simplify the art and ignore the criteria my studio team and I established and the limits we were working under." Judy Chicago, "A Place at the Table: An Exchange," *New York Review of Books*, July 11, 2018, <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2018/07/11/a-place-at-the-table-an-exchange/>.
- 25 Faith Ringgold, dedication in *Dinner at Aunt Connie's House* (New York: Hyperion, 1993), n.p.
- 26 Ringgold, *Dinner at Aunt Connie's House*, n.p.
- 27 Ringgold, interview, 3:10.

X

The Bitter Nest



The Bitter Nest, Part I: Love in the School Yard, 1988

Acrylic on canvas with printed, dyed, and pieced fabric  
75 1/2 x 92 1/2 in (191.8 x 235 cm)



The Bitter Nest, Part II: The Harlem Renaissance Party, 1988

Acrylic on canvas with printed, dyed, and pieced fabric  
94 × 83 in (238.8 × 210.8 cm)



X



The Bitter Nest, Part III: Lovers in Paris, 1988

Acrylic on canvas with printed, dyed, and pieced fabric  
96 x 83 in (243.8 x 210.8 cm)



The Bitter Nest, Part V: Homecoming, 1988

Acrylic on canvas with printed, dyed, and pieced fabric  
76 x 96 in (193 x 243.8 cm)

X



The Bitter Nest, Part IV: The Letter, 1988  
Acrylic on canvas with printed, dyed, and pieced fabric  
 $94\frac{1}{2} \times 84\frac{1}{2}$  in (240 x 214.6 cm)

# In Conversation: A Retelling of *Tar Beach*

Jordan Casteel

Cassie Louise Lightfoot's dream,  
to be free,  
to go wherever she wanted,  
is a dream I share with my ancestors.

*I will always remember the art on the walls around me  
that lifted me up above the Rocky Mountains.*

As a child,  
I began to imagine life beyond the corners of Denver, Colorado,  
through Cassie and her adventures in the Harlem sky  
on the rooftop of her family's apartment  
in the acclaimed children's book *Tar Beach*.

*I could see myself in the sky, with Grandmama and Granddaddy  
and Ms. Thomas and Mr. Bearden, the legends before me,  
making despite the pain as if it was normal,*

Through painted imagery and a storyline of a family that  
resembled my own,  
Faith captured my spirit and desire for adventure,  
enveloped in a world she made especially for me.

*and Fay Fay, my guide, ever present in my heart and mind,  
her images affirming like a familiar embrace  
guiding me through the sky.*

It was here, in the interior of my home, that I subconsciously  
absorbed the power of art.

*Reading Tar Beach was magical. Lying on the bed in the night,  
with possibilities all around me,  
made me feel seen—like all in the world was for me.*

I found that my story, humanity, and personal modes of  
expression were valuable.

*This book was my most prized possession.*

In my most intimate spaces growing up, I was surrounded by  
the work of

Faith,  
Charles White,  
Elizabeth Catlett,  
Romare Bearden,  
Hale Woodruff.

It was not until years later  
that I understood the privilege of this early exposure.

I discovered that my "normal" was not present  
in mainstream art narratives,  
the experiences of Black Americans were almost completely  
ignored  
within historical canons  
that have long defined value  
through critical and institutional investment.

*Grandmama said that Where We At was a  
beautiful collective of Black women artists and that it  
was founded in 1971, the very year Granddaddy died.*

*Fay Fay worked on that collective, sharing our narratives. Since then,  
I've wanted that community to be mine too.*

*Now I have claimed it. All I had to do was fly into it for it to  
be mine forever. I can wear it like a Fay Fay quilted coat,*

In reconciling the power of the images in my home  
with the lack of representations in institutions,  
I sought to dig deeper  
into the plights and stories of those artists who encircled me  
growing up.

My quest for understanding turned into years of chasing the  
same stars  
Faith has finally been counted among.

*or just fly above it and witness the strength in numbers.  
I can fly—yes, fly. Me, Jordan Margaret Casteel, only thirty-two  
years old, and I can fly. That means  
I am free to go wherever I want for the rest of my life.*

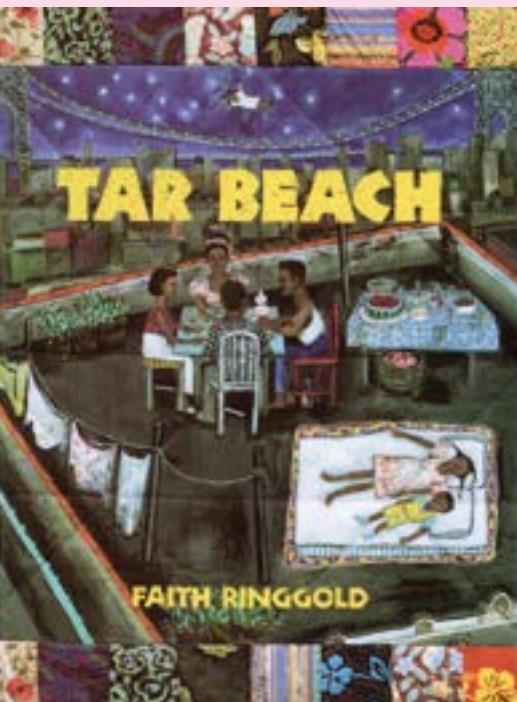


Fig. 1  
*Tar Beach* (1991) by Faith Ringgold

It was through Faith's words that I found the agency to thrive in  
an art world not made for me  
—just as Cassie found her place among the stars above the  
New York cityscape,  
claiming all that she deserved.

*Fay Fay took me to see the collective she's been  
working on.*

*She can fight in the most important rallies and not  
fall. They call her the Tigress.*

*But still she couldn't join Spiral because she  
was not a man.*

It is here,  
among the stars,  
that Faith has left me.

Through her voice and vision,  
I have been overcome  
by a sense of belonging,  
knowing that when committed to the work,  
the possibilities are endless.

*Well, Fay Fay is going to own that collective,  
'cause I'm gonna fly over it and give it to her.  
Then it won't matter that she's not in their old group,  
or whether she's a woman or inexperienced, like they say.*

She has forged a way out of no way,  
through her unwavering dedication to the justice, the work, and  
her sense of self,

*She'll be right and won't have to stand alone outside  
all day and night. She can walk into her own studio  
looking up.*

Shifting the landscape of possibility for young Black women  
such as myself.  
While we continue to pursue a not-yet-realized equity,  
Faith's stories offer us a road map.

*And Grandmama won't cry all year  
when Fay Fay goes looking for support and can't find her place.*

Her painterly gestures are unapologetic;  
they are honest.

*And Grandmama can laugh and sleep late like Mr. Bearden,*

A quilt,  
comfortable and familiar,  
contrasts with her representations of the horrors  
engraved on the souls of Black people.

*and we can have white cake every night for dessert.*

It is within each composition  
that her brilliance lies,  
depicting the true breadth of the Black experience,

*Next I'm going to fly over the cake factory,  
just to make sure we do.*

*Tonight we're going to read Tar Beach. Grandmama is roasting  
peanuts and frying chicken, and Granddaddy will bring home a  
watermelon. Mr. Bearden and Ms. Thomas will bring the paper and  
my favorite green pens.*

*Their guidance will nourish me,  
and I will fly to the studio.*

compelling us all

*I'll take Fay Fay with me. She has promised to tell me everything  
and not leave me behind.*

to reckon with ourselves.

*She told me it's very easy, anyone can fly.  
All you need is somewhere to go that you can't get to any other way.  
The next thing you know,  
you're flying among the stars.*

# The Fantastical Alive

Tschabalala Self

I first met Faith Ringgold at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York during my junior year of high school. Every Saturday morning in 2007, I would take the M3 bus from Harlem around Central Park and down Fifth Avenue to the Met, where I was an intern. I enjoyed this ritual—the humming of the bus engine from my favorite seat in the back, the view of the park, and my breakfast egg sandwich from the bodega—on my way to the grandest of archives.

I was lucky enough to be chosen to participate in a panel interview with Ringgold as part of the opening day ceremony of the new Ruth and Harold D. Uris Center for Education at the Met that year. I was very excited to have the opportunity to meet an artist whose work I looked at often in my favorite childhood book, *Tar Beach* (1991).

My mother bought me *Tar Beach* in 1996. We read it together and saw seemingly familiar faces in familiar places through Ringgold's depiction of a hot Harlem night. I saw myself as Cassie, the little girl in the picture book.

I asked Ringgold lots of questions that day at the Met, including ones about her influences and challenges as a Black woman in her field. I can't remember many details from that day, the art on the walls or the faces in the crowd (other than the face of my mom, who had left work early to see me in the panel), but I do distinctly remember Ringgold's poise and grace.

As a woman, I continue to see myself reflected in the complexity and nuance of Ringgold's subjects. Her self-portrait from 1965 captures the resolve and reserve of a young, sincere artist trying to find her bearings in the deeply contemplative field of painting. Her sidelong glance shows determination, while her crossed arms ostensibly show defiance. Yet I read apprehension—the apprehension of one who deeply considers her next move.

As a child, I loved *Tar Beach* because it so clearly reflected my reality. Today Ringgold's practice inspires me to acknowledge my reality as truth. Her work brings the fantastical alive. It sparks my imagination and has propelled my interest in the endless possibilities available within figuration.

# The Soft Library of Faith

Diedrick Brackens

Faith Ringgold makes me possible. Her long, storied life, the range of her practice, and the sheer volume of her production—it's all awe inspiring. Ringgold's output is filled with images of New York, American history, and the events of her life. What moves me is the way that she engages with her home, Harlem, and the intensity with which she represents the lives of her Black subjects and lays down the historical record. Ringgold represents a kind of artistic foremother for me as someone who so plainly fuses the worlds of medium and process to her race and gender. There are others I claim as part of my artistic lineage—Emma Amos, Barbara Chase-Riboud, Senga Nengudi, Maren Hassinger, and Joyce J. Scott—who come to mind as her contemporaries, all at times working at the intersections of fiber art, Blackness, and feminism. What sets Ringgold's work apart is her use of language and the exquisite reverberations of joy and rage that sweep across her work.

At the center of Ringgold's practice is a need to commune—to make, to make clear, to speak, to transmit information. Many of the works tell stories across panels, figures seeming to move from cell to cell in multiblock quilts or leap from one discreet textile to another in series that tell stories over longer stretches. This storyboarding strategy is not unfamiliar to comics, as well as early American quilts that employ a similar method to organize motifs and information. It is not just the organization of images in service of narrative that make plain her desire for connection. Ringgold thirsts for speech to be rendered palpable. Full sentences are often scrawled under the scenes that appear in quilts; other times phrases or a single provocative word bursts forth from the painted surfaces. Ringgold wanted to publish her writing in the traditional sense from very early on but was unsuccessful in finding someone to share in telling her truth. Writing has been there from the very first moments, and it does not surprise me that she turned to her quilts as substrates for narrative. Textile and text are, in fact, etymologically linked in the Latin word *textere*.

Beneath the language, there is a sense of the spiritual. For me, Ringgold's quilts become altars. She binds herself to artist and activist ancestors, celebrates her family, and, most importantly, exalts herself. She stretches the lineage of Black

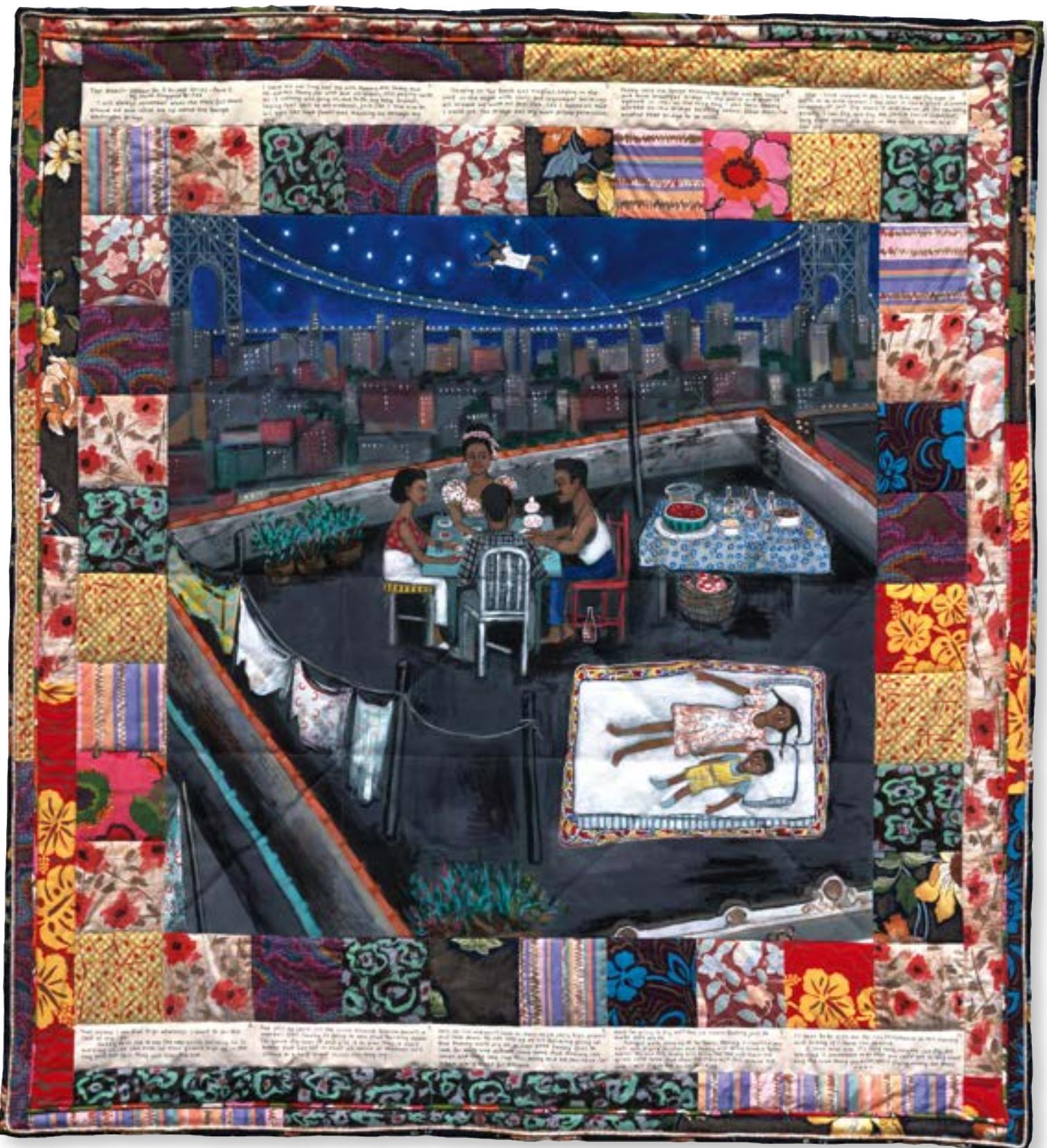
feminists across her quilts, emblazoning the faces and words of women like Sojourner Truth, Audre Lorde, and Alice Walker upon their surfaces. Ringgold also welcomes Picasso, Van Gogh, and other canonical artists to her table. When I look at a work like *Marlon Riggs: Tongues Untied* (1994), I am reminded that those we call dead are alive and loved within us. This quilt is in conversation with a broad range of works, from Harriet Powers's Bible quilts to panels from the NAMES Project. Moreover, I am reminded how my life and Ringgold's have been bound together from the beginning—she, as a Black woman, lifting up the name Marlon Riggs and calling it scared in the midst of the AIDS crisis, a powerful statement; and me, a Black queer person, drawing on both of their lives, as culture workers and Black people in a world hostile to our existence, in order to survive. She has always known what was at stake, that our lives and struggles are intersectional. In creating quilted works, she acknowledges that she is working in the medium our foremothers, both real and imagined, used to keep us warm, a medium that guides our aesthetics and cultural ethos, a medium that has belonged to feminist intervention in art production since the start of her career.

It has often occurred to me that one of textiles' most powerful allegiances is to healing. If we probe language further, we find the old English word *clitha* (a parent of the word *cloth*), meaning "poultice." I think Ringgold is aware that her narrative textiles are wholly dedicated to mending, to realignment. Cloth certainly tends to our physical needs in the form of bandages, slings, and cold compresses. She uses textiles to explore psychic space and to patch and poultice our interiority. She re-images history, considers rest, and reworks worlds through cloth.

I am embedded in the soft library of Faith. Here, alongside my contemporaries—folks like April Bey, Devin N. Morris, Bisa Butler, Ebony G. Patterson, and Njideka Akunyili Crosby—I am animated by her practice. Here, in our own quilting bee, I am learning to thread the needle and aim precisely. I am learning to be ferocious. I am learning to pad anger and baste kin, binding myself to urgency and home. I have learned to speak in order to heal.

Woman on a Bridge #1 of 5: Tar Beach, 1988  
Acrylic paint, canvas, printed fabric, ink, and thread  
74 5/8 x 68 1/2 in (189.5 x 174 cm)

X





X



Tar Beach II, 1990

Silk screen on silk with pieced fabric  
66 ¾ x 67 ½ in (169.6 x 171.5 cm)



Dancing on the George Washington Bridge, 1988  
Silkscreen on canvas  
68 × 68 in (172.7 × 172.7 cm)

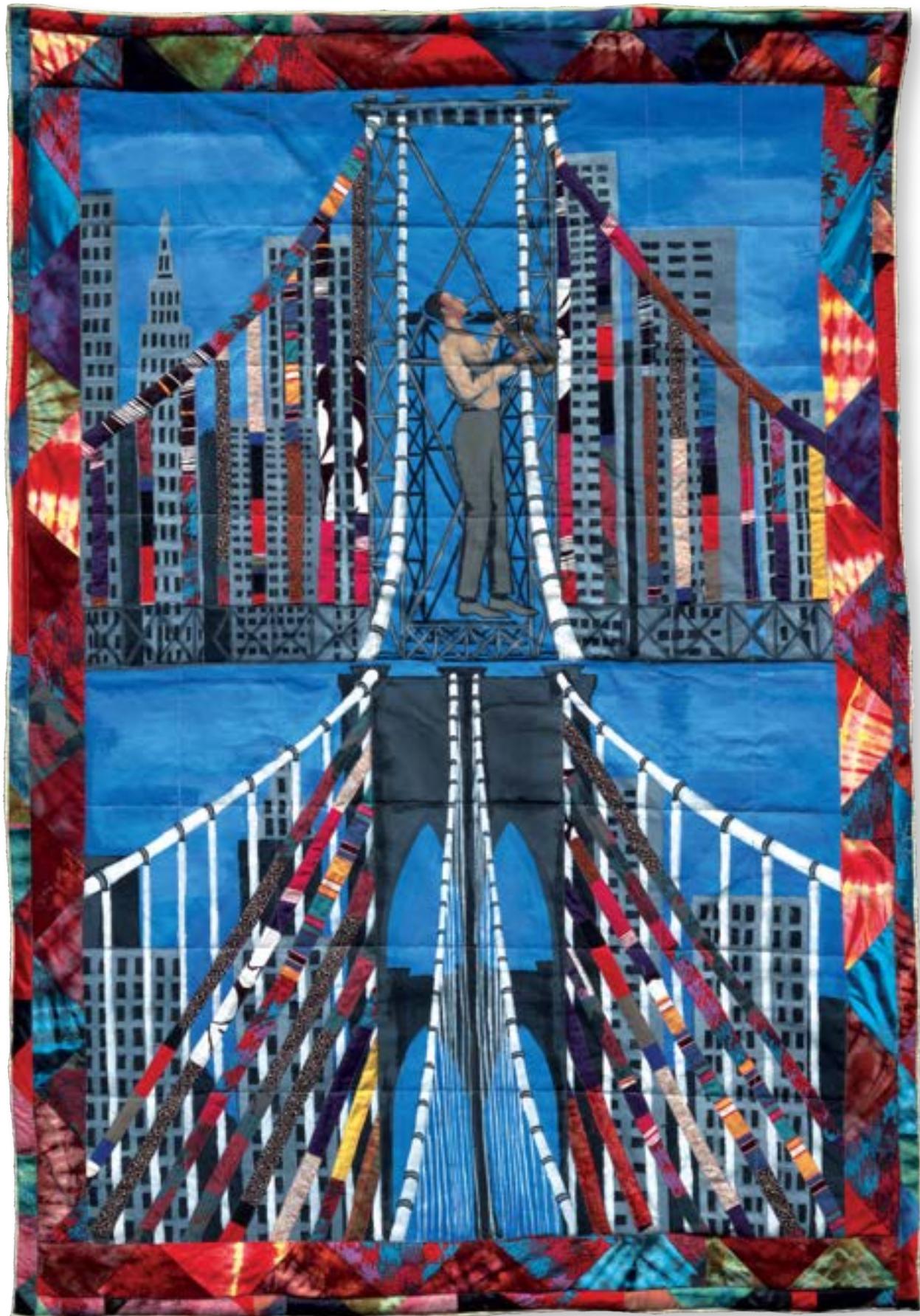
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The Winner: Woman on a Bridge #4, 1988

Acrylic on canvas with pieced fabric border  
68 × 68 in (172.7 × 172.7 cm)

172



Sonny's Bridge, 1986

Acrylic on canvas with printed and pieced fabric  
84 ½ × 60 in (214.6 × 152.4 cm)

173

# Dancing at the Louvre

Michele Wallace

In 1990 Faith began working on her most ambitious series of story quilts to date. It was called *The French Collection* and would eventually total twelve in number. Like much of her work from the 1980s, it was dedicated to the memory of her mother, fashion designer and bon vivant Mme. Willi Posey (Momma Jones, as my sister and I knew her) [Fig. 1]. It tells the story of Willia Marie Simone, a fictional character Faith invented (partly in her own image, partly in that of her mother), who travels to France in 1920 at the age of sixteen and marries a wealthy white American expatriate who dies soon after giving her two children, Marlena and Pierrot.

Willia Marie's Aunt Melissa financed her initial trip to France with a gift of \$500, on the supposition that it would be more likely for her as a Black woman in the 1920s to become a successful artist in France than in the United States. Getting married and having two babies was a detour in the opposite direction. And yet, still determined to become an artist, and with her husband's death having left her independently wealthy, she decides the best way to proceed is to send the children to Atlanta to be raised by her Aunt Melissa, leaving her free to pursue her career.

How Willia Marie's life subsequently unfolds, rendering her ultimately a successful expatriate Black woman artist living in France, is explained in an elliptical series of stories, most but not all of which are presented in the form of letters home to Aunt Melissa. These narratives, which are handwritten on the quilts, are paired with a series of images designed to provide a visual presentation of Willia Marie's progress.

The process of making this work included much input and support from others, as Faith acknowledges in her first publication on *The French Collection*, a 1992 artist book illustrated in black and white.<sup>1</sup> She thanks Denise Mumm for her quilting and Lisa Yi, then Faith's assistant in New York, for copying the stories onto the quilts. She expresses gratitude to the University of California, San Diego (where she was then a professor), and the National Endowment for the Arts for funding her travel abroad to scope out settings and find inspiration, and she thanks La Napoule Art Foundation for providing her with a three-month residency in the South of France, where she began the paintings.

In both stories and images, many of the details of Willia Marie's progress are not included. Instead, we get a series of keys



Fig. 1  
Mme. Willi Posey, Faith Ringgold's mother, 1950

to what Faith wants us to know about the process of becoming a successful Black woman artist. The titles of the twelve story quilts provide the first set of clues to Faith's focus and intentions in *The French Collection*.

**1. Dancing at the Louvre** (1991) [p. 185]. In the letter to Aunt Melissa that accompanies this image, Willia Marie talks about how her friend Marcia chides her for not having her children in France with her. The scenario illustrates the pressures involved in being a single mother with ambitions. With wry wit, Faith

models Marcia and her children on my sister Barbara and her three children, Faith, Teddy, and Martha, none of whom were invited to accompany Faith during her trips to Europe in the early 1990s.<sup>2</sup>

This image also has its roots in Faith's recollection of her first trip to France in 1961 on the SS *Liberté*, when she was accompanied by my sister and me as children, with Momma Jones as built-in babysitter [Fig. 2].<sup>3</sup> Faith took the trip two years after having received her master's degree in art education at the City College of New York. The goal (there was always a goal) was to figure out whether and/or how she could become an artist. Much delay related to being a working mother ensued.<sup>4</sup>

**2. Wedding on the Seine** (1991) [pp. 186–87] depicts Willia Marie dressed in her bridal gown, having fled her wedding party to throw her bridal bouquet into the Seine as an expression of her great trepidation about marriage. While the first work in *The French Collection* expresses reservations about the obstacles inherent to having children as a woman artist, this second panel casts doubt on the wisdom of being married as a female artist. Willia Marie is shown as a tiny doll-like figure on the Pont Neuf, the oldest of Paris's ancient bridges to the Île de la Cité, with some of Paris's most celebrated architecture in the background. Willia Marie is figuratively at the heart of the city, but her relatively diminutive size registers her vulnerability.

The text that accompanies this image, which appears not to be in the format of a letter to Aunt Melissa, provides crucial information. We learn that Willia Marie is afraid that getting married and then having children will interfere with her plans to become an artist. But we are also told that her wealthy husband dies three years after their marriage, which would appear to resolve the problem of what to do with a husband underfoot.

This particular narrative, I now believe thirty years subsequently, speaks directly to Faith's own situation as a married woman in her sixties with adult children, already a successful artist determined to become even more successful. She would spend the better part of two years on sabbaticals and grants in Europe pursuing this project.

When she wasn't in Europe, Faith was often painting and working with her artist assistants (Lisa Yi in New York, Gail Leiblig and Grace Matthews in La Jolla) and quilters (C. Love in La Jolla and Denise Mumm in New York) on various art and book projects in her spacious studio in La Jolla at the University of California, San Diego (UCSD), or in the studio she rented in Chelsea. She always had music playing and especially liked to listen to a recording of Ruby Dee reading from Zora Neale Hurston's *Mules and Men* (1935), a collection of African-American folklore. Much of the inspiration in her work and the laughter in their conversations were inspired by Hurston's tales and sayings.<sup>5</sup>

Faith's husband, Burdette, never accompanied her to either location, although he was repeatedly asked. Always he had his own life, his own friends (who were not particularly Faith's friends), and his own activities, even as he shared his life with her.<sup>6</sup> In the early '90s, they still lived in their spacious apartment, which they had bought when it became a co-op in



Fig. 2  
Mme. Willi Posey, Faith Ringgold, and Michele Wallace, Louvre Museum, Paris, 1961

the '80s. It was the crown jewel of a well-maintained Harlem building with twenty-four-hour doorman service. In 1963, when we moved in, it had previously been occupied by only one other tenant, the singer Dinah Washington. In the early '90s, Burdette was still working full-time at General Motors in Tarrytown, New York, although there were signs that the plant's days were numbered.

Once Faith had quit teaching in 1973, Burdette provided their primary financial support, but by the early '90s Faith was making a significant income teaching at UCSD, doing college lectures, touring exhibitions of her soft sculptures, quilts, masks, *tankas*, and performances, and selling art through her gallery in SoHo in New York. They had mostly kept their finances separate, and Faith was always free to spend her additional income as she chose, while Burdette remained largely responsible for the essentials.

*Wedding on the Seine* is a paradoxical Act One that offers more questions than answers. While the text and image are a tribute to the advantages of not having one's husband along, and the wisdom of marriage for a woman artist is questioned, I believe this story quilt may also be an expression of some regret on Faith's part about these ongoing separations from her husband. She loved her art-making and exploring, but she loved her husband too. With him she shared her happiness.<sup>7</sup>

But Burdette was afraid of flying. He would have loved the SS *Liberté*, but by then that ship had been decommissioned, like so many others. There were conversations about trains to California and boats to Europe, but neither ever happened.

**3. The Picnic at Giverny** (1991) [pp. 188–89] is one of five quilts in the series rendered as a group portrait. It is also the first in the series in which chronology and time get seriously wonky and discombobulated. Faith rearranges history and location to

include people, places, and events that did not and could not have shared the same context, to underscore the relevance of race and gender to her project.

Claude Monet lived at his home in Giverny, France, from 1883 until his death in 1926. The letter to Aunt Melissa doesn't say who has invited Willia Marie to paint at Giverny, only that she had received an invitation, but given that the context is the 1920s, the invitation would have needed to be from Monet himself, since he died in 1926, after which Giverny was much neglected. It wasn't until his son Michel gave Giverny to the Académie des beaux-arts in 1966 that renovations began that ultimately restored Giverny to its previous glory, providing the access Faith received in the '90s.<sup>8</sup>

The setting of the painting is Monet's garden in Giverny. Willia Marie is shown painting a portrait of a group of women. She is wearing a white dress and high heels, a motif in the series that acts as a tribute to my grandmother, who always kept Faith, herself, and her granddaughters fashionably dressed in couture-level ensembles of her own design. In this sense, Willia Marie's attire combines Faith with Momma Jones.

The women in the painting are said to be discussing women's liberation, which fascinates Willia Marie. However, her overarching topic in this letter to Aunt Melissa is, What shall I paint? What should a Black woman artist paint in order to be recognized? How can she make the magic necessary to the creation of art? She writes in her letter:

Should I paint some of the great and tragic issues of our world? A black man toting a heavy load that has pinned him to the ground? Or a black woman nursing the world's population of children? Or the two of them together as slaves, building a beautiful world for others to live free? Non! I want to paint something that will inspire—liberate. I want to do some of this WOMEN ART. Magnifique!



Fig. 3  
Mme. Willi Posey (center) with models including daughters Barbara Jones (far right) and Faith Ringgold (fourth from right), 363 Edgecombe Avenue, Harlem, New York, 1959



Fig. 4  
Édouard Manet, *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* [Luncheon on the Grass], 1863.  
Oil on canvas, 81 1/8 x 104 1/8 in (208 x 264.5 cm)

The women included in the painting were all then current supporters of Faith's artistic practice. This painting thus forms a tribute to their assistance and in some cases—for example, the inclusion of Emma Amos—an acknowledgment of the helpfulness of their being.<sup>9</sup>

In the letter, Willia Marie describes her painting as being inspired by Édouard Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (1863) [Fig. 4]. She inserts an elderly Pablo Picasso, naked apart from his rakish hat, into the scene of fully clothed women, a tongue-in-cheek reversal of Manet's painting of a picnic in which the women are naked and the men are clothed. "C'est la fantaisie pure," she writes to Aunt Melissa. Picasso's insertion here is the first indication of his importance in the series. He painted women compulsively throughout his career, often in a manner considered the antithesis of the liberated woman. However, Picasso did liberate the female form and face from its previously stultifying conventions in representation, even if he appears to have been a rather difficult father, lover, and husband to the children and women in his life.

**4. The Sunflowers Quilting Bee at Arles** (1991) [pp. 190–93] was made at a time when Faith was doing commissions for Oprah Winfrey, which included a portrait of Maya Angelou for her birthday.<sup>10</sup> Set against a field of sunflowers, Willia Marie has executed a portrait of the fictional National Sunflower Quilters Society of America, composed of historical female figures Winfrey admired.

But Faith made the subject completely her own, framing their gathering as an international celebration. The group tours the world staging quilting bees to spread the cause of peace. These historic icons of African-American history all brought together in one time and one place give this image a dreamlike

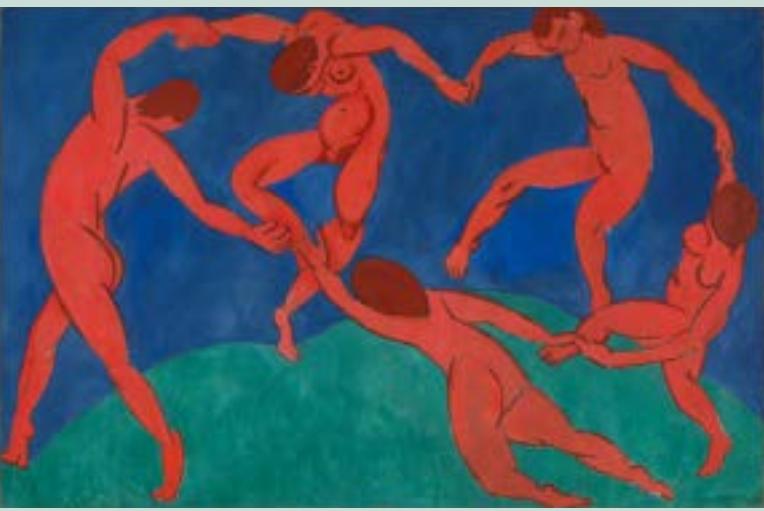


Fig. 5  
Henri Matisse, *Dance*, 1910. Oil on canvas, 102 3/8 x 154 in (260 x 391 cm)

quality. Sojourner Truth was a Dutch-speaking slave born at the end of the eighteenth century. Harriet Tubman, Madam C.J. Walker, Ida B. Wells, and Mary McLeod Bethune were all born in the nineteenth century, whereas Fannie Lou Hamer, Rosa Parks, and Ella Baker were born in the early twentieth century. All of them except Baker were born in the South, and all were major supporters of African-American civil rights for their entire lives.

They are presented here working together on a sunflower quilt in the middle of a sunflower field in France, as a metaphorical representation of their important work in human rights. Standing nearby is Vincent van Gogh with a bouquet of sunflowers, with the town of Arles in the background. His presence unsettles them. "Is this a natural setting for a black woman?" Sojourner asks Willia Marie. She tells them it wasn't possible for her to be an artist in the United States, to which they respond, "We are all artists. Piecing is our art. We brought it straight from Africa.... That was what we did after a hard day's work in the fields to keep our sanity and our beds warm and bring beauty into our lives. That was not being an artist. That was being alive."

Later on, after they have finished the quilt, they say, "Now we can do our real quilting, our real art: making this world piece up right." By virtue of these exchanges, the notion of what quilting is, what art is for a Black woman, and what it should be for Willia Marie is several times reformulated. Quilting is claimed first as African, then as art, then as a means of healing the wounds and suffering of the Black community and the world. And there is even more to art than that: "making this world piece up right."

Although there are many reproductions of this quilt on the internet, Faith and I haven't seen the actual quilt since

Winfrey bought decades ago, which makes us sad, especially given the beauty of its message and creation. This 2022 exhibition at the New Museum marks the quilt's first public display in almost a quarter of a century.

**5. Matisse's Model** (1991) [p. 194] is one of three from the series featuring a woman reclining in the posture of an odalisque, obviously influenced by the many famous odalisques in art history. In this painting, Willia Marie is modeling nude for Henri Matisse. Matisse's head is rendered in black and white in the foreground. In the background is his masterpiece *Dance* (1910) [Fig. 5], the one that now hangs at the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, in which the women's bodies are redder than the paler version owned by the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York.

The narrative turns out to be a reflection on the subject of beauty and the issues African Americans, women in particular, face concerning the darkness of skin. What is beauty? Can dark skin be beautiful? We know of at least one Black woman, Josephine Baker, who was considered a beauty in France in the 1920s. In the United States, not so much. But more to the point: What does being an artist's model have to do with becoming an artist? Only women are expected to use such employment as a means of entry into the art world.

**6. Matisse's Chapel** (1991) [p. 195] is set in the interior of the Chapelle du Rosaire, also known as the Matisse Chapel, a project he worked on from 1947 to 1951 in Vence on the French Riviera. While today the chapel is maintained as a tourist destination, in the early '90s, the only way Faith could gain access to it was to attend a mass, which she did.

The dominant colors of the quilt are the blue, yellow, and green of the chapel's stained-glass windows. Seated and standing are Faith's ancestors and relatives, all deceased. These include my grandmother, Momma Jones, as she would have looked when she was about sixty. Seated next to her is her oldest daughter, Barbara, wearing the wedding gown her mother made for her in 1950. In Momma Jones's lap is Ralph, the child she lost right before she had Faith. To her left is Faith's father, Andrew Sr., and her oldest brother, Andrew. Both are attired in tuxedos, as they were at my Aunt Barbara's wedding [Fig. 7].

To the left is a group of two men and four women, all elderly. On the left is Ida Matilda Bingham Posey [Fig. 8], the mother of Momma Jones, seated next to Susie Shannon [Fig. 9] and Betsy Bingham (Momma Jones's great-grandmother and grandmother, respectively), both quilters and dressmakers, and both born slaves. When Momma Jones was a child, Betsy and Susie lived together in a house in Jacksonville, Florida, a dressmaker sign posted on the front, until they both died in advanced old age. Next to Betsy is Professor Benjamin Bunyon "B. B." Posey [Fig. 11], Momma Jones's father, a teacher and school principal who died of appendicitis in 1912 in Palatka, Florida, which was where Momma Jones was born.<sup>11</sup> Behind them sit Aunt Janie and Uncle Peter. Peter may have been Ida Matilda's sibling and the son of Betsy. Janie was perhaps his wife.

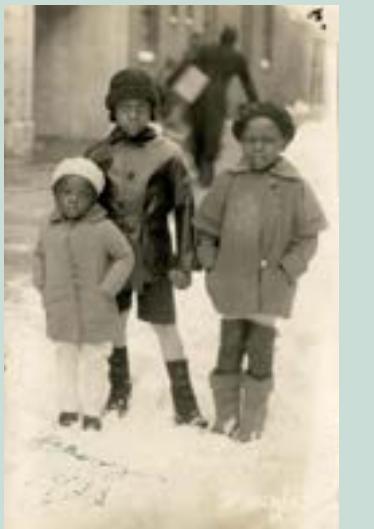


Fig. 6  
Faith, Andrew, and Barbara, Harlem,  
New York, Winter 1932



Fig. 7  
Andrew Sr. and Andrew Jr. at  
Barbara Jones's wedding, with  
Aunt Bessie in the background,  
1950

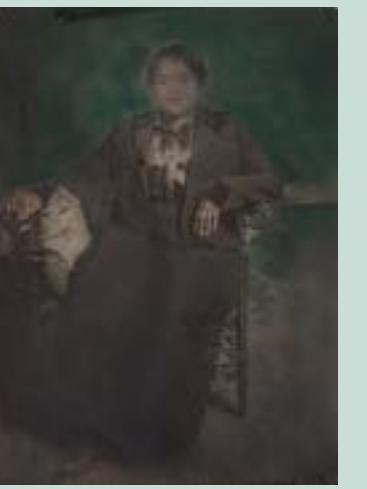


Fig. 8  
Ida Matilda Bingham Posey,  
Faith Ringgold's grandmother



Fig. 9  
Susie Shannon, Faith Ringgold's  
great-great-grandmother



Fig. 10  
Barbara, Andrew, and Faith Jones,  
222 West 146th Street, Harlem,  
New York, 1930s



Fig. 11  
Benjamin Bunyon Posey, Faith  
Ringgold's grandfather

Arranged along the back of the chapel are Momma Jones's siblings: Hilliard, the youngest; Cardoza, her oldest brother, born in 1893; Edith; Bessie, her oldest sister; Bessie's daughter Mildred (who had died prematurely of Alzheimer's); and another sibling, Ida Mae. All of the likenesses thus far are based on photographs and memories. The two standing figures in the back, however—Faith's father's parents, Baby Doll Hurd and Reverend Jones—are largely imagined. Faith met Baby Doll on at least two occasions when she came to stay with them. Andrew Sr. and Momma Jones were no longer together, but his mother couldn't stay with him because she was very religious, and he was a raucous gambler, drinker, and womanizer—the nice kind but far too profane for his mother, who was married to a minister. Although it was my impression that Momma Jones gladly welcomed guests from down South, Faith had somewhat unpleasant memories of Baby Doll's visits.<sup>12</sup> Not sure why.

The story that goes with this image is in the form of a dream that Willia Marie recounts to Aunt Melissa, in which she refers to the people assembled as "the dead members of our family . . . gathered in Henri Matisse's Chapel in Vence." When Willia Marie arrives, Grandma Betsy is telling a story that was told to her by her mother, Susie. A white man asked her how she felt about being a descendant of slaves. She shot back at him, "How you feel descendant [sic] from slavers?"

The man then tells a story about his grandmother and grandfather, slavers from South Carolina, on a vessel returning from Europe. A slave ship in distress approached them, bringing with it a terrible fragrance of shackled bodies. While white women dressed in white stood on deck regarding the slave ship with disdain, suddenly a large gust of wind blew the stink of the slave ship into their faces. As the passengers on the ocean liner were throwing up, the slaves were smiling and waving. Then the ocean liner caught fire, forcing the passengers to inhale even more deeply the insufferable fragrance from the slave ship.

The story concludes, "God don't love ugly. That white man got to live his own story and we got to live ours." In the 1990s when I first wrote about this quilt, I didn't know how to regard this story, which is like a labyrinth with a story inside a story inside a story. As a student of literature, I had learned early never to ignore a story within a story, and to realize that it always means something other than what is being said.

Now I acknowledge that Faith wanted to capture the anger of the former slaves without degrading them, so she placed our actual ancestors (who are also Willia Marie's ancestors) in their best clothes in this beautiful chapel to talk about the ugliness and filth that necessarily accompanies a scene of enslavement. Having extensively studied photographs of slaves and elderly Blacks postslavery, I know these images were in common circulation in Faith's youth and that they were viewed by her and other northern Black children in integrated schools with white teachers as demeaning and critical of the slaves themselves. Moreover, throughout the United States (except in entirely segregated Black institutions), prevailing scholarship took the stance that emancipation had been wasted on the former slaves—their attempts to vote, to educate themselves,

and to prosper were a dismal failure. To this day, I fear this may still be what white Americans are thinking when they hear the words "Black Power," or even "Black Lives Matter."<sup>13</sup>

There is erasure at play as well, in that the story is presented in a dream and through the voices of people who are no longer alive. Also, if one accepts that these people were my mother's ancestors, although they were all deceased by 1990 when she did this work, many of them would not have been deceased in the 1920s when Willia Marie was having this dream. Indeed, every one of them, apart from Susie, would have still been alive. And several—Aunt Barbara, Uncle Andrew, and Uncle Ralph—would not have yet been born. You could say this was the family that Faith was born into before Ralph's death in 1929.

But it is the 1920s' proximity to slavery that troubles me most about the story. It would have been a mere sixty years since emancipation in the United States when Willia Marie was writing the letter, which means former slaves, as well as former soldiers in the Civil War, were everywhere in the United States, North and South. There were other places in the New World, such as Cuba and Brazil, in which slavery was practiced on a much larger scale and for significantly longer. And, of course, France continued to be a major colonial power in the Caribbean and Africa, perpetuating poverty and disenfranchisement, which were the direct results of centuries of slavery and imperialism.

In 8. **On the Beach at St. Tropez** (1991) [p. 199] Willia Marie explains to her son, Pierrot, why she chose to stay in France and be an artist rather than raise him. This conversation goes smoothly and serenely, reflecting Faith's view that relationships between mothers and sons are less volatile and expressing her own regret that she never had a son.

12. **Moroccan Holiday** (1997) [pp. 206–07], the final installment of *The French Collection*, shows Willia Marie and her daughter, Marlena, having a conversation about motherhood and heroism. The title alludes to the fact that Faith and her friend Moira spent considerable time in Morocco hunting for an appropriate setting for this all-important mother-daughter confab. (It was among the last of both *The French Collection* and *The American Collection* to be completed, and my opinion on its texts was requested on more than one occasion during its composition, for Faith and Moira were high-speed daily faxers then.)

However, ultimately the scene was set in Willia Marie's studio against a background of four portraits, presumably by Willia Marie, of Black heroic figures: Frederick Douglass, Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King Jr. Willia Marie says that if she had been born a man, she would have been just like one of them.

Marlena insists that Aunt Melissa, who raised her, was as heroic as these men and says that if she ever has children, she vows to raise them herself, making implicit her sense of disappointment with her mother. But she has decided to be an artist herself and will have her chance to demonstrate whether she can do a better job at being a woman than her mother. (*The American*

*Collection*, which follows *The French Collection*, focuses on Marlena's career as an artist in the United States. She has much success but ends up alone, never marries, and has no children.)

How this conversation relates to our family has always puzzled me. Is it a form of subterfuge, a higher level of consciousness, or some crafty and noble combination? While I have always lived in a culture in which the artful is celebrated over the factual, the urge to fictionalize reality baffles me more and more the older I get, although the relationship of fiction to the truth still fascinates me. This one I will continue to ponder—I haven't a clue. It won't stand still to be analyzed. I think the most puzzling part is trying to imagine Douglass, Garvey, King, and Malcolm X as women, when they were all so clearly handicapped in life by their masculinity.

There are two other group portraits in *The French Collection*:

9. **Dinner at Gertrude Stein's** (1991) [p. 201] and 11. **Le Café des Artistes** (1994) [pp. 204–05]. In both cases, illustrious Black writers and artists, male and female, are interspersed with celebrated white modernists: Picasso and Ernest Hemingway at Gertrude Stein's and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Maurice Utrillo, Paul Gauguin, and van Gogh at Le Café des Artistes. The café, which Willia Marie owns, turns into a real battle royal over the declaration of Black feminist freedom for Black women artists. Faith includes portraits of Loïs Mailou Jones, Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller, and Elizabeth Catlett, as well as William H. Johnson, Archibald Motley, Sargent Johnson, Henry Ossawa Tanner, Romare Bearden, and Jacob Lawrence. And she includes herself (as Faith Ringgold), as well as Ed Clark and Raymond Saunders, whom she hung out with in Paris.

"The important thing for the colored woman to remember is we must speak, or our ideas and ourselves will remain unheard and unknown," Willia Marie writes to Aunt Melissa. "The café is my academie, my gallery, my home. The artists and writers are my teachers, and my friends. But Africa is my art, my classical form and inspiration."

10. **Jo Baker's Birthday** (1993) [pp. 202–03] combines a portrait of Baker nearly nude, in a manner reminiscent of Olympia and the Manet portrait, but the image is combined with a Matisse masterpiece called *The Red Room (Harmony in Red)* (1908) [Fig. 12]. In the process, the Black Jo Baker becomes the Olympia figure, and the white woman in the background is configured as her servant, reversing the racial roles of the Manet painting.

*The French Collection* piece that probably preoccupies me the most at this particular moment is 7. **Picasso's Studio** (1991) [pp. 196–97]. Willia Marie is posing for Picasso in his studio with *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907) [Fig. 13] in the background. Picasso is presented as an elderly man in his sixties or seventies, as he would have looked during Faith's early career as an artist, not as the young man of twenty-five who painted *Les Demoiselles*. In Willia Marie's letter to Aunt Melissa, an exchange between the African masks in the studio and the women in the painting ensues, each encouraging Willia Marie to take what is hers, as

a person of African descent and as a woman. Under consideration is the relationship between European modernism and Africa.

Long before Faith created *The French Collection*, even before our first trip to France, my sister and I as children would accompany my mother to view Picasso's powerful masterpiece *Guernica* (1937) [p. 25], which was in exile at MoMA, not to be returned to Spain until it was no longer a fascist dictatorship under Francisco Franco.

In the late '60s and early '70s, beginning when I was sixteen in 1968, Faith and I participated in protests in the museum orchestrated by the Art Workers' Coalition in response to its lack of inclusion of Black and Puerto Rican artists. *The Jungle* (1943) [Fig. 14] by the Cuban artist Wifredo Lam (who had met and was greatly influenced by Picasso) was one of the few works by an artist of African descent prominently displayed in the lobby then. During the first of these protests I can recall, Faith focused on the demand for a Martin Luther King Jr. Wing at MoMA, partly in response to King's recent assassination. We found a small work from *The Migration Series* (1940–41) by Jacob Lawrence, an African-American artist, on display and designated that room as the likely site of the wing.

Deep in my Black cultural nationalism phase then, I led our group of protesters in an African chant I had recently learned at the National Black Theatre under the tutelage of the actress Barbara Ann Teer, in a studio on 125th Street near the Studio Museum in Harlem then belonging to the original Last Poets. Other protests followed by Art Strike, Ad Hoc Women Artists' Committee, Black Emergency Cultural Coalition, and other groups affiliated with the Art Workers' Coalition, often led by friends and comrades Jon Hendricks and Jean Toche, in which *Guernica* sometimes figured prominently [Fig. 15].<sup>14</sup>



Fig. 12  
Henri Matisse, *The Red Room (Harmony in Red)*, 1908. Oil on canvas, 71 x 87 in (180.5 x 221 cm)



Fig. 13  
Pablo Picasso, *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, 1907. Oil on canvas, 96 x 92 in (243.9 x 233.7 cm)

Picasso died in 1973, followed by Franco in 1975. After much negotiation, *Guernica* was finally returned to Spain in 1981, abruptly ending MoMA's long engagement with the work. Faith painted *Die* in 1967, while my sister and I were in Europe with our grandmother. This powerful twelve-by-six-foot diptych tribute to *Guernica* and the protests of the '60s languished in obscurity for decades, until Dorian Bergen at ACA Galleries began to collaborate with Thom Collins on the 2011 exhibition he curated at the Neuberger Museum in Purchase, New York, bringing Faith's master works of the 1960s out of the shadows.

From this point, Bergen, sometimes collaborating with Collins, proceeded in a campaign to heighten the profile of *Die*, in particular by inserting it appropriately into a range of high-profile exhibitions abroad. At least twice *Die* was shown in exhibitions that directly engaged with Picasso's influence on contemporary artists, first in Barcelona and then in Paris. The first of these was called "Post-Picasso: Contemporary Reactions" at the Museu Picasso in Barcelona in 2014, curated by Michael FitzGerald, who had also curated "Picasso and American Art" at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 2006.<sup>15</sup> Whereas the Whitney exhibition was sadly bereft of Black representation, apart from a perfunctory mention of Jean-Michel Basquiat<sup>16</sup> in the text, "Post-Picasso" orbited around the influence of Picasso's work on artists from all over the world, with a particular focus on African diasporic artists, among them Ibrahim El-Salahi, Basquiat, Lam, and Faith. The exhibition and resulting book, which juxtaposed Picasso's works with those of artists who were influenced by him (including Jasper Johns, Roy Lichtenstein, Deborah Kass, Red Grooms, Carol Bove, Claes Oldenburg, and so on), were divided into segments that focused on particular themes and periods of his work.



Fig. 14  
Wifredo Lam, *The Jungle*, 1943. Gouache on paper mounted on canvas, 94 1/4 x 90 1/2 in (239.4 x 229.9 cm)

A section each was devoted to *Les Demoiselles* and *Guernica*. The section on *Les Demoiselles* features a color reproduction of Faith's *Picasso's Studio* from *The French Collection*. FitzGerald discusses her seeming lack of concern with Picasso's reputation for misogyny and sexism, which has colored the artist's reception in the United States for many decades. Clearly, he expected when writing this text to be able to borrow *Picasso's Studio* from the Worcester Art Museum in Massachusetts (which rarely loans it), but he got only *Die*, which was featured in the section on *Guernica*, in which he quotes me as having written that Faith "saw in Picasso a place where she, as a black artist produced by the West, could think about her African heritage." Then FitzGerald writes, "Ringgold explored this set of relationships most complexly in *Picasso's Studio*".<sup>17</sup>

In 2016 MoMA bought *Die* and has exhibited it prominently ever since. In 2019, after a massive reorganization of the permanent collection, one of the most talked and written about aspects was the placement of *Die* in what some referred to as the "Picasso room," juxtaposing it with *Les Demoiselles* [p. 28].<sup>18</sup> Faith's *Picasso's Studio* and Picasso's *Guernica* form the missing connective tissue.

Soon after this reopening, Suzanne Preston Blier, an African art expert, published her genealogical monograph on *Les Demoiselles* with an emphasis on its African influences in Paris at the time of its creation.<sup>19</sup> The critical thing Blier does is to deconstruct the misinterpretation of *Les Demoiselles* as a portrayal of a brothel (which has been dominant in its criticism), thus allowing the African presence in Paris in 1907 and in the painting to reemerge as a legitimate and important focus. She draws upon not only the presence of African sculpture in Picasso's circle but also the proliferation in Paris of ethnograph-

ic photography of nude adolescent girls of color, substantiating that Picasso collected such photographs and clearly was influenced by some of them in sketches and paintings at that time.

I don't understand people who don't understand Picasso. Because of my early education in African art and Cubism, it is impossible for me to unsee the obvious formal relationship between the two. I know this connection is basic to the development of Faith's career as an artist. On the other hand, it may also be impossible to explain it to others. The art world has moved on quite a bit. It is partly that Marcel Duchamp came to the United States, while Picasso never did.<sup>20</sup>

No sooner had I found Blier's book than our entire world shut down in the shadow of the dreaded COVID-19 epidemic, under the specter of the scary blond president from hell and the constant simultaneous refrain of Black Lives Matter in the streets, in the wake of unremitting police violence against Black people.

\* \* \*

Our current political turmoil provides a useful transition to the first work in *The American Collection* (1997): **1. We Came to America** [pp. 213–15].<sup>21</sup>

*The American Collection* was intended to be composed of twelve pieces, one of which was never completed and all of which were to be understood as paintings done by Marlena, Willia Marie's adult daughter, as a successful Black woman artist living in the United States. She should be regarded as a doppelganger for Faith, living and working in roughly the same time frame but more successful, possibly because she has no husband and children.



Fig. 15  
Art Workers' Coalition and the Guerrilla Art Action Group protest in front of Picasso's *Guernica* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, January 8, 1970

In *The American Collection* Faith decides to no longer include the stories on the quilts. Nevertheless, *We Came to America* has the most complete story, based on an elaborate scenario that includes a burning slave ship set afire by a Black Statue of Liberty holding a torch in one hand and a Black child in the other. Around her are the slaves who have escaped, walking on water. This is a mysterious work for me, because unlike our usual stories concerning slaves walking on water, these slaves are not walking back to Africa but are being welcomed to North America by a Black Statue of Liberty. Since the Statue of Liberty was not erected until the late 1880s, in a time in which both the French and American men in power regretted the emancipation of the slaves and were certainly not in favor of their political freedom, one way to see Faith's work is as an alternative earlier history that might have superseded the Civil War and Reconstruction when the importation of slaves was still legal, which would have been before 1830.

**2. A Family Portrait** [p. 216] includes Aunt Melissa seated in an armchair holding Marlena and Pierrot as children, in front of two portraits of Willia Marie and her French husband. The family is obviously multiracial, not only because Willia Marie's husband has white skin and blond hair but also because Pierrot, who can pass for white and sometimes does, is of similar coloration. Biracial blond male children often appear in Faith's work, perhaps inspired by her husband, Burdette, who had very light skin and blond hair as a child. Although Burdette was African American on both sides, according to the DNA test I encouraged him to take, he was actually more than 50 percent European. I wonder about the accuracies of these businesses, which, for instance, cannot provide women with a full genetic picture unless their fathers have been genotyped as well. Only men are able to retrieve their paternal DNA, and yet it is women who have the babies. Something about this doesn't seem right. Of course, all of this is ancient, going back one hundred thousand years when the first modern humans walked out of Africa and gradually populated the entire planet. Presumably we are all descended from them, and yet there continue to be astounding discoveries of prehistoric remains all over Africa, gradually changing the comprehension of those who specialize in this field.

One thing is for sure: we are in the habit of identifying people by the way they look. And another thing is certain: you can't tell much about a person's genealogy from looking at them. This is part of what Faith was pointing out in making Pierrot and Marlena, who are siblings, different colors.

**3. Born in a Cotton Field** [p. 217] shows a slave couple with a baby in a cottonfield at night. Over them hovers a magical figure with long arms, a sequence that would later appear in a children's book by Faith called *The Invisible Princess* (1999). The book's titular character is born a slave but escapes persecution and is protected by the fact that she is invisible to all whites. The only white person who is able to see her is the master's daughter, who is blind. The book is beautifully illustrated with images

that elaborate upon the sequence from *Born in a Cotton Field*. As is not unusual in Faith's children's work, the ending is a happy one. The master relinquishes his plantation in order to be reunited with his blind daughter, who has rejected him for his racism.

**4. Jo Baker's Bananas** [p. 218] shows Marlena and her brother at the opening of Marlena's exhibition at MoMA. They are standing in front of a painting called *Jo Baker's Bananas* with a chorus line of multiple Josephine Bakers dancing in banana skirts.

**5. Bessie's Blues** [p. 219] was inspired by the work of Andy Warhol and features a grid of identical Bessie Smiths.

**6. The Flag is Bleeding #2** [p. 220] was inspired by the original *American People Series #18: The Flag Is Bleeding* (1967) [pp. 44–45], except instead of a Black man bleeding from a knife wound, a white woman and a white man with a gun, and the stripes bleeding, this time it is a Black woman who is bleeding, holding her two children by their hands.

**7. Stompin at the Savoy** (for which there are only sketches) was never completed.

**8. Cotton Fields, Blackbirds, Sunflowers, and Quilting Bees** [p. 221] was conceived as a kind of replacement for *The Sunflowers Quilting Bee at Arles*. The blackbirds were an addition that came out of Faith and Birdie's (Burdette) move to Englewood, New Jersey, where the crows would sometimes peck on Birdie's bedroom window to remind him to feed them.

**9. Two Jemimas** [p. 222] was inspired by Willem de Kooning's *Two Women* paintings. Like *Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima?* (1983) [p. 115], this work engages with stereotypes of Black women.

In **10. Wanted: Douglass, Tubman, and Truth** [p. 223], the three titular characters are situated together in a rural setting. Faith wanted to know, did they ever meet? My research says yes, and that they were friends. All three lived substantially after slavery was abolished and continued to work for human rights in the Black community in a variety of ways. Of course, Douglass was the literate one who wrote many speeches and books.

At this point, Faith began to paint many rural settings, possibly in response to her move to Englewood, where she bought and remodeled a house, which was only a block from a nature preserve called Flat Rock. The last two of *The American Collection* show Marlena alone in a forest. In **11. Picnic on the Grass Alone** [p. 224], the man who was to meet her didn't show up. **12. Listen to the Trees** [p. 225] is yet another meditation on solitude. The entire series gives Marlena financial success but without children and a partner.

As Faith was completing *The American Collection*, she began to transition into a series called *Coming to Jones Road*, focused on her reception in Englewood, which was not welcoming. Parts 1

and 2 both focused on a group of runaway slaves who escaped from the South to find refuge on Jones Road in the eighteenth century. As it turns out, New Jersey was one of the last states to abolish slavery. But that didn't preclude, given its rural terrain, communities of escaped slaves living there. Once again, as she had done in *The French Collection* and *The American Collection*, in *Coming to Jones Road* Faith combined her own biography and experience with the history of her own people and ancestors, weaving a rich polyphony of voices, each speaking in their individual way but always in the first-person plural.

1 Faith Ringgold, *The French Collection, Part 1* (New York: Being My Own Woman Press, 1992).

2 Barbara's daughters Faith, Teddy, and Martha were nine, six, and three in 1991.

3 Born in 1903, Momma Jones was fifty-eight in 1961. Barbara and I were nine and eight.

4 Faith married Burdette Ringgold, my stepfather and a childhood friend of my father, in June 1962 at Bethany Lutheran Church in the Bronx neighborhood of New York, where we continued to live for another year. That summer Barbara and I attended the Black Camp Craigmearde for the last time. The founder, Helen Meade, died that summer. We spent the following summer in Oak Bluffs on Martha's Vineyard, where Faith, prompted by a vigorously unfolding civil rights movement and writings by James Baldwin and LeRoi Jones, would begin her *American People Series* paintings on the lawn of the Goldsberrys', where we stayed. In the fall of 1963, Barbara and I left Our Savior Lutheran School to attend New Lincoln, where we would graduate, me in 1969 and Barbara in 1970. During that time, Faith would have two one-woman shows at the Spectrum Gallery. Most of her painting then was created in her summers off as a teacher. The summer of 1967, when Faith painted her crucial set of three murals—*American People Series #18: The Flag Is Bleeding*, *American People Series #19: U.S. Postage Stamp Commemorating the Advent of Black Power*, and *American People Series #20: Die—Barbara and I were in Europe with Momma Jones*. Faith spent the summer painting at the gallery on 57th Street in New York with her friend Jeannine Petit and spent her nights at Momma Jones's apartment in the Lenox Terrace. Burdette was left to shift for himself. There are wonderful descriptions of all of this in her memoir, *We Flew over the Bridge: The Memoirs of Faith Ringgold* (Boston: Bulfinch Press, 1995).

5 I began to notice certain catchphrases in their conversations, such as "telling lies and murdering groceries," "come if you're comin'," and "go if you gwine," which led me to reread *Mules and Men* and teach Hurston seminars for years. I had to stop, though, because Black people, especially the hypereducated ones, were unable to understand what we could possibly gain from studying the conversational styles of rural, probably unlettered folks from the 1930s.

6 Burdette did visit Oak Bluffs on summer weekends in 1963 and Provincetown, Massachusetts, on summer weekends in 1966. He loved to swim and sail and would have been enchanted by both La Jolla and La Napoule on the Côte d'Azur. There was real concern that if he had gone to either place, it might have been difficult to get him to come home again. Then, too, his presence certainly would have impacted the work.

7 I am just beginning to glimpse the depth of Faith's attachment since Burdette's death on February 1, 2020.

8 In her acknowledgments of her artist book *The French Collection, Part 1*, Faith thanks Frances Chaves of the Reader's Digest Foundation for arranging her visit to Monet's garden.

9 The women included are: Ofelia Garcia, professor of art at William Paterson University, Wayne, New Jersey; Johnetta Cole, at that point president of Spelman College, Atlanta; Moira Roth, professor of art history emeritus, Mills College, Oakland, California, who frequently accompanied Faith on her European travels, wrote extensively about *The French Collection*, and edited her memoir, *We Flew over the Bridge: A 25 Year Survey*; Ellie Flomenhaft, gallerist and the curator of "Faith Ringgold: A 25 Year Survey"; Lowery Sims, who was then curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art; Judith Leiber (now deceased), the pocketbook designer who raised money by making pocketbooks of *Tar Beach* (1988) and *Street Story Quilt* (1985), the sale of which helped to finance the purchase and donation of these two works to the Guggenheim Museum and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, respectively; Thalia Gouma-Peterson (now deceased), professor of art history at the College of Wooster in Ohio, who curated an exhibition of Faith's paintings, *tankas*, story quilts, soft sculptures, and masks in 1985; the Black woman artist Emma Amos (now deceased); Bernice Steinbaum, then Faith's dealer; and myself, as someone who had frequently written about Faith's work.

10 After Angelou's death, the quilt was inherited by her son, who sold it at auction at the Swann Galleries to significant media fanfare. Ultimately, it was purchased by the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville, Arkansas, where it is on permanent display.

11 I maintain a public family tree under the name of Benjamin Bunyon Posey (b. 1860) on Ancestry.com. It has been a means of finding considerable genealogical information about these and other branches of our family.

12 When I interviewed Faith in 1999 about Baby Doll, she mentioned her waking her and her siblings up before dawn, insisting that they get up and get breakfast. "Grandma," she said, "it's too early. The stores aren't even open yet." I thought perhaps Baby Doll's orientation was more rural, one in which the children might need to get up and feed the hogs and gather the eggs or whatever it was country people did early in the morning to get themselves fed before going to the fields for the first light. African Americans were still living this way in the '60s. Baby Doll may have been a former slave herself or had some experience of that situation in the rural South, in which many southern Blacks lived very much like slaves.

13 There is finally a great deal to read about all of this. My most recent pass through this terrain was much helped by reading David W. Blight's *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2018) and then finally, after many years of stalling, breezing through his *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), which is an analysis of the history of American popular culture and literature we choose to ignore and no longer teach, including Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), D.W. Griffith's film *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), and Margaret Mitchell's novel *Gone with the Wind* (1936).

14 See Anne Monahan, *Faith Ringgold: Die, One on One* series (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2018), in which Monahan does a great job of setting the scene in which Faith's political art emerged in a cauldron of disparate art world elements unified by their disdain for US policies in the Vietnam War.

15 See Michael Fitzgerald, *Picasso and American Art* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006); and Michael Fitzgerald, *Post-Picasso: Contemporary Reactions* (Barcelona: Fundació Museu Picasso de Barcelona, 2014).

16 Basquiat, who was obviously greatly influenced by Picasso, had his first retrospective exhibition at the Whitney in 1992. I was asked to write for the subsequent catalogue, but I found his work so overwhelmingly impressive and thought-provoking that, with my prior lack of knowledge of his work, I just couldn't make it happen.

17 My essay "American People, Black Light: Faith Ringgold's Paintings of the 1960s," in *American People, Black Light: Faith Ringgold's Paintings of the 1960s*, ed. Thom Collins and Tracy Fitzpatrick (Purchase, NY: Neuberger Museum of Art, 2011), 34–35, is discussed at length in a footnote. My quotation is taken from "The Global Issue," *Art in America*, July 1989, 89.

18 *Die* was featured on the cover of *Artforum*'s January 2020 issue, "The New MoMA." Both Helen Molesworth and Kerry James Marshall comment on the presence of *Die*. Marshall approves, Molesworth doesn't. I could say more, but I won't.

19 See Suzanne Preston Blier, *Picasso's Demoiselles: The Untold Origins of a Modern Masterpiece* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019). I had the pleasure of reviewing this book as my favorite of 2020 for the December 2020 issue of *Artforum*.

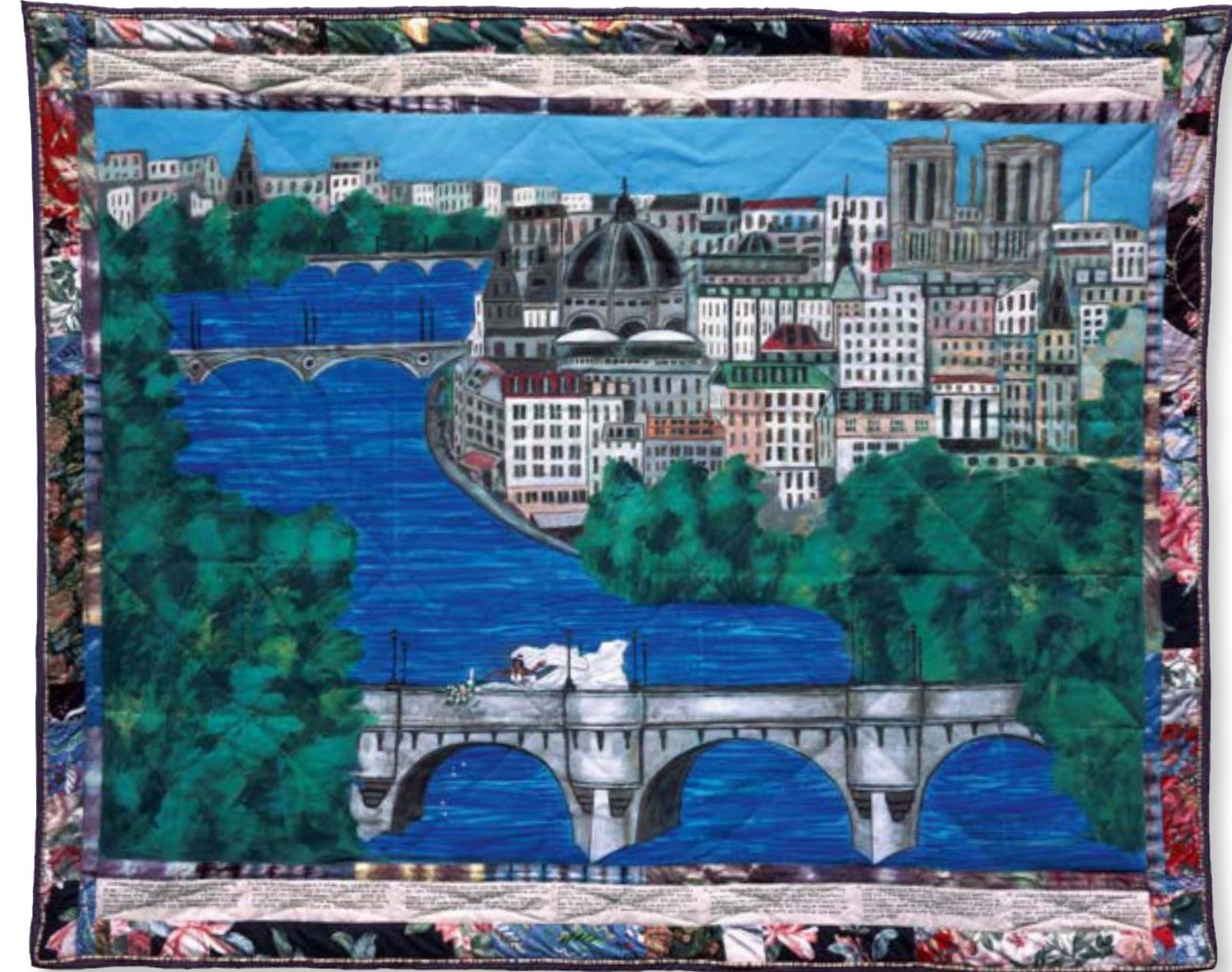
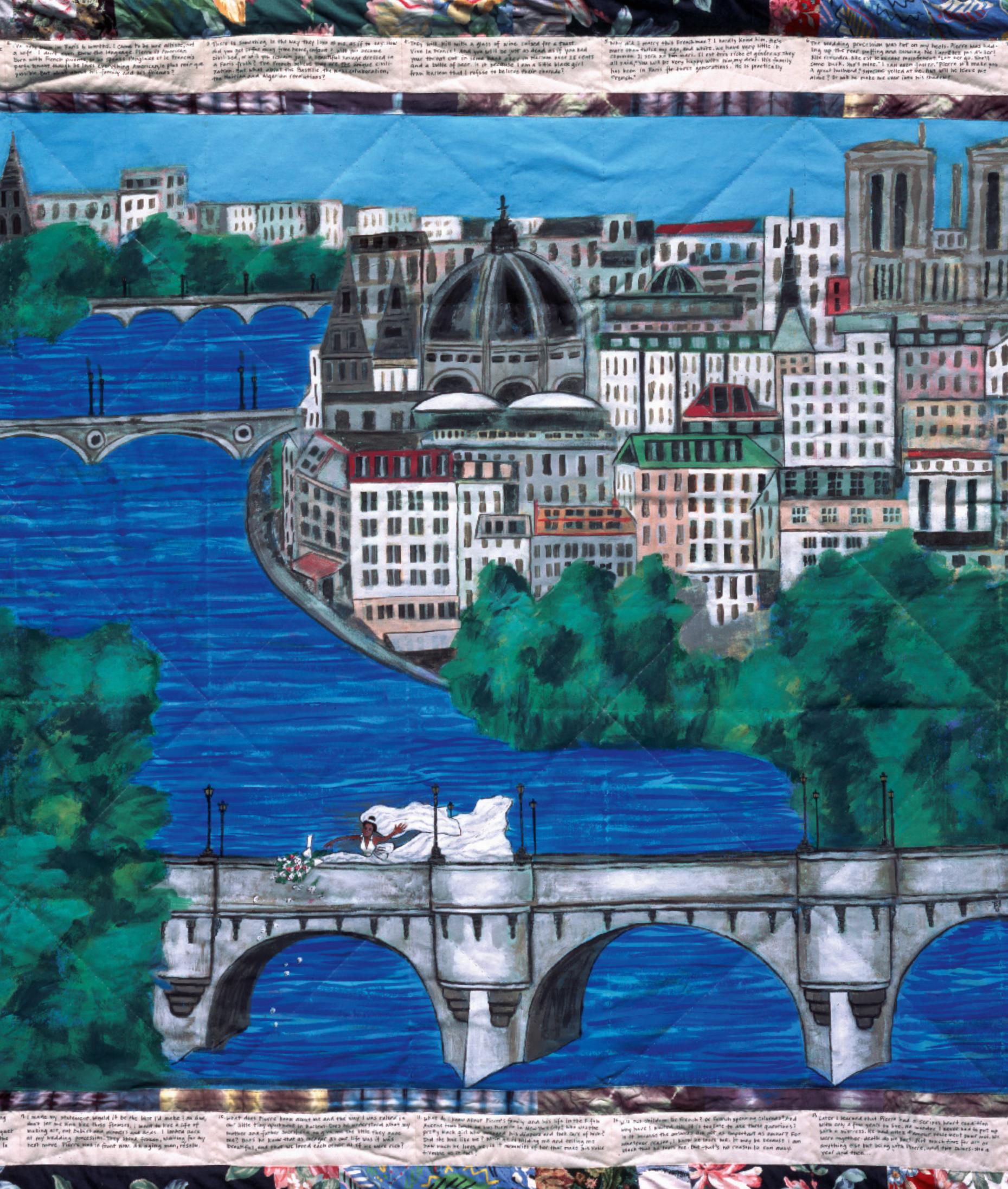
20 Fitzgerald mentions in *Post-Picasso* how the precedents set by Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol dominate criticism of contemporary art today, as well as art production, I might add. Picasso is invariably demonized as the rich narcissist. Meanwhile, Duchamp (who did what exactly?) always comes out smelling like a rose.

21 *We Came to America* is featured in all its splendor in the magnificently illustrated catalogue *The Color Line: Les artistes Africains-Américains et la ségrégation, 1865–2016* (Paris: Flammarion and Musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac, 2016). Faith's stunning Black Statue of Liberty is placed opposite Elizabeth Catlett's sculpture *Hommage to Black Women Poets* (1984), an obvious influence.

Dancing at the Louvre: The French Collection Part I,  
#1, 1991

Acrylic on canvas, printed and tie-dyed pieced fabric, ink  
 $73\frac{1}{2} \times 80\frac{1}{2}$  in (186.7 x 204.5 cm)





## Wedding on the Seine: The French Collection F #2, 1991

Acrylic on canvas, printed and tie-dyed pieced fabric  
74 x 89 in (188 x 226.1 cm)



The Picnic at Giverny: The French Collection Part I,  
#3, 1991

Acrylic on canvas, printed and tie-dyed pieced fabric, ink  
73 1/2 x 90 1/2 in (186.7 x 229.9 cm)

The Sunflowers Quilting Bee at Arles:  
The French Collection Part I, #4, 1991  
Acrylic on canvas, printed and tie-dyed pieced fabric, ink  
74 x 80 in (188 x 203.2 cm)





MARY L. SMITH

MARCH 22, 1922

FANNIE

WELLS

1965

FANNIE

LOU

HAMER

HARRIET

TUBMAN

1811-1913

JULIA

MARKS

1880-1964

Ella

Baker

1903-1986

DEDICATION TO CHANGE THE WORLD

X



Matisse's Model: The French Collection Part I, #5, 1991

Acrylic on canvas, printed and tie-dyed pieced fabric, ink  
73 1/4 x 79 3/4 in (186.1 x 202.6 cm)

194



Matisse's Chapel: The French Collection Part I, #6, 1991

Acrylic on canvas, printed and tie-dyed pieced fabric, ink  
74 x 79 1/2 in (188 x 201.9 cm)

195



Picasso's Studio: The French Collection Part I, #7, 1991  
Acrylic on canvas, printed and tie-dyed pieced fabric, ink  
73 × 68 in (185.4 × 172.7 cm)

X



On the Beach at St. Tropez: The French Collection Part I, #8, 1991

Acrylic on canvas, printed and tie-dyed pieced fabric, ink  
74 x 92 in (188 x 233.7 cm)

Dinner at Gertrude Stein's: The French Collection Part II, #9, 1991  
Acrylic on canvas, printed and tie-dyed pieced fabric, ink  
79 x 84 in (200.7 x 213.4 cm)





Jo Baker's Birthday: The French Collection Part II, #10, 1993  
Acrylic on canvas, printed and tie-dyed pieced fabric, ink  
 $74\frac{1}{4} \times 78\frac{1}{2}$  in (188.6 x 199.4 cm)

X



Le Café des Artistes: The French Collection Part II, #11, 1994

Acrylic on canvas, printed and tie-dyed pieced fabric, ink  
79 1/2 x 90 in (201.9 x 228.6 cm)

X



Moroccan Holiday: The French Collection Part II, #12, 1997

Acrylic on canvas, printed and tie-dyed pieced fabric, ink  
74 3/4 x 92 in (189.9 x 233.7 cm)

# Opening Doors: A Conversation with Faith Ringgold

Massimiliano Gioni

**Massimiliano Gioni:** I know people often ask you about the past, because you have had such a distinguished career, but what I would like to know is if you have any view about America today and its future.

**Faith Ringgold:** That's a compelling question, because I think there are still a lot of changes that need to be made. There is still a lot of work to do. And time changes everything, either for the good or the bad. I would hope that America would change for the better, but it is hard to say.

**MG:** So much of your work is not only about art but also about the world. I'm curious to understand if, when you started making art, you felt your role was not only to change art but that you had a responsibility to have an impact on American culture and American history?

**FR:** To tell you the truth, I didn't really think that I could change anything. And I didn't really think that art could make changes. I thought that art records history and records the present. So that's what I think I was doing: recording. And by that I don't mean only recording what was happening around me. I also wanted to record or rewrite the history of American art, because a lot of great American art had not been recorded properly.

So many people and so many artists stumble upon history and don't think much about it and don't realize that there are entire parts of history that have been erased. I wanted to give notice to what I thought was not right, what had been wrongly erased and forgotten, and I wanted to give notice to what I thought was good that hadn't been mentioned or remembered or recorded. So that was what I was trying to do.

**MG:** Did you ever have the impression that specific works of yours had an impact beyond the world of art? There aren't many artists who, like you, have changed not only the history of art but also the history of museums and the history of a country. So I am curious as to whether you had a clear sense at any point in your career that your work was reaching beyond the confines of the art world. Did you ever feel a specific artwork of yours changed your place in the world or transformed the world around you?

**FR:** I just wanted to show things my way. I wanted to show the way I saw the world, and I hoped that it would give people a push and encourage them to look further than they were typically looking. I was just trying to show them what I saw. And I wanted to lift people up to some extent. There was so much grief all around, but I had never wanted to represent grief, because grief alone brings more grief. I wanted to show hope and put hope in my art and in the world. I think that art is about taking a complicated situation and transforming it and elevating it.

**MG:** What do you mean by that?

**FR:** Take a series like *Coming to Jones Road*: that's grief. It's us as slaves. I had never seen any work really commemorating that experience. And I tried to put myself in the position of escaping. I did a lot of work like that, didn't I?

**MG:** I want to go back to your early work, like the *American People Series*. Would you say you were still trying to give hope through those works, or were you reflecting a state of crisis? It's hard to think that paintings like *American People Series #18: The Flag Is Bleeding* (1967) [pp. 44–45] or *American People Series #20: Die* (1967) [pp. 48–51] were about hope.

**FR:** I just wanted to give some understanding into what America was about. In *The Flag Is Bleeding*, you notice there is no Black woman in the picture: that's because those were the people who were involved in the struggle. The Black woman was left out of it. The white woman was trying to bring the Black and the white man together because she really had no power, and the only way to acquire it was by bringing together the men. There was also a lot of tension and jealousy: the Black man was demonstrating his freedom by being with the white woman, and she was claiming her freedom by being with the Black man. And either way you looked at it, the Black woman was excluded. And there was blood everywhere simply because bad stuff was happening everywhere. Black women were literally out of the picture, period.

**MG:** A Black woman was painting the picture, though.

**FR:** Well, yes, that's true: the Black woman painted it. In fact, many years later, when I made a quilt version of *The Flag Is Bleeding* [*The Flag is Bleeding #2: The American Collection* #6, 1997 (p. 220)], then I put a Black woman in it because at that point the struggle was very different. But it took decades before people realized that we existed.

**MG:** How did your political ideas develop in the 1960s? Were there specific events or specific books that helped you shape your political beliefs? When did you feel you wanted to take a position in your art and in your life?

**FR:** It's just about being Black in America. There was no way you could avoid what was going on at the time: you had to take some kind of position about it. There was no way you were going to ignore it, because everything was either Black or white, and very strongly so.

**MG:** Was there a discussion among artists of your generation about the ways that were most appropriate to depict the struggle?

**FR:** Those discussions didn't really involve Black women then. Many of my paintings from that period are about the freedoms that I did not have as a Black woman. The men had their friendships and their loves, but we just didn't. It was impossible for us. Even friendship was impossible. It was simply not accepted. And Black male artists were also hesitant to explicitly engage with the Black-and-white problem. My painting *The Artist and His Model* (1966) [p. 43] is about that: I saw many Black male artists who were happy to just paint white women and enjoy that freedom instead of talking about the struggle.

**MG:** May I ask you about the choice of figuration? Did you feel that was the way you were going to record history? Were you at all involved in the conversations around what language was most appropriate to engage with "the struggle," as you call it? Was it a conscious choice on your part to use figuration instead of abstraction, for example?

**FR:** I just really felt that I could do what I wanted. So I painted people and figures. And I also felt that some people had a problem with figuration: they thought it was too simple, so they took on abstraction. But I didn't care about those rules. I felt I could do both. Really, why shouldn't I do what I wanted to do? So I painted people, and then, when I wanted, I put figuration and abstraction together. Even in the *American People Series*, there is a lot of abstraction, like in *Hide Little Children* (1966) [pp. 40–41]. Those are my children, Barbara and Michele, and they are hiding. You can see their faces, but it is also an abstract painting. And it is about fitting in or having to hide. It's about children at school trying to understand who they are and about adults trying to find the children and making the children become what they want them to be. It's about fitting in and standing out.

**MG:** In your autobiography you said that in all your life, you never had a single Black teacher.

**FR:** It seems hard to believe, but yes, that's true. I never had a Black teacher. It's incredible, but that's what happened.

**MG:** And yet you came from a family of teachers.

**FR:** Yes, but they all taught in the South. I never went to school in the South, and I had never even been in the South until much, much later in my life. When I started teaching, myself, most of the time I was the only Black teacher. Black folks would get educated in the North, but it was hard to find jobs, and many would go back and teach in the South: they had to go back down to teach.

I had to struggle a lot to get a teaching job. Even though I had been training at the highest level, they tried very hard to keep me out of a job. But I decided I was going to get one, and I didn't stop until I did. Open the door. I'm coming.

**MG:** Did you think of your own art as a form of teaching? Was art a type of pedagogy for you?

**FR:** Well, I think of my art as my voice. It's what I have to say about the world I live in, and it's about who I am and what I would like things to be. Art is my voice. And I'm going to say what I want to say, no matter what people tell me to do.

As for whether you can teach through your art, sometimes as an artist, and as a Black woman artist, it is tough to realize how much everything is still really the same as it used to be. That can be more than a little depressing. But maybe that's what I can teach: we don't give up. And even if change seems impossible, don't give up, because things will get better.

**MG:** Throughout your career, you have brought attention to the fact that many of the discussions around freedom and liberation in the 1960s were not really having an impact on the conditions of women and Black women in particular. You said that after all the hard work you had put in, with the protests and the picketing, when finally the doors of museums opened, they only opened for the Black male artists.

**FR:** That's right. Although we were out there causing the disturbance, we were not the ones who were let in when the doors opened. That was just such a hard lesson to learn. Being an artist is tough; being a Black woman artist was hell on fire back then. That's when I understood we had to become feminists. There was no other way around it, because otherwise they were going to ignore us. Who was going to battle for us except ourselves?

**MG:** You have worked so hard to transform access and representation in museums, in ways that still seem very relevant today as museums and institutions are constantly under scrutiny and pressure and grappling with their responsibilities. What was your ideal for museums to become?

**FR:** Well, I'd just like the doors to be opened so that somebody who has the potential and the work could enter, irrespective of being male, female, Black, white, whatever. In a sense, it was pretty easy and clear. Just open the door, see who's out there, and pick the ones that you think are eligible, regardless of their origins and whether they are women or men.

We demonstrated and demonstrated, everywhere, at all museums: MoMA, the Met, the Whitney, everywhere. We did all that work, and still Black women artists were left out. That's when I said: "Wait a minute. Hold it. This doesn't make any sense at all." So that's when the stakes got higher, in a sense.

**MG:** This might be too simplistic of me, but how did you come to feel that it was your responsibility to stand up and say, "This is not working"?

**FR:** It's simple. Nobody else was doing it. And some people just don't sit well with injustice. I had planned to be an artist, and it was getting pretty obvious I wasn't going to be one, not because of my work but because I was being halted in so many different ways. The choice was really either to go ahead and complain and talk about it and do something about it or to be left out in silence. So I thought, "Why don't I just raise a little hell and see if that'll open things up a little bit?" And I think I did a good job.

**MG:** Absolutely, a very good job. One could say you have always made a virtue out of necessity. The way you speak about some of your most radical choices, even when it comes to your own work, such as the choice of working with fabrics and making quilts, you always make it sound as though those were practical questions that turned a difficult situation onto its head, taking on a challenge to turn a disadvantage into a strength.

**FR:** The quilts were just much easier to handle and ship and carry around. Nobody wanted to pay for shipping, and I couldn't get those big stretched canvases down the stairs. I couldn't get them into a taxi. With the quilts, I could still do my paintings, but I could roll them up and carry them with me. I didn't have to wait for my husband to come home from work to take my art downstairs. So on many levels, the quilts were also about independence, about being able to do things by myself, without asking for help or permission. Then of course it also became stylish, and so many artists also started using loose canvases and fabric, but for me it was just a way to do things by myself.

**MG:** When you and your friends and peers were protesting against museums, did you ever think about building your own museum or developing an alternative to those museums? You showed very often at the "old" New Museum in the 1980s and 1990s, and Marcia Tucker had been receptive to many of the ideas of artists who, like you, were trying to reform museums in the 1960s and 1970s. I am curious to know if you ever attempted to build your own museum, as an alternative to the existing institutions.

**FR:** No, I didn't. First of all, I wanted to be inside those museums. I didn't want to go somewhere else. If some artists could be inside MoMA or the Whitney, why couldn't I?

And then creating a whole new museum would have taken me away from creating art. For all the disturbance I was causing, I was still determined to be an artist. I'd rather make art than find a place to show it. If all my energy went into building a place to show art, I just wouldn't be able to make my own work.

**MG:** You did organize exhibitions, though, like the legendary "People's Flag Show" (1970).

**FR:** Well, I got arrested for doing that. [laughs] I'll never forget that. And it was really a little tiny room too. Imagine if I had built a whole museum. I would have been in so much trouble. But it was amazing to see how the whole art world turned out to support us and raise money and help. Really everybody showed up. I guess you have to be ready to go to jail for people to show up, right? [laughs]

**MG:** I want to change subject for a moment. How did your interest in literature begin? When did you start thinking about yourself as a storyteller and a writer? How did you publish your first books?

**FR:** It took a long time. My autobiography alone took twelve years to get published. Nobody seemed to be interested in publishing my work. So I started writing on my paintings. *Tar Beach* (1988) [pp. 165–67] happened because I said to myself, "You know what? I'm going to write that, and I am going to put it in my painting," because nobody seemed to be listening otherwise. And that's really how it started. Then an editor saw the quilt of and asked me if I was interested in turning it into a book, and it snowballed down from there. One book became two books and three and more. Like for every opportunity, one thing led to another, but at the beginning there was just the idea that I was not going to be silenced. The idea that people could decide not to allow me my freedom of speech, that was something I was just not willing to accept.

**MG:** Were there other writers who you were interested in when you started working more in the field of literature? Were there models you looked up to?

**FR:** Actually, what was happening was that there were all these stories being published about Black people, stories that I did not agree with and that I didn't like. I was troubled by these representations of Black people, and so I said to myself, "Let me write my stories. You wrote yours and I wrote mine. How's that?"

I started with children's books, because it was hard to find stories I wanted to read for a child. And that's how the children's books came about. In a way, it was the opportunity that found me rather than the other way around. It started with *Tar Beach* (1991), and then it all came down, like a waterfall. All I had to do was to say that first yes. When opportunity knocks, you just have to open the door.

**MG:** You could actually argue that you have opened many doors for yourself and for others, simply because you didn't want to accept that doors would be slammed in front of you. You had to find unconventional ways to open doors or to enter from the window, so to speak, using a different approach. It's like with your paintings: you didn't want to wait for your husband to help you, so you started working with quilts. Nobody published your writing, and you started telling stories in your paintings. I remember you said at one point that you started organizing your own traveling shows because nobody was showing your work in New York. That's another example of how you opened new doors and avenues for your work. You have always created your work but also developed its distribution system, in a sense.

**FR:** Yes, but really you just do what you can. Get in where you can get in. And the truth is that most of the time I wasn't the one making those decisions. I had to find another way, because they didn't let me do what I wanted.

**MG:** We talked about stories, but I am curious about your take on history. In *The French Collection* (1991–97) [pp. 185–207] and *The American Collection* (1997) [pp. 213–25], in particular, there is this desire to rewrite history, by revisiting the canon of modern art and presenting a much more textured and intricate view of the past, to use a textile metaphor. The quilts in *The French Collection* and *The American Collection* are "rememories," as Toni Morrison would have said about this constant revisiting of the past.

**FR:** Here is an interesting tale about history. I made a children's book called *Holy Night*, and the publisher was so nervous about it, because it had a Black baby Jesus, that they wouldn't distribute it. I bought back all the copies myself. They didn't like the idea of Christ not being white.

And also with *The French Collection* I wanted to show there were Black people when Picasso, Monet, and Matisse were making art. I wanted to show that African art and Black people had a place in that history.

**MG:** The quilts are polyphonic almost by design: the connection between storytelling and quilting is a profound one, and it dates back centuries.

**FR:** For me it also had a lot to do with my mother, as you know. She was a seamstress, and she taught me how to back the quilts up and how to put the seams in and hold them together. Although she was a dressmaker, she still knew all the steps to make quilts, because she had grown up at a time when African Americans still made quilts to go on beds. Women would sit around and make quilts and talk and tell stories as they did. So yes, storytelling and quilts have been related for centuries.

My first quilt, *Echoes of Harlem* (1980) [p. 114], I made it with my mother, and then I made *Mother's Quilt* (1983) [p. 113].

**MG:** Which is beautiful, almost Byzantine or even Ethiopian.

**FR:** I made it so quickly, actually. When I finished it, I asked myself why my mother was always complaining about quilting, because I did that rather quickly. And there are many other quilts that have to do with my mother. She inspired some beautiful ones when she was alive, and she even inspired some beautiful ones when she was gone. When she passed away in 1981, I just couldn't paint figures anymore, and I started making a series of abstract paintings. I soon realized it was a way for me to try and envision where my mother was, where she had gone. "Where is she?" That's what these pieces were asking.

At the time, my granddaughter, baby Faith, used to come in the studio and look around, and the children like to name my paintings. Baby Faith could hardly talk then, and I said to her, "What do you wanna call that?" And she said, "Dah." And that's what we called them. Which is a bit like "over there." Maybe that's where Mom was gone.

**MG:** You have been working for more than five decades. Did you ever have painter's block?

**FR:** Not really, but it is difficult right now, I guess. My husband died and that has been tough, very tough. And then the way things have been with the pandemic and all the grief and the protests in summer of 2020 for George Floyd, it's hard. One doesn't know where to start. There is always something going on here, in America. It's a colorful place, so to speak—never a dull moment. But I am never discouraged. I think we are going to be all right.

We Came to America: The American Collection #1, 1997  
Acrylic on canvas with painted and pieced fabric  
 $74\frac{1}{2} \times 79\frac{1}{2}$  in (189.2 x 201.9 cm)





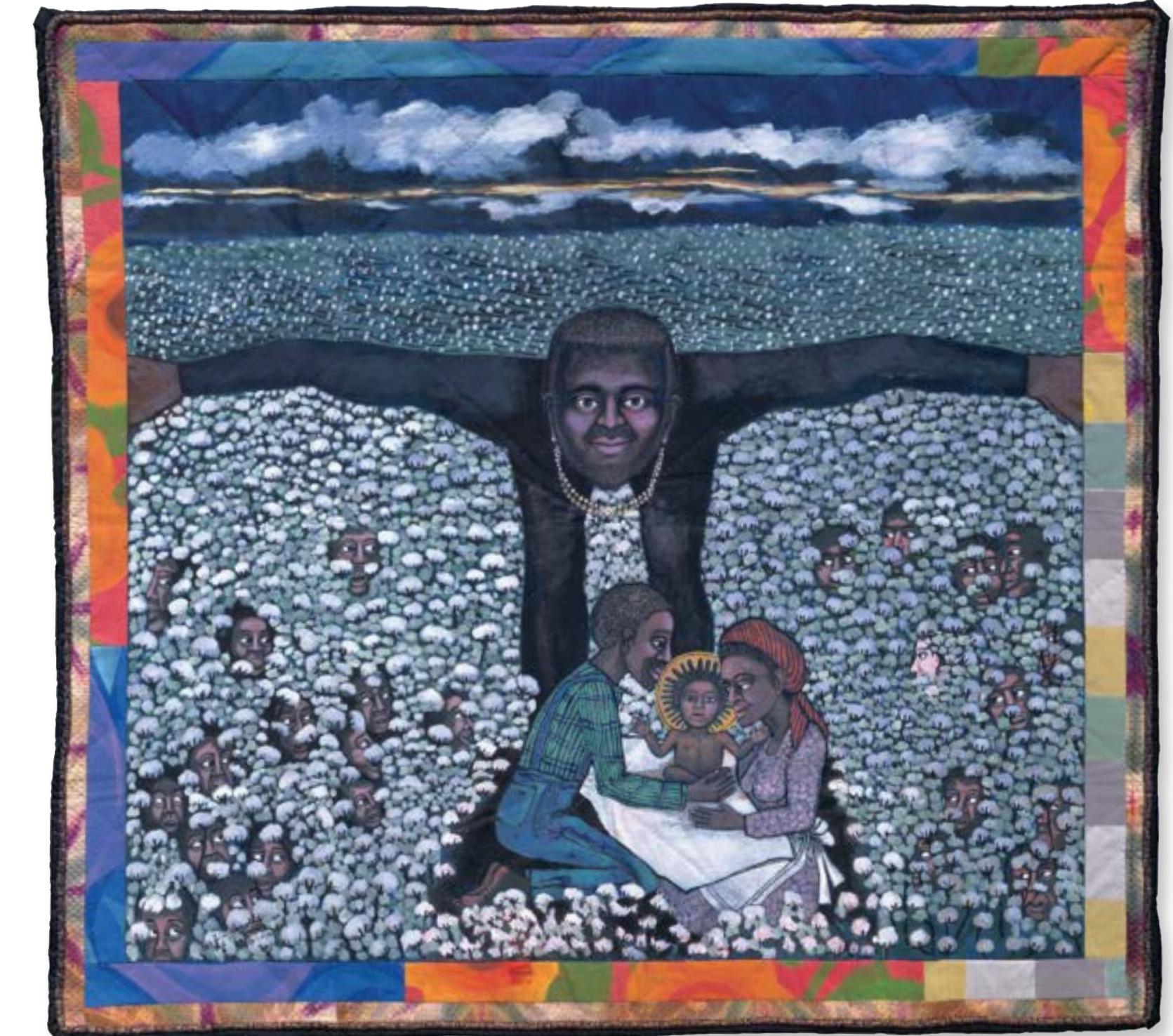
X



A Family Portrait: The American Collection #2, 1997

Acrylic on canvas with painted and pieced fabric  
79 ½ × 80 in (201.9 × 203.2 cm)

216



Born in a Cotton Field: The American Collection #3, 1997

Acrylic on canvas with painted and pieced fabric  
73 ½ × 79 ½ in (186.7 × 201.9 cm)

217



Jo Baker's Bananas: The American Collection #4, 1997

Acrylic on canvas with painted and pieced fabric  
80 1/2 x 76 in (204.5 x 193 cm)



Bessie's Blues: The American Collection #5, 1997

Cotton-, rayon-, nylon-, and polyester-blend fabrics, acrylic paint  
76 7/8 x 79 1/4 in (195.3 x 201.3 cm)



The Flag is Bleeding #2: The American Collection #6, 1997

Acrylic on canvas with painted and pieced fabric  
76 x 79 1/2 in (193 x 201.9 cm)



Cotton Fields, Sunflowers, Blackbirds, and Quilting Bees:

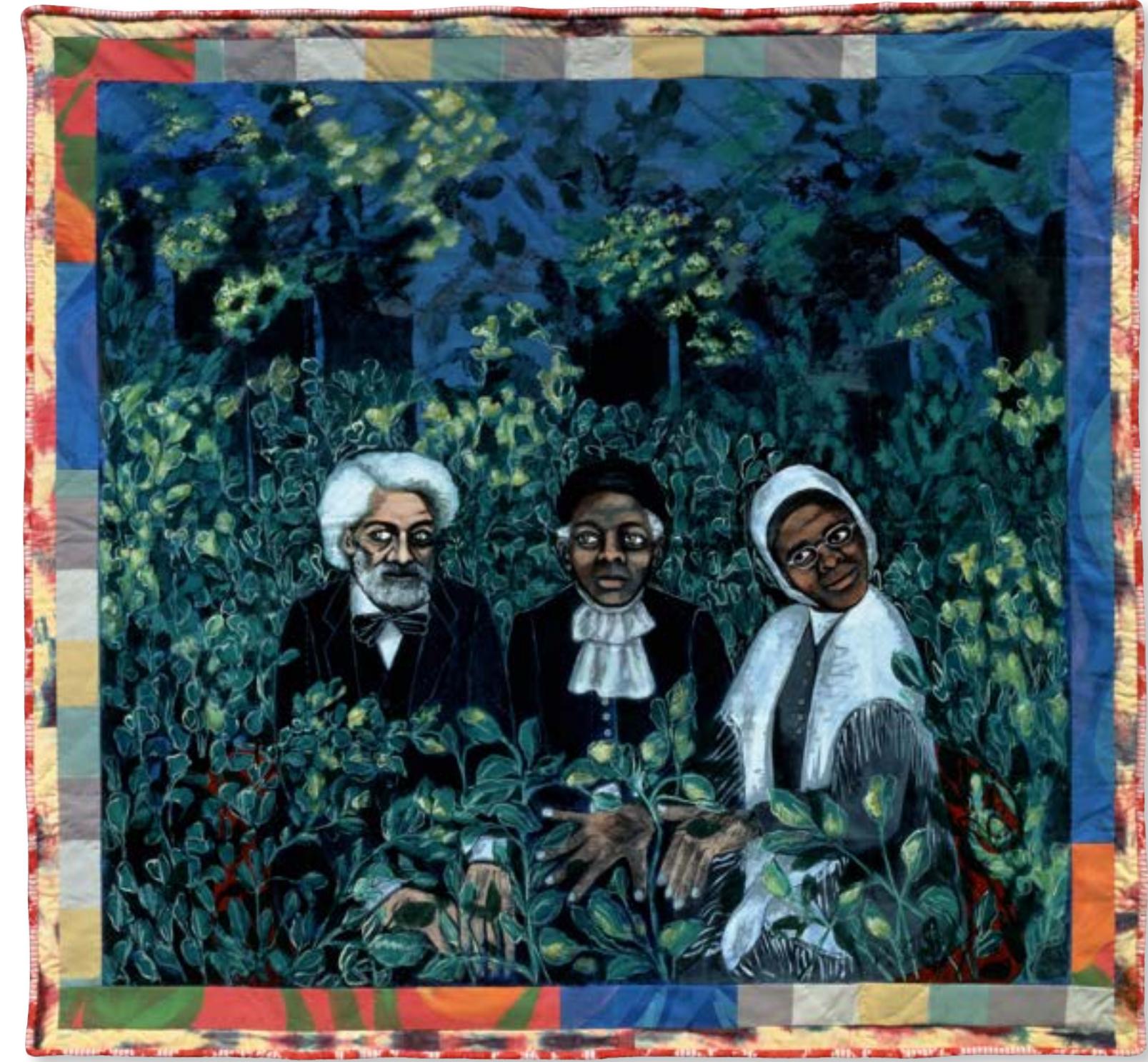
The American Collection #8, 1997

Acrylic on canvas with painted and pieced fabric  
76 1/2 x 75 1/4 in (194.3 x 191.1 cm)



Two Jemimas: The American Collection #9, 1997

Acrylic on canvas with painted and pieced fabric  
76 x 82 in (193 x 208.3 cm)

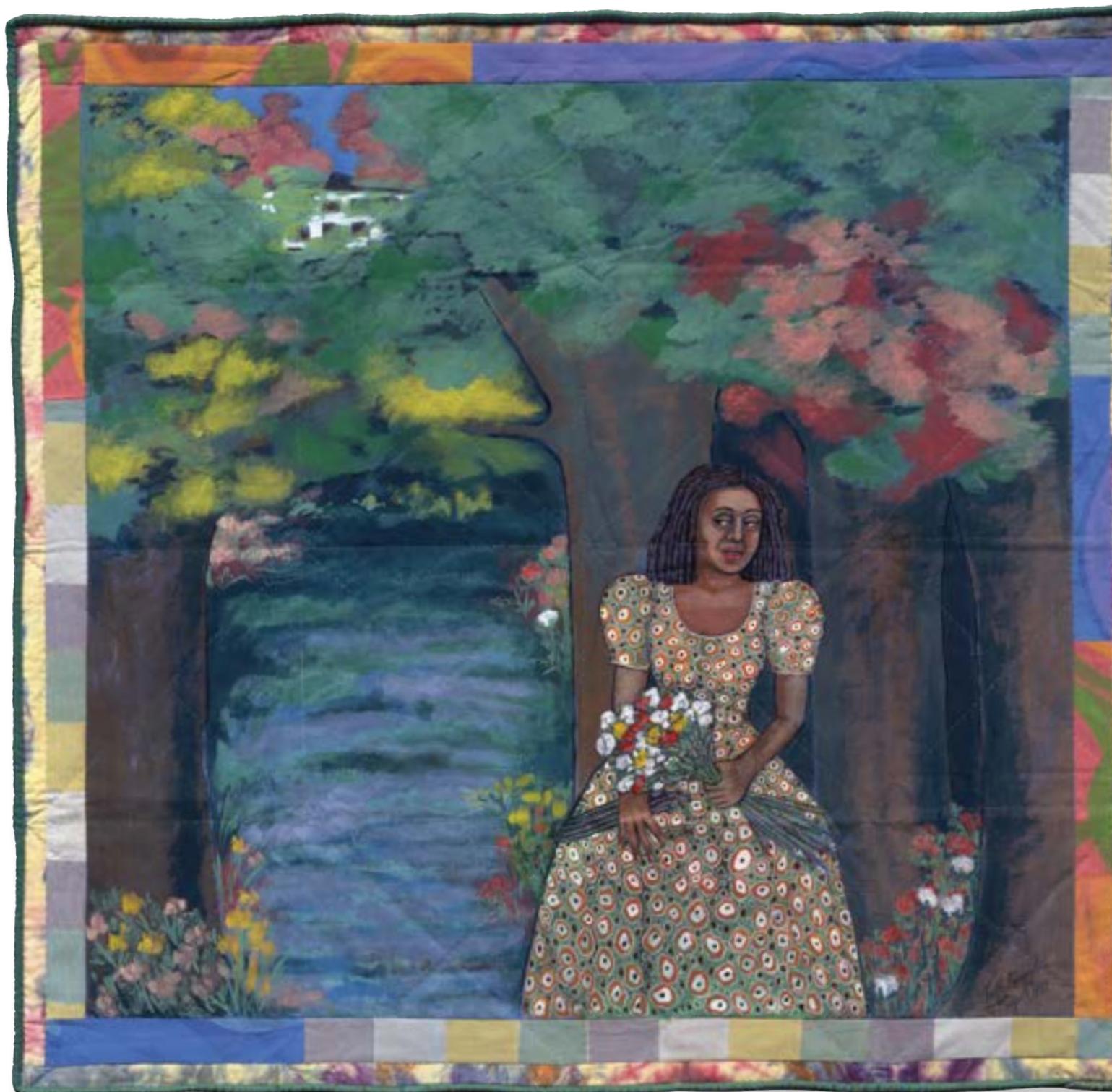


Wanted: Douglass, Tubman, and Truth:  
The American Collection #10, 1997

Acrylic on canvas with painted and pieced fabric  
77 x 81 in (195.6 x 205.7 cm)

X

X



Listen to the Trees: The American Collection #11, 1997

Acrylic on canvas with painted and pieced fabric  
76 1/2 x 80 in (194.3 x 203.2 cm)

224



Picnic on the Grass Alone: The American Collection #12, 1997

Acrylic on canvas with painted and pieced fabric  
79 x 77 1/4 in (200.7 x 196.2 cm)

225

## Coming to Jones Road Part 2

X



Coming to Jones Road Part 2: Sojourner Truth Tanka #2:  
Ain't I A Woman?, 2010  
Acrylic on canvas with pieced fabric  
61 x 42 in (154.9 x 106.7 cm)



Coming to Jones Road Part 2: Martin Luther King Jr. Tanka #3:  
I Have A Dream, 2010  
Acrylic on canvas with pieced fabric  
61 x 42 in (154.9 x 106.7 cm)

X

X



Coming to Jones Road Part 2: Harriet Tubman Tanka #1:  
Escape to Freedom, 2010

Acrylic on canvas with pieced fabric  
61 x 44 in (154.9 x 111.8 cm)



Coming to Jones Road Part 2, #2: We Here Aunt Emmy Got Us Now, 2010

Acrylic on canvas with pieced fabric  
68 x 63 in (172.7 x 160 cm)

X

# Works in Exhibition

As of October 7, 2021

## Early Works

### Early Works #15: They Speak No Evil, 1962

Oil on canvas  
40 1/4 x 30 1/4 in (102.2 x 76.8 cm)  
Courtesy the artist and ACA Galleries, New York  
p. 15

### Early Works #16: A Man Kissing His Wife, 1964

Oil on canvas  
19 x 12 in (48.3 x 30.5 cm)  
Private collection; courtesy Pippy Houldsworth Gallery, London  
p. 14

### Early Works #17: Black Man, 1964

Oil on canvas glued onto Masonite  
24 1/4 x 16 1/8 in (61.6 x 41 cm)  
Courtesy the artist and ACA Galleries, New York  
p. 17

### Early Works #19: Red, White and Blue Woman, 1964

Oil on canvas glued onto Masonite  
18 x 14 1/4 in (45.7 x 36.2 cm)  
Courtesy the artist and ACA Galleries, New York  
p. 18

### Early Works #20: Black and Blue Man, 1964

Oil on Masonite  
23 3/4 x 16 in (60.3 x 40.6 cm)  
Courtesy the artist and ACA Galleries, New York  
p. 16

### Early Works #22: Uptight Negro, 1964

Oil on paperboard  
24 x 18 in (61 x 45.7 cm)  
Courtesy the artist and ACA Galleries, New York  
p. 19

### Early Works #25: Self-Portrait, 1965

Oil on canvas  
50 x 40 in (127 x 101.6 cm)  
Brooklyn Museum  
Gift of Elizabeth A. Sackler, 2013.96  
p. 21

## American People Series

### American People Series #1: Between Friends, 1963

Oil on canvas  
40 x 24 in (101.6 x 61 cm)  
Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase College, State University of New York  
Museum purchase with funds from the Roy R. Neuberger Endowment Fund  
and Friends of the Neuberger Museum of Art  
p. 32

### American People Series #2: For Members Only, 1963

Oil on canvas  
36 x 40 in (91.4 x 101.6 cm)  
Courtesy the artist and ACA Galleries, New York  
p. 34

### American People Series #3: Neighbors, 1963

Oil on canvas  
41 1/8 x 24 1/4 in (106.4 x 61.6 cm)  
Courtesy the artist and ACA Galleries, New York  
p. 33

### American People Series #4: The Civil Rights Triangle, 1963

Oil on canvas  
36 1/8 x 42 1/8 in (91.8 x 104.5 cm)  
Glenstone Museum, Potomac, Maryland  
p. 35

### American People Series #5: Watching and Waiting, 1963

Oil on canvas  
36 x 40 1/8 in (91.4 x 101.9 cm)  
Courtesy the artist and ACA Galleries, New York  
p. 36

### American People Series #6: Mr. Charlie, 1964

Oil on canvas  
33 1/8 x 18 1/8 in (84.1 x 46 cm)  
Courtesy the artist and ACA Galleries, New York  
p. 37

### American People Series #8: The In Crowd, 1964

Oil on canvas  
48 x 26 in (121.9 x 66 cm)  
Private collection  
p. 38

### American People Series #10: Study Now, 1964

Oil on canvas  
30 1/8 x 21 1/8 in (76.5 x 53.7 cm)  
Courtesy the artist and ACA Galleries, New York  
p. 39

### American People Series #13: God Bless America, 1964

Oil on canvas  
31 x 19 in (78.7 x 48.3 cm)  
Collection Bonnie and Gil Schwartz  
p. 30

### American People Series #14: Portrait of an American Youth, 1964

Oil on canvas  
36 x 24 in (91.4 x 61 cm)  
Courtesy the artist and ACA Galleries, New York  
p. 31

### American People Series #15: Hide Little Children, 1966

Oil on canvas  
26 x 48 in (66 x 121.9 cm)  
Private collection; courtesy Pippy Houldsworth Gallery, London  
pp. 40-41

### American People Series #16: Woman Looking in a Mirror, 1966

Oil on canvas  
36 x 32 in (91.4 x 81.3 cm)  
Private collection  
p. 42

### American People Series #17: The Artist and His Model, 1966

Oil on canvas  
30 x 24 in (76.2 x 61 cm)  
Private collection, London  
p. 43

### American People Series #18: The Flag Is Bleeding, 1967

Oil on canvas  
72 x 96 in (182.9 x 243.8 cm)  
Courtesy the artist and ACA Galleries, New York  
pp. 44-45

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

Oil on canvas  
72 x 96 in (182.9 x 243.8 cm)  
Courtesy the artist and ACA Galleries, New York  
pp. 46-47

### American People Series #20: Die, 1967

Oil on canvas, two panels  
72 x 144 in (182.9 x 365.8 cm)  
Museum of Modern Art, New York  
Acquired through the generosity of The Modern Women's Fund, Ronnie F. Heyman, Glenn and Eva Dubin, Lonti Ebers, Michael S. Ovitz, Daniel and Brett Sundheim, and Gary and Karen Winnick  
pp. 48-51

## Black Light Series

### Black Light Series #1: Big Black, 1967

Oil on canvas  
30 1/4 x 42 1/4 in (76.8 x 107.3 cm)  
Pérez Art Museum Miami  
p. 55

### Black Light Series #2: Man, 1967

Oil on canvas  
30 1/8 x 24 1/8 in (76.5 x 61.3 cm)  
Courtesy the artist and ACA Galleries, New York  
p. 54

### Black Light Series #3.1: Invisible Man #1, 1968

Oil on canvas  
60 x 84 in (152.4 x 213.4 cm)  
Courtesy the artist and ACA Galleries, New York  
p. 66

### Black Light Series #3.2: Invisible Woman #1, 1968

Oil on canvas  
60 x 84 in (152.4 x 213.4 cm)  
Courtesy the artist and ACA Galleries, New York  
p. 67

### Black Light Series #4: Mommy and Daddy, 1969

Oil on canvas  
30 x 24 1/4 in (76.2 x 61.6 cm)  
Courtesy the artist and ACA Galleries, New York  
p. 56

### Black Light Series #5: Black Art Poster, 1969

Oil on canvas  
50 x 36 in (127 x 91.4 cm)  
Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Art and Artifact Division,  
The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations, New York  
p. 57

### Black Light Series #6: Love Black Life, 1969\*

Oil on canvas  
30 x 30 in (76.2 x 76.2 cm)  
Private collection

### Black Light Series #7: Ego Painting, 1969

Oil on canvas  
30 x 30 in (76.2 x 76.2 cm)  
Art Institute of Chicago  
Wilson L. Mead Trust Fund; Claire and Gordon Prussian Fund for  
Contemporary Art; Mr. and Mrs. Frank G. Logan Purchase Prize Fund; Ada  
S. Garrett Prize, Flora Mayer Witkowsky Purchase Prize, Gordon Prussian  
Memorial, Emilie L. Wild Prize, William H. Bartels Prize, William and Bertha  
Clusmann Prize, Max V. Kohnstamm Prize, and Pauline Palmer Prize funds  
p. 59

### Black Light Series #8: Red White Black Nigger, 1969

Oil on canvas  
24 x 24 in (61 x 61 cm)  
Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum  
Richard Norton Memorial Fund  
p. 60

**Black Light Series #9: The American Spectrum**, 1969  
Oil on canvas  
18 x 72 in (45.7 x 182.9 cm)  
JPMorgan Chase Art Collection, New York  
pp. 62–63

**Black Light Series #10: Flag for the Moon: Die Nigger**, 1969  
Oil on canvas  
36 x 50 in (91.4 x 127 cm)  
Glenstone Museum, Potomac, Maryland  
p. 61

**Black Light Series #11: US America Black**, 1969  
Oil on canvas  
60 x 84 in (152.4 x 213.4 cm)  
Courtesy the artist and ACA Galleries, New York  
p. 64

**Black Light Series #12: Party Time**, 1969  
Oil on canvas  
59 3/4 x 84 in (151.8 x 213.4 cm)  
Glenstone Museum, Potomac, Maryland  
p. 65

## Posters

**All Power to the People**, 1970  
Cut-and-pasted colored paper, pencil, and presstype on paper  
30 x 20 in (76.2 x 50.8 cm)  
Collection Mary Wolfson and Bob Rosenberg  
p. 75

**Committee to Defend the Panthers**, 1970  
Cut-and-pasted colored paper, pencil, and presstype on paper  
33 3/4 x 27 3/4 in (85.7 x 70.5 cm)  
Museum of Modern Art, New York  
The Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Endowment for Prints  
p. 74

**The Judson 3**, 1970  
Offset lithograph  
18 x 24 in (45.7 x 61 cm)  
Courtesy the artist and ACA Galleries, New York  
p. 77

**America Free Angela**, 1971  
Offset lithograph  
30 x 20 in (76.2 x 50.8 cm)  
Courtesy the artist and ACA Galleries, New York  
p. 81

**People's Flag Show**, 1971  
Offset lithograph  
18 x 24 in (45.7 x 61 cm)  
Museum of Modern Art, New York  
The Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Endowment for Prints  
p. 76

**Woman Freedom Now**, 1971  
Offset lithograph  
30 x 20 in (76.2 x 50.8 cm)  
Courtesy the artist and ACA Galleries, New York  
p. 79

**Woman Free Yourself**, 1971  
Offset lithograph  
24 1/8 x 18 1/8 in (61.3 x 46 cm)  
Museum of Modern Art, New York  
The Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Endowment for Prints  
p. 78

**Women Free Angela**, 1971  
Offset lithograph  
30 x 20 in (76.2 x 50.8 cm)  
Courtesy the artist and ACA Galleries, New York  
p. 80

**United States of Attica**, 1971–72  
Offset lithograph  
21 5/8 x 27 3/8 in (54.9 x 69.5 cm)  
Museum of Modern Art, New York  
The Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Endowment for Prints  
pp. 82–83

## For the Women's House

**For the Women's House**, 1971  
Oil on canvas  
96 x 96 in (243.8 x 243.8 cm)  
Rose M. Singer Center, New York  
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## Feminist Series

**Feminist Series #6: There Was One of Two Things**, 1972  
Acrylic on canvas, fabric  
46 1/2 x 34 in (118.1 x 86.4 cm)  
Courtesy the artist and ACA Galleries, New York  
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**Feminist Series #12: We Meet the Monster**, 1972  
Acrylic on canvas, fabric  
50 x 32 1/2 in (127 x 82.6 cm)  
Courtesy the artist and ACA Galleries, New York  
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**Feminist Series #14: Men of Eminence..., 1972/1993**  
Acrylic on canvas, fabric  
48 x 30 in (121.9 x 76.2 cm)  
Courtesy the artist and ACA Galleries, New York  
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**Feminist Series #18: "Mr. Black Man Watch Your Step...", 1973/1993**  
Acrylic on canvas, fabric  
56 x 26 1/2 in (142.2 x 67.3 cm)  
Courtesy the artist and ACA Galleries, New York  
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## Slave Rape

**Slave Rape #1: Fear Will Make You Weak**, 1972  
Oil on canvas, fabric  
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89 1/2 x 51 in (227.3 x 129.5 cm)  
Glenstone Museum, Potomac, Maryland  
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**Slave Rape #2: Run You Might Get Away**, 1972  
Oil on canvas, fabric  
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Glenstone Museum, Potomac, Maryland  
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**Slave Rape #3: Fight to Save Your Life**, 1972  
Oil on canvas, fabric  
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Glenstone Museum, Potomac, Maryland  
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**Mrs. Jones and Family**, 1973  
From *Family of Woman Mask Series*  
Sewn fabric and embroidery  
74 x 69 in (188 x 175.3 cm)  
Courtesy the artist and ACA Galleries, New York  
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**The Wake and Resurrection of the Bicentennial Negro**, 1975–89  
Mixed-media installation  
Life size  
Courtesy the artist and ACA Galleries, New York  
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**Auntie Mask**, 1973  
Mixed mediums  
Dimensions variable  
Courtesy the artist and ACA Galleries, New York  
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**Bena**, 1973  
Mixed mediums  
Dimensions variable  
Courtesy the artist and ACA Galleries, New York  
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**Bubba Mask**, 1973  
Mixed mediums  
Dimensions variable  
Courtesy the artist and ACA Galleries, New York  
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Mixed mediums  
Dimensions variable  
Courtesy the artist and ACA Galleries, New York  
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**Child's Mask #2**, 1973  
Mixed mediums  
Dimensions variable  
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Mixed mediums  
Dimensions variable  
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Mixed mediums  
Dimensions variable  
Courtesy the artist and ACA Galleries, New York  
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Mixed mediums  
Dimensions variable  
Courtesy the artist and ACA Galleries, New York  
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**Moma Mask**, 1973  
Mixed mediums  
Dimensions variable  
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**Mourner's Mask #1**, 1973  
Mixed mediums  
Dimensions variable  
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Mixed mediums  
Dimensions variable  
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**Pop**, 1973  
Mixed mediums  
Dimensions variable  
Courtesy the artist and ACA Galleries, New York  
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**Windows of the Wedding #1: Woman**, 1974  
Acrylic on canvas, fabric  
63 x 27 in (160 x 68.6 cm)  
Courtesy the artist and ACA Galleries, New York  
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**Windows of the Wedding #3: Woman**, 1974  
Acrylic on canvas, fabric  
82 1/2 x 36 in (209.6 x 91.4 cm)  
Courtesy the artist and ACA Galleries, New York  
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Courtesy the artist and ACA Galleries, New York  
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Courtesy the artist and ACA Galleries, New York  
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Acrylic on canvas  
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Courtesy the artist and ACA Galleries, New York  
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**California Dah #1**, 1983  
Acrylic on canvas, fabric  
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Courtesy the artist and ACA Galleries, New York  
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Acrylic on canvas, fabric  
83 1/2 x 36 1/4 in (212.1 x 92.1 cm)  
Courtesy the artist and ACA Galleries, New York  
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**California Dah #3**, 1983  
Acrylic on canvas, fabric  
86 1/2 x 35 1/4 in (219.7 x 89.5 cm)  
Courtesy the artist and ACA Galleries, New York  
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**California Dah #4**, 1983  
Acrylic on canvas, fabric  
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Courtesy the artist and ACA Galleries, New York  
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**Echoes of Harlem**, 1980  
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89 1/2 x 80 1/2 in (227.3 x 204.5 cm)  
Studio Museum in Harlem  
Gift of Altria Group, Inc.  
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**Mother's Quilt**, 1983  
Acrylic, appliquéd and embroidered fabric, and sequins  
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Blanchet Bradley Collection  
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**Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima?**, 1983  
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Glenstone Museum, Potomac, Maryland  
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**Street Story Quilt, Parts I–III: The Accident, the Fire, and the Homecoming**, 1985  
Cotton canvas, acrylic paint, ink marker, dyed and printed cotton, and sequins, sewn to a cotton flannel backing  
Overall 90 x 144 in (228.6 x 365.8 cm)  
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Arthur Hoppock Hearn Fund and funds from various donors, 1990  
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**Change: Faith Ringgold's Over 100 Pounds Weight Loss Performance Story Quilt**, 1986  
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Acrylic on canvas  
68 x 68 in (172.7 x 172.7 cm)  
Courtesy the artist and ACA Galleries, New York  
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Tie-dyed, printed fabrics, and acrylic on cotton canvas  
74 1/2 x 75 1/2 in (189.2 x 191 cm)  
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Acrylic on canvas with printed and pieced fabric  
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High Museum of Art, Atlanta, Georgia  
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Ronald D. Balser  
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**Dancing on the George Washington Bridge**, 1988  
Silkscreen on canvas  
68 x 68 in (172.7 x 172.7 cm)  
Courtesy the artist and ACA Galleries, New York  
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**Woman on a Bridge #1 of 5: Tar Beach**, 1988  
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Gift, Mr. and Mrs. Gus and Judith Leiber, 1988  
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**Tar Beach II**, 1990  
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**The Bitter Nest, Part I: Love in the School Yard**, 1988  
Acrylic on canvas with printed, dyed, and pieced fabric  
75 1/2 x 92 1/2 in (191.8 x 235 cm)  
Phoenix Art Museum  
Museum purchase with funds provided by Contemporary Forum, Stanley and Mikki Weithorn, Consortium of Black Organizations and Others for the Arts; Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Lorenz Anderman, Mr. and Mrs. David K. Anderson, Mr. and Mrs. Roy Neuberger  
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**The Bitter Nest, Part II: The Harlem Renaissance Party**, 1988  
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**Dancing at the Louvre: The French Collection Part I, #1**, 1991  
Acrylic on canvas, printed and tie-dyed pieced fabric, ink  
73 1/2 x 80 1/2 in (186.7 x 204.5 cm)  
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Gift of David Horvitz '74 and Francie Bishop Good  
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Acrylic on canvas, printed and tie-dyed pieced fabric, ink  
73 1/2 x 90 1/2 in (186.7 x 229.9 cm)  
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**The Sunflowers Quilting Bee at Arles: The French Collection Part I, #4**, 1991  
Acrylic on canvas, printed and tie-dyed pieced fabric, ink  
74 x 80 in (188 x 203.2 cm)  
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**Matisse's Model: The French Collection Part I, #5**, 1991  
Acrylic on canvas, printed and tie-dyed pieced fabric, ink  
73 1/4 x 79 3/4 in (186.1 x 202.6 cm)  
Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, Maryland  
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**Matisse's Chapel: The French Collection Part I, #6**, 1991  
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**Picasso's Studio: The French Collection Part I, #7**, 1991  
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Acrylic on canvas, printed and tie-dyed pieced fabric, ink  
79 x 84 in (200.7 x 213.4 cm)  
Collection of Mr. Stanley and Mrs. Mikki Weithorn  
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**Jo Baker's Birthday: The French Collection Part II, #10**, 1993  
Acrylic on canvas, printed and tie-dyed pieced fabric, ink  
74 1/4 x 78 1/2 in (188.6 x 199.4 cm)  
Saint Louis Art Museum, St. Louis, Missouri  
Museum Minority Artists Purchase Fund, the Honorable Carol E. Jackson, Casually Off-Grain Quilters of Chesterfield, Mr. and Mrs. Steven M. Cousins, Mr. and Mrs. Lester A. Crancer Jr., Mr. and Mrs. Solon Gershman, Mr. Sidney Goldstein in memory of Chip Goldstein, The Links, Inc., Gateway Chapter, the Honorable and Mrs. Charles A. Shaw, Donald M. Suggs, the Thimble & Thread Quilt Guild, and funds given in honor of Cuesta Benberry  
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**Le Café des Artistes: The French Collection Part II, #11, 1994**

Acrylic on canvas, printed and tie-dyed pieced fabric, ink  
79 ½ x 90 in (201.9 x 228.6 cm)  
Private collection  
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**Moroccan Holiday: The French Collection Part II, #12, 1997**

Acrylic on canvas, printed and tie-dyed pieced fabric, ink  
74 ¾ x 92 in (189.9 x 233.7 cm)  
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Purchase, the R. H. Norton Trust, 98.765  
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Acrylic on canvas with painted and pieced fabric  
74 ½ x 79 ½ in (189.2 x 201.9 cm)  
Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia  
Art by Women Collection, Gift of Linda Lee Alter  
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**A Family Portrait: The American Collection #2, 1997**

Acrylic on canvas with painted and pieced fabric

79 ½ x 80 in (201.9 x 203.2 cm)

Collection Bill and Elizabeth Landes, Chicago

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Acrylic on canvas with painted and pieced fabric

73 ½ x 79 ½ in (186.7 x 201.9 cm)

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80 ½ x 76 in (204.5 x 193 cm)

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Cotton-, rayon-, nylon-, and polyester-blend fabrics, acrylic paint  
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Robert Allerton Endowment

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76 x 79 ½ in (193 x 201.9 cm)

Glenstone Museum, Potomac, Maryland

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**Wanted: Douglass, Tubman, and Truth: The American Collection #10, 1997**

Acrylic on canvas with painted and pieced fabric  
77 x 81 in (195.6 x 205.7 cm)  
Courtesy the artist and ACA Galleries, New York, New York  
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**Coming to Jones Road Part 2**

**Coming to Jones Road Part 2: Harriet Tubman Tanka #1: Escape to Freedom, 2010**

Acrylic on canvas with pieced fabric

61 x 44 in (154.9 x 111.8 cm)

Courtesy the artist and ACA Galleries, New York

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**Coming to Jones Road Part 2: Sojourner Truth Tanka #2: Ain't I A Woman?, 2010**

Acrylic on canvas with pieced fabric

61 x 42 in (154.9 x 106.7 cm)

Courtesy the artist and ACA Galleries, New York

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**Coming to Jones Road Part 2: Martin Luther King Jr. Tanka #3: I Have A Dream, 2010**

Acrylic on canvas with pieced fabric

61 x 42 in (154.9 x 106.7 cm)

Courtesy the artist and ACA Galleries, New York

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**Coming to Jones Road Part 2, #2: We Here Aunt Emmy Got Us Now, 2010**

Acrylic on canvas with pieced fabric

68 x 63 in (172.7 x 160 cm)

Private collection

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\*An asterisk denotes a work not illustrated in this catalogue

## Artist Biography

Faith Ringgold, born 1930 in Harlem, New York, is a painter, mixed media sculptor, performance artist, writer, teacher, and lecturer. She received her BS and MA degrees in visual art from the City College of New York in 1955 and 1959. Professor Emeritus of Art at the University of California in San Diego, Ringgold has received twenty-three honorary doctorates.

During the early 1960s Ringgold traveled in Europe. She created her first political paintings, the *American People Series*, from 1963 to 1967 and had her first and second one-person exhibitions at the Spectrum Gallery in New York. In the early 1970s Ringgold began making tankas (inspired by a Tibetan art form of paintings framed in richly brocaded fabrics), soft sculptures, and masks. She later utilized this medium in her masked performances of the 1970s and '80s. Although Faith Ringgold's art was initially inspired by African art in 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 her greatest influence.

She made her first quilt, *Echoes of Harlem*, in 1980, in collaboration with her mother, Mme. Willi Posey. The quilts were an extension of her tankas from the 1970s. However, these paintings were not only bordered with fabric but quilted, creating for her a unique way of painting using the quilt medium.

Ringgold's first story quilt, *Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima?*, was written in 1983 as a way of publishing her

unedited words. The addition of text to her quilts has developed into a unique medium and style all her own.

Crown Publishers published Ringgold's first book, the award-winning *Tar Beach*, in 1991. It has won over twenty awards, including the Caldecott Honor and the Coretta Scott King award for the best illustrated children's book of 1991. An animated version with Natalie Cole as the voiceover was created by HBO in 2010. The book is based on the story quilt of the same title from the *Woman on a Bridge* series in 1988. The original painted story quilt, *Tar Beach*, is in the permanent collection of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York City.

Her second children's book, *Aunt Harriet's Underground Railroad in the Sky*, was published in 1992 by Crown. In 1993 Hyperion Books published *Dinner at Aunt Connie's*, Ringgold's third book based on *The Dinner Quilt* (1986). Ringgold's autobiography and first book for an adult audience, *We Flew over the Bridge: The Memoirs of Faith Ringgold* (Bulfinch Press, 1995; released in paperback by Duke University Press in 2005), as well as the children's book *My Dream of Martin Luther King* were published. To date she has illustrated seventeen children's books. Ringgold's most recent books are *Harlem Renaissance Party* (Harper Collins, 2015) and *We Came to America* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2016).

## Contributor Biographies

**Amiri Baraka** (1934–2014) was a writer of criticism, fiction, and poetry. A central figure in the Black Arts Movement, he established the Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School in Harlem in 1965.

**Diedrick Brackens** is an American artist known for his woven tapestries, which often present allegorical scenes of intimacy and male tenderness. He lives and works in Los Angeles.

**LeRonn P. Brooks, PhD**, is Associate Curator for Modern and Contemporary Collections, specializing in African American collections, at the Getty Research Institute. He is a specialist in African American art, poetics, performance, and Africana Studies.

**Julia Bryan-Wilson** is Doris and Clarence Malo Professor of Modern and Contemporary Art and Director of the Arts Research Center at the University of California, Berkeley. Since 2018, she has served as an adjunct curator at the Museu de Arte de São Paulo.

**Jordan Casteel** is an American figurative painter who lives and works in Harlem, New York, where many of her intimate portraits of strangers and friends have been set.

**Bridget R. Cooks, PhD**, is a scholar, writer, curator, and professor in the Department of African American Studies and the Department of Art History at the University of California, Irvine. Her book *Exhibiting Blackness: African Americans and the American Art Museum* (2011) won the inaugural James A. Porter and David C. Driskell Book Award in African American Art History.

**Massimiliano Gioni** is *Edlis Neeson Artistic Director* at the New Museum. He has curated numerous international exhibitions, including Manifesta (2004), the Berlin Biennale (2006), the Gwangju Biennale (2010), and the Venice Biennale (2013).

**Mark Godfrey** is an independent curator based in London. In 2021 he curated exhibitions of Jacqueline Humphries, Laura Owens, and Anicka Yi, and coedited *The Soul of a Nation Reader* with Allie Biswas.

**Lucy R. Lippard** is a writer, art critic, curator, and activist. An early champion of Conceptual art and a pioneering supporter of feminist art, she is the author of more than twenty books and the curator of more than fifty exhibitions. Lippard was a member of the Art Workers' Coalition, a cofounder of the feminist magazine *Heresies*, and a cofounder of Printed Matter, Inc.

**Tschabalala Self** is an American artist known for her large collages and mixed-media works in which she challenges stereotypical representations of African-American bodies, reinventing new images of Black femininity in particular. She lives and works in New York.

A Professor Emeritus in English at the City University of New York, **Michele Wallace, PhD**, is the daughter of Faith Ringgold and one of the most attentive interpreters of her work.

**Zoé Whitley, PhD**, is Director of London's Chisenhale Gallery. She curated the British Pavilion at the Venice Biennale featuring the work of Cathy Wilkes (2019) and cocurated the award-winning 2017 exhibition "Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power" with Mark Godfrey.

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Cover (back): *Black Light Series #2: Man*, 1967. Oil on canvas, 30 1/8 × 24 1/8 in (76.5 × 61.3 cm) Endpapers (front): *Windows of the Wedding #14: Fathers*, 1974 (detail; multiplied). Acrylic on canvas, 83 1/2 × 36 1/4 in (212.1 × 92.1 cm)

Endpapers (back): *Windows of the Wedding #13: Mother*, 1974 (detail; multiplied). Acrylic on canvas, 86 1/2 × 35 1/4 in (219.7 × 89.5 cm)

p. 2: *Early Works #25: Self-Portrait*, 1965 (detail). Oil on canvas, 50 × 40 in (127 × 101.6 cm). Brooklyn Museum; Gift of Elizabeth A. Sackler, 2013.96

p. 4: *Woman Freedom Now*, 1971 (detail). Cut paper design for poster, 30 × 20 in (76.2 × 50.8 cm) pp. 8–9: *Dancing at the Louvre: The French Collection Part I*, #1, 1991 (detail). Acrylic on canvas, printed and tie-dyed pieced fabric, ink, 73 1/2 × 80 1/2 in (186.7 × 204.5 cm). Gund Gallery at Kenyon College, Gambier, Ohio; Gift of David Horvitz '74 and Francie Bishop Good

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