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The Artistic Narratives of Faith Ringgold: Depicting Race Relations and Social Justice in 1960s America

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The Artistic Narratives of Faith Ringgold: Depicting Race Relations and Social Justice in 1960s
America

A Project Submitted to the Faculty of Art and Design Department

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By

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the works of artist and activist Faith Ringgold within the context of the Civil Rights movement in the United States. The Civil Rights era was a pivotal moment in American history, marked by racial segregation, violence, and discrimination against Black Americans. Against this backdrop, Ringgold's art emerged as a powerful tool for social critique and political activism. The thesis focuses on five of Ringgold's most significant works: *Between Friends*, *The Civil Rights Triangle*, *The Flag is Bleeding*, *US Postage Stamp Commemorating the Advent of Black Power*, and *Die*. These works span the period of the 1960s to the present day and represent different stages of Ringgold's artistic and political development. Through close analysis of these works, the thesis demonstrates how Ringgold used her art to challenge dominant narratives about race and power in America. Each work embodies different themes related to the Civil Rights movement, such as interracial relationships, Black Power, and police brutality. Ringgold's art also reflects the shifting political and cultural landscape of America during the Civil Rights era. Her use of bright colors, bold lines, and mixed media techniques speaks to the vibrant and dynamic cultural scene of the time. Overall, this thesis argues that Ringgold's art has made a significant contribution to the field of art and activism. By using her art to challenge dominant narratives about race and power, she has inspired generations of artists and activists to engage in political struggle through artistic expression.

INTRODUCTION

This thesis project focuses on the and the events and encounters of the Civil Rights movement. Faith Ringgold, known for her work in story quilts and portraiture, uses her art to explore issues of identity, intersectionality, and the discomfort of Black and White relationships during the Civil Rights era. Through her own experiences and those of others, Ringgold sheds light on the unusual and uncomfortable nature of these relationships during this time. The project aims to demonstrate how Ringgold's work and the Civil Rights movement both discuss race and politics that confronted issues that arose in the 1960s. Specifically, this thesis project explores five paintings from the to show how well integrated the Civil Rights movement was into Faith Ringgold's life, eventually leading to the creation of the . By analyzing these works, readers can gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which Ringgold's art intersects with the Civil Rights movement and the social and political issues of the time. Faith Ringgold's work represents a body of art that not only takes her out of her comfort zone but also introduces portraiture into her oeuvre. This project aims to assist readers interested in researching Black American art during the 1960s. By examining Ringgold's and her voluntary contributions to the Civil Rights movement, this thesis project casts light upon the important role that art can play in exploring and addressing complex social issues in America.

THESIS PROJECT PROPOSAL

During the Civil Rights era, Faith Ringgold was deeply impacted by the chaos and turmoil of living in Harlem. She also grappled with her personal relationships with White individuals, illustrating the interwoven nature of the Civil Rights movement and her own experiences. Ringgold's series contains "paradoxical situations hidden in plain view," as noted by her daughter Michelle Wallace.¹ This refers to the fact that many White individuals were oblivious to the racial injustices that led to the Civil Rights movement. The era was marked by a series of hate crimes, riots, and assassinations of national heroes. Martin Luther King Jr., a prominent leader in the Civil Rights Movement, was unexpectedly shot and killed outside his motel. This was followed by the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy and Civil Rights leader Malcom X, which further

¹ Michele Wallace, Faith Ringgold (Distributed Art Pub Inc, 2022).

intensified racial tensions throughout the United States. The thesis project will examine the ways in which Ringgold's artwork and the Civil Rights movement intersect and address the issues of race and politics that arose in the 1960s. Ringgold's artwork includes her well-known story quilts and portraiture, which explore themes of identity, intersectionality, and discomfort in Black and White relationships. The project will analyze five of her paintings from the series, highlighting how the Civil Rights movement was deeply integrated into Ringgold's lifestyle and inspired her artwork. Through this analysis, the thesis project aims to assist researchers interested in Black American art during the 1960s and shed light on the significance of Ringgold's contributions to the art world during this pivotal era.

Introduction:

The 1960s was a decade of great social and political upheaval in America, particularly for African Americans who were struggling for their civil rights. The art world was not immune to this unrest, and Black artists found themselves marginalized and excluded from the mainstream art scene. Faith Ringgold was one such artist who witnessed the racial tension in art form during this

time. The lack of representation of Black artists in museums and galleries was stark, and the world around her was changing rapidly. From the riots in the streets to the exclusive museums and galleries that only showed non-Black people, Ringgold saw it all. The Civil Rights movement had shifted from peaceful protests to violent riots in the aftermath of Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination.

Ringgold's experiences during this time lit the match of her activism, which became the main source of her subject matter in her artwork. Her paintings focused on the stories of Black and White Americans, particularly women, and displayed the effects of their interactions. Ringgold's contemporary experience was her everyday life and survival, and she used these experiences and encounters in her artwork to create bold and bright figures that symbolized the awkwardness of relationships between Black and White people.

This exhibition catalog delves into the life of artist Faith Ringgold during the 1960s and her creative process in painting the *American People* series. This thesis will examine and discuss five paintings from the series: *Between Friends*, *The Flag is Bleeding*, *US Postage Stamp*, *The Civil Rights Triangle*, and *Die*. These paintings illustrate the iconography and feminist themes that are prevalent throughout Ringgold's work. Through this analysis, we hope to gain a deeper understanding of Ringgold's contributions to the art world and the impact of her work during a time of great change in America.

THE AMERICAN PEOPLE SERIES

In 1963, Faith Ringgold began her "American People" series, which coincided with the 100th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation and Martin Luther King Jr.'s iconic "I Have A Dream" speech. The series was created in response to the rise of the Civil Rights movement,

and Ringgold tackled these issues head-on. The series was carefully planned, and it became her largest series of paintings to date. Through this series, Ringgold aimed to portray the complex emotions and theatrical perplexities of America's race issue. Despite not having personally been victimized by the hands of the law when it came to race, she was able to touch on the complicated relationships that Black and White Americans struggled with during this time. Her work not only focused on the illegal clashes and issues of race but also allowed us to see behind the scenes or irregular moments in society of racial tension. In response to the Civil Rights movement, Faith explains: "The summer of 1963 was the beginning of my mature work. I planned to paint five paintings in my new style...The idea was to make a statement in my art about the Civil Rights movement and what was happening to black people at that time."²

One of the unique aspects of the *American People* series was the way in which it unfolded. It was not unintentional or unplanned, but rather each painting was carefully crafted to create a specific narrative. The series was a deliberate attempt by Ringgold to shine a light on the struggles of Black Americans and to challenge the prevailing narrative in the art world. In the series, Ringgold used her artistic prowess to create bold and vibrant figures that symbolized the tensions between Black and White Americans. Her work was a reflection of her own experiences and the experiences of those around her. It was a call to action for the art world to take notice of the issues faced by Black Americans and to give them a platform to express themselves through their art.

During the summer, Faith Ringgold took her daughters to Martha's Vineyard to stay with the Goldberrys, who lived next door to their summer home in Oaks Bluffs. It was during this time that she set up her easel and began working on five out of the twenty paintings from the

² Farrington, Lisa. "The Making of an Artist, Faith Ringgold." *American Visions*, 1999.

"American People" series. The series was a bold and confrontational commentary on the injustices of the Civil Rights movement, and the Martha's Vineyard setting provided a peaceful and inspiring environment for her work. It was also during this time that Ringgold's creative style underwent a significant change. She began to focus her work on the theme of racial tension, and she referred to her new style as "super realism." This style was characterized by flattened spaces, simple lines, and swaths of muted colors. Through this style, Ringgold was able to convey the complex emotions and tensions of the time in a way that was both powerful and accessible to the viewer.

Ringgold's use of "super realism" was an intentional departure from traditional artistic styles that had been dominated by White artists. Her use of simple lines and muted colors allowed her to create bold and powerful images that spoke directly to the viewer. It was a style that was uniquely her own and one that would become synonymous with her work. Faith stated that she "wanted her audience to make a personal connection with its images and the message."³ The American People series unfolds in a very precise way. Each painting was intentional, and the series would grow to twenty pieces.

During the 1960's there were not many galleries showing Black artists but a gallery by the name of Spectrum had opened up its doors to Faith Ringgold's art. Spectrum gallery was located time, on 57th street, the director Robert Newman had seen Faith's work prior and offered for her to not only use his 57th street gallery as her studio, but to finish the series and show these works at the end of 1967. Faith described the gallery as "an early cooperative gallery run by Robert Newman."⁴ Newman pushed Ringgold to paint what was going on in the news, which

³ Faith Ringgold, *We Flew over the Bridge: The Memoirs of Faith Ringgold* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

⁴ Faith Ringgold, *We Flew over the Bridge: The Memoirs of Faith Ringgold* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

was the riots, injustices amongst Black people, and everything in between, and gave the artist the impetus to paint the news, and this is what she did in the three murals.⁵

The three murals, *Flag is Bleeding*, *US Postage Stamp Commemorating the Advent of Black Power*, and *Die*, were the first pieces shown in the presentation of the *American People* series at Spectrum Gallery on 57th Street. This exhibition marked Ringgold's first solo show, and it took place on December 13, 1967. The reception was met with a positive response, and gallery-goers packed Spectrum Gallery for the opening. There were many people in attendance, including professionals and members of the press. A photograph from the night shows Ringgold in a sequined black dress chatting away with friends. She is flanked by Richard Mavhew and Romare Bearden, and they are talking to two others. She has a glass of whiskey in her hand; it's all very festive.⁶ The picture also solidified the difference between the scenes depicted in the stand-out works from the show and the three large paintings that Ringgold referred to as "murals." At that time, the word "murals" had not fully been used in the art world. These final works of Ringgold's *American People* series were full of protest, violence, and prejudice.

The impact of Ringgold's series on the art world cannot be overstated. The series was a groundbreaking commentary on the racial tensions and injustices of the time and represented a turning point in Ringgold's career. Through her art, Ringgold was able to confront the prevailing narrative in the art world and challenge the exclusion of Black artists. Her work paved the way for future generations of Black artists to express themselves through their art and to push for greater representation in the art world. The positive response to the exhibition at Spectrum Gallery was a testament to the impact of her work. The exhibition not only garnered critical acclaim,

⁵ Faith Ringgold, *We Flew over the Bridge: The Memoirs of Faith Ringgold* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

⁶ Faith Ringgold, *We Flew over the Bridge: The Memoirs of Faith Ringgold* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

but it also drew attention to the issues of racial injustice and discrimination that were being faced by Black Americans. Ringgold's work became a powerful tool for activism and social change.

As some of her most famous works, the series marked a turning point in her artistic career. The process of painting this series changed how her artwork was perceived, and after its completion and her opening at Spectrum Gallery, things took a turn for Ringgold. She was no longer an aspiring artist trying to find her way, but rather an artist who had made her mark, starting with the series. This series captures moments that were true to Ringgold's experiences during the Civil Rights movement. It was special in that aspect, as it provided a powerful commentary on the state of America during a time of great social upheaval.

The *Black Series* that Ringgold released shortly after the *American People* series was another powerful commentary on the social issues of the 1960s. It was a continuation of her activism through her art, and it further cemented her reputation as a groundbreaking artist. The *American People* series went into storage after its debut, but it reemerged in 1973 for a retrospective at Rutgers University Art Gallery. *Flag is Bleeding* was included in the 1985 group show *Tradition and Conflict: Images of a Turbulent Decade, 1963-1973* at the Studio Museum in Harlem. A few years later, *Flag is Bleeding* was shown in the group show *Soul of A Nation* at Tate Modern in London, which was a traveling exhibition that also went to the Brooklyn Museum. Furthermore, *U.S. Postage Stamp* was featured in the Serpentine Gallery for Faith Ringgold's retrospective exhibition in 2019. In 2016, *Die* was acquired by MoMA after its expansion, and it was later hung in a gallery across from Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)*, 1911-12. A few years later, *Art Forum Magazine* devoted the entire front cover of their January 2020 issue to *Die*.

These exhibitions and features highlight the enduring impact of Ringgold's *American People* series on the art world. Her work continues to be relevant and thought-provoking, and it

serves as a powerful reminder of the struggles and triumphs of Black Americans during a time of great social change. Though all of the works were made between 1963-1967, they still resonate with the present issues that we are still challenged by today. This makes them not only important to American history, both Black and White, but to art history, both modern and contemporary.

ABOUT FAITH RINGGOLD

Faith Ringgold is a multi-talented individual who has made significant contributions as an artist, author, teacher, and activist. Her activism was a direct representation of her artwork, as she fought tirelessly for the very things she painted about: women's rights and racial equality.

Ringgold was born Faith Willi Jones in Harlem, Manhattan, and was raised in a creative environment. Her mother was a seamstress who taught her the skills of sewing and embroidery, which would later influence her mixed media sculptures. As a child, she was exposed to the vibrant arts scene in Harlem, which would inspire her to pursue a career in the arts. Despite facing discrimination and rejection, Ringgold remained determined to pursue her passion for art. She was rejected from the male-only fine arts program but went on to study art education at City College of New York, where she earned a Master's degree in 1959. Ringgold's persistence and dedication to her craft eventually paid off, and she went on to become a successful artist and teacher.

Before Ringgold started painting full-time, she worked as an art teacher for the New York Public Schools. This experience gave her a firsthand understanding of the challenges faced by aspiring artists and helped shape her approach to teaching and mentoring young artists. Between 1964 and 1968, Ringgold worked as a teaching specialist at P.S. 100, where she assisted children in a MES program designed to improve reading and writing scores for those living in the ghetto. During her free time, she continued to pursue her passion for art and created paintings that would ultimately pave the way for her artistic career. While Ringgold is perhaps best known for her storybooks and quilts, her artistic career began with her paintings. Through her use of bold colors and flat lines, she created powerful portraits, figures, and groups of figures that exposed the inequalities faced by people of color during the 1960s. Her work was a potent commentary on the social and political issues of the time, and it helped to raise awareness about the struggles and triumphs of Black Americans.

Ringgold was a prominent figure in the Black community, and she was particularly active in advocating for women's rights. When the Whitney Museum opened its exhibition *The 1930s: Painting and Sculpture in America* in November 1968, and not a single Black artist was featured, Ringgold was among many in the Black community who felt disappointed and frustrated. In response to this exclusion, Ringgold joined a group of Black artists, known as the Black Coalition for Artists, led by Black critic Henri Ghent. The group planned a public protest in front of the Whitney Museum to voice their dissent. It was during this protest that Ringgold met other Black artists who shared her frustration at the lack of representation of Black artists in museums. During the protest at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1968, Ringgold and her fellow Black artists took bold actions to make their voices heard. They left eggs inside the museum and

Ringgold came up with the idea of each member blowing a whistle to disrupt the exhibition.⁷

While some of her protests were peaceful, others were not without risk.

In the 1970s, Ringgold's artistic and political focus shifted to embrace feminism, and she led protests outside of New York museums demanding equal representation for women and people of color in exhibitions. She also designed political posters and co-organized the People's Flag Show, for which she was arrested.

Faith Ringgold's art was unique among that of her Black contemporaries, as she tackled issues that were largely ignored by the mainstream art world in the 1960s. She used her art to portray the contemporary American experience, with a particular focus on the complex racial interactions of the time. Ringgold drew inspiration from her own experiences, as well as those of others, to highlight the problems and challenges that interracial contact posed during the Civil Rights era.

Ringgold's work was a powerful commentary on the social and political issues of the time, and it helped to raise awareness about the struggles and triumphs of Black Americans. Her art was not only political but also celebrated Black culture and identity, challenging stereotypes and celebrating the diversity and richness of Black culture. Through her activism and art, Ringgold has become an icon in the fight for equality and justice, inspiring generations of artists and activists to continue the fight for a better future.

In conclusion, Faith Ringgold is an artist and activist whose work has had a lasting impact on the art world and beyond. Her art speaks to the struggles and triumphs of Black Americans, particularly during the Civil Rights era, and has served as a powerful tool for activism and social change. Ringgold's unique style and perspective set her apart from her contemporaries, and her

⁷ Elisa Wouk Almino, "Three Lessons from Artists' Protests of the Whitney Museum in the 1960s–70s," *Hyperallergic*, April 27, 2017, <https://hyperallergic.com/374428/three-lessons-from-artists-protests-of-the-whitney-museum-in-the-1960s-70s/>.

ability to channel her outrage and frustration into her art helped her to create work that is both timeless and relevant. Her art provides a window into the past and a means of understanding the challenges we face in the present, reminding us that history repeats itself and that the fight for justice and equality is ongoing. Overall, Faith Ringgold's contributions to the art world and to the fight for social justice have been significant, and her legacy continues to inspire and empower people today. She is a true icon and a testament to the power of art to effect change in the world.

EXHIBITION CATALOG

The works included in this exhibition catalog were selected based on their significance within Faith Ringgold's artistic career and their representation of the events of the Civil Rights movement. During the 1960s, mainstream media largely ignored the riots, trauma, and violence that were occurring in the streets. Ringgold's paintings, including *#1 Between Friends* and *#3 The Civil Rights Triangle*, serve as powerful symbols of the complex relationships that she encountered during the height of the Civil Rights era.

The last three paintings in the series, *#18 The Flag is Bleeding*, *#19 US Postage Stamp*, and *#20 Die*, are also included in this catalog. These murals represent a turning point in the series, and they would become the main focus of the exhibition. Through these works, Ringgold showcases the violence and hidden racism that were prevalent in America during this time, but largely ignored by the media. These paintings serve as a powerful reminder of the injustices that occurred and the ongoing fight for equality and justice.



Figure 1. Faith Ringgold, #1: *Between Friends*, 1963. Oil on canvas, 40 x 24 in (101.6 x 61 cm). © Faith Ringgold / ARS, NY and DACS, London, courtesy ACA Galleries, New York 2021

The first painting in the series, *#1 Between Friends*, serves as a statement piece that encapsulates the central theme of the series - the relationships that Faith Ringgold encountered or witnessed.

This painting was also the first piece created for the series. It was inspired by Ringgold's relationship with a White neighbor she met while staying at Martha's Vineyard during the Civil

Rights era. The painting depicts the difficulties of building organic relationships between Black and White individuals during this time, outside of the political climate.

Ringgold uses a balance of light and dark hues in the painting to create a yin-yang effect between the two figures, who are depicted facing each other and looking into each other's gaze. This striking painting sets the tone for the rest of the series and highlights Ringgold's ability to use her art to address complex societal issues. In recent interviews when asked about this painting,

Ringgold describes it as:

...an uneasy meeting between a black and a white woman, was inspired by the women who came to weekday poker parties at the Goldsberry's house while their husbands were in their offices in town. The Goldsberys were lifetime members of the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) and entertained an interracial group of high powered friends. I thought the white women were simply representing their husbands, and I could sense a lot of distance between friendship and what these women were sharing.⁸

Intriguingly, the painting portrays a sense of uneasiness between the two women, with their figures pushed closely together in the center of a dark background. The Black woman's figure is painted with softer, rounded lines and a yearning expression, conveying a sense of hope in her eyes. In contrast, the White woman's figure is depicted with bolder, harder lines, giving her a stern appearance. Faith Ringgold uses colder tones for the White woman, symbolizing her less welcoming demeanor, while warmer undertones are used for the Black woman. The painting captures the complexities and nuances of interracial relationships during the Civil Rights era.

The painting, *Between Friends*, highlights the complexity of interracial relationships during the Civil Rights era. Faith Ringgold's own experience with her neighbor, Mrs. Goldberry, and her observations of the Goldberry's interactions with other interracial families, inspired this painting.

⁸ Wallace, Michele. "American People #1: Between Friends." American People #1: Between Friends, January 1, 1970. <http://ringgoldinthe1960s.blogspot.com/2010/06/american-people-1-between-friends.html>.

Despite the Goldberry's apparent acceptance of interracial families, there was still a sense of uneasiness and distance between them, which Ringgold captures in the painting. The contrasting use of warm and cold tones on the two figures emphasizes this divide, with the Black woman appearing more open and inviting compared to the stern and closed-off expression of the White woman. Ringgold's use of the title, *Between Friends*, suggests that while the two figures may be in close proximity, they can never truly be friends due to the racial tensions of the time. The painting serves as a powerful commentary on the limitations and complexities of interracial relationships during the Civil Rights movement.

Provenance

Collection of 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.

Exhibition History

Spelman College Museum of Fine Art, Pérez Art Museum Miami, and currently in the National Museum of Women in the Arts collection.

Bibliography

Marthas Vineyard, 1963.



Figure 2. #4: The Civil Rights Triangle, 1963, Oil On Canvas. Glenstone Museum, Potomac, Maryland.

The *Civil Rights Triangle* is a significant painting within the *American People* series, and it is the fourth installation in the series. Faith Ringgold created this painting in 1963 while she was staying with a friend who was an active member of the NAACP and participated in the Civil Rights movement. This painting reflects Ringgold's involvement and support of the movement, which was a crucial aspect of her life and work during that time. The *Civil Rights Triangle* portrays

three figures: a Black man, a White man, and a White woman. The figures are positioned in a triangular composition, with the Black man standing above the White woman and the White man on the bottom. The painting conveys a sense of tension and unease, as if the figures are struggling to find a way to coexist. Faith Ringgold describes the men in the paintings in her autobiography:

The *Civil Rights Triangle* referred to the church as both the power structure for change and its association with the white male establishment—which together made up the top structure of the Civil Rights Movement. By the time I came home at the end of the summer, these paintings were finished, and I was planning to do many more in this series. Now I knew where my art was going. I had so many ideas that I barely had time to execute them.

The New York Times describes this piece in relation to Ringgold's activism during the Civil Rights movement. The painting is a powerful commentary on the unequal power dynamics within the movement, with the White man positioned above the Black men, symbolizing the dominance of White leadership. The Black men at the bottom represent the grassroots activists who were fighting for their rights, while the two men in suits allude to the role of lawyers and preachers within the Black community. The painting not only captures the hierarchy within the Civil Rights movement but also sheds light on the tensions and conflicts that existed within it.

The New York Times describes this piece in relationship to her activism:

In *The Civil Rights Triangle* (1963), three men in business suits, two black and one white, form a pyramid, with the white man on top, suggesting that to the extent the Civil Rights Movement was white-approved, it was also white-controlled.⁹

The positioning and body language of the men in *The Civil Rights Triangle* speak to the power dynamics and tensions between Black and White individuals during the Civil Rights era. The

⁹ Holland Cotter, "An Era's Injustices Fuel an Artist's Activist Works," *The New York Times* (*The New York Times*, December 9, 2010), <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/10/arts/design/10ringgold.html>.

grouping of the four Black men at the bottom of the triangle, with one White man standing above them, creates a visual representation of the imbalance of power and authority at the time. The uncomfortable and awkward body language of the men further emphasizes this tension and discomfort. Faith Ringgold's use of imagery and composition in this piece effectively captures the complexities of racial dynamics during this period in history.

Provenance

Courtesy of Faith Ringgold and ACA Galleries, New York, 1963. Glenstone Museum, Potomac, Maryland, 2021.

Exhibition History

Neuberger Museum, 2010. Kennedy Center, 2019. Glenstone Museum, 2021.

Bibliography

Martha's Vineyard, 1963.

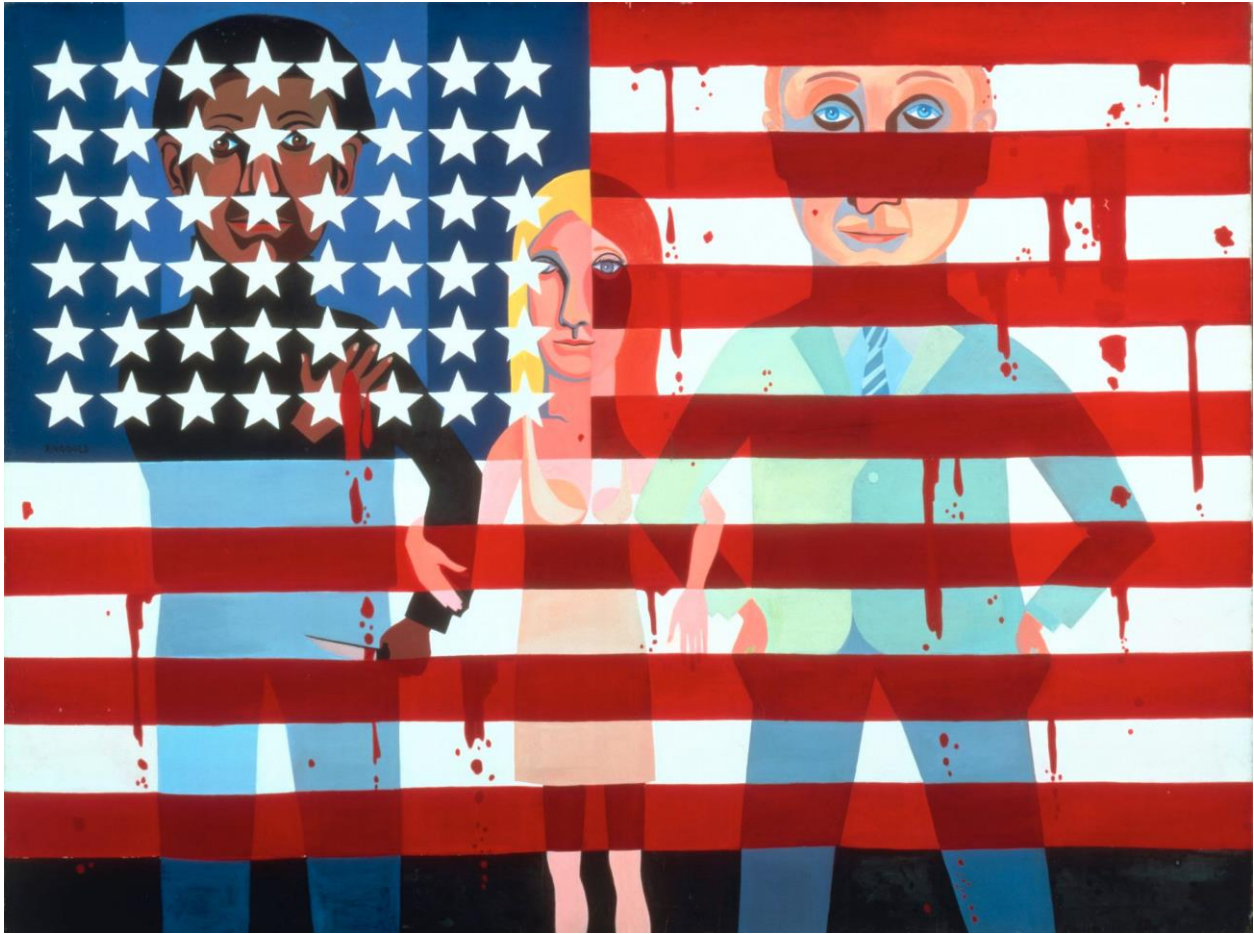


Figure 3. Faith Ringgold, “The #18: The Flag is Bleeding,” 1967 (oil on canvas, 182.88 x 243.84 cm / 72 x 96 inches). | © Faith Ringgold. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Gift of Glenstone Foundation and Patrons’ Permanent Fund, 2021.28.1

The third work in the series and one of three murals, *The Flag is Bleeding* by Faith Ringgold delves into themes of patriotism, gender, and race. This work showcases a transition from single-figure portraits to room-sized murals made up of several canvases. The use of bold colors, abstract forms, and racial conflicts captivates the audience. This work shows strong similarities to the style of Pop Art, which was heavily influenced by Andy Warhol, and was popular during the time of its creation.

The figures in the painting are abstracted and simplified, yet their positions and expressions convey a sense of tension and conflict. The use of the American flag as the backdrop adds to the political commentary of the piece. The blood dripping down the flag suggests the violence and turmoil that was happening during the Civil Rights era. The image of the White man with two guns and the Black man beaten up symbolizes the power dynamics and racial inequality of the time.

The White woman's role as the peacemaker and helper adds a layer of complexity to the relationships portrayed in the painting. *The Flag is Bleeding* is a powerful piece that reflects the social and political issues of the time and still resonates today.

In recent acquisition at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., they described the piece as examining:

The American identity and history in and through an iconic depiction of the flag, one of Ringgold's signature motifs. The painting features a semi-transparent US flag with colors that appear to bleed or run as a bold backdrop to the ambiguous interactions of three figures—a Black man, a white woman, and a white man—who stand with arms linked. The Black man, who holds a knife with one hand and covers his bleeding heart with the other, simultaneously protects the wound and pledges allegiance to the flag. The vague and shifting relationships of the figures speak to the violent protests in Los Angeles, Detroit, Washington, DC, and elsewhere during the politically turbulent era of the civil rights and antiwar movements of the late 1960s.¹⁰

During the time of the painting's creation, the Feminist movement was also starting to take shape. Interestingly, Faith Ringgold deliberately left out a Black woman from the scene. According to Ringgold, she did not include a Black woman because she believed that women had a different role to play, and they could not just be helping men; they also had to be at home taking care of their families. This sentiment was later expressed in the second painting of the *Flag is*

Bleeding series, where Ringgold included a Black woman with her two children standing behind a bleeding American Flag.

¹⁰ Victoria L. Valentine, "National Gallery of Art Acquires Faith Ringgold's 'Flag Is Bleeding' Painting: May Be Museum's 'Most Important Purchase of a Single Work of Contemporary Art' since 1976," Culture Type, July 17, 2022, <https://www.culture-type.com/2021/10/24/national-gallery-of-art-acquires-faith-ringgolds-flag-is-bleeding-painting-may-be-museums-most-important-purchase-of-a-single-work-of-contemporary-art-since-1976/>.

Provenance

Gift of Glenstone Foundation and Patrons 'Permanent Fund, 2021.

Exhibition History

On acquisition directly from Ringgold's collection by the National Gallery of Art (NGA) in Washington, DC in October 2021 with support from Glenstone in Potomac, Maryland.

Bibliography

Spectrum Gallery, New York City, 1967.

Figure 4. #19 US Postage Stamp Commemorating the Advent of Black Power, 1967, oil on canvas. Image courtesy of the Serpentine Gallery.



The next work to be discussed is the *US Postage Stamp Commemorating the Advent of Black Power*, which is Faith Ringgold's first painting that embraces the Black Power movement. This painting represents the events that were occurring during that time, specifically Stokely Carmichael's words of frustration during a recent march where he urged his audience to start saying "Black Power" instead of "freedom." Ringgold painted the canvas as a U.S. postage stamp, similar to the one with Frederick Douglass that was released in 1967.

In this painting, Ringgold challenges the male gaze by shifting it to a racial gaze through the eyes of a White person, symbolizing the dominant presence of White power in America. This is seen in the U.S. postage stamp-like design of the painting, where the image of Stokely Carmichael is

framed by the American flag and the words "Black Power." Ringgold admits that painting one hundred faces was difficult, and she had to rely on her imagination to create an image of what "Black Power" meant to her. This painting is a testament to Ringgold's ability to capture the essence of the Civil Rights movement and the Black Power movement through her artwork, and her willingness to challenge traditional artistic conventions to create powerful, thought-provoking pieces. In this painting, the design and demographics suggest that White Power dominates the scene. In 1967, only 10% of the US population was African American, making Black people scarce and their needs unimportant to the majority, which was White.¹¹ This reality is reflected in the painting, indicating the dominance of White power.

Ringgold's painting reveals the physical dominance of White people in the foreground and the scarcity of Black people in the background. However, she also depicts Black gazes and "Black Power" dominating the painting with an 'X' formation that serves as a memorial to Black people who refused to be intimidated by the white gaze and chose to return it instead. This small detail in the painting highlights the complex and estranged relationship between Black and White Americans, and the power dynamics at play. "...a memorial to the Black people that would not be cowed by the white gaze, but instead chose to return it and look the white man full in the face."¹²

Faith Ringgold's use of the 'X' in the US Postage Stamp Commemorating the Advent of Black Power also pays homage to Malcolm X, who rejected his ancestor's owner's surname and was recently assassinated. The 'X' serves as a reminder of the structure of White supremacy that America was built upon. Ringgold flips the imagery, colors, and words in this painting to use Black

¹¹ Hannah Hutchings-Georgiou, "Postcards in Isolation 18: Faith Ringgold, #19 US Postage Stamp Commemorating the Advent of Black Power, 1967," Lucy Writers Platform, August 5, 2020, <https://lucywritersplatform.com/2020/08/05/postcards-in-isolation-18-faith-ringgold-19-us-postage-stamp-commemorating-the-advent-of-black-power-1967/>.

¹² Hannah Hutchings-Georgiou, # .

Power to overpower the White gazes, emphasizing that while White people may have thought they had taken over, Black Power will always remain.

Provenance

de Young Museum © 2022 Faith Ringgold / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, Courtesy ACA Galleries, New York.

Exhibition History

Glenstone Museum, 2021, New Museum, 2022, de Young Museum, 2022.

Bibliography

Spectrum Gallery, New York City, 1967.



Figure 5. #20: Die, 1967. 486. Oil on canvas, two panels, 72 × 144" (182.9 × 365.8 cm). 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.

One of Faith Ringgold's most celebrated story quilts is *#20 Die*. The inspiration for this work came during a visit to the Modern Museum of Art (MoMA) in 1967 with her two daughters. At the museum, they saw Picasso's *Guernica*, a painting depicting the horror of the bombing of a Basque town during the Spanish Civil War. Ringgold was struck by the painting and used it as a reference for *#20 Die*, her own version of *Guernica* set in America. In a 2020 interview, she explained that *Guernica* was "the painting we used to go looking for."¹³

¹³ Phaidon, ed., "The Life of Die, Faith Ringgold's Absolutely Startling Masterpiece," PHAIDON, 2002, <https://www.phaidon.com/agenda/art/2022/March/05/The-life-of-Die-Faith-Ringgold%27s-absolutely-startling-masterpiece/>.

Ringgold's inspiration from Picasso's *Guernica* led her to create her own version depicting violent confrontations between Black and White Americans in America. She used Picasso's motif of using outstretched limbs and figures going forward and backward, and used limbs as lines to tie everything together. Ringgold also referenced *Guernica* by bending the knee of the Black woman in the bottom right corner. Throughout *Die*, Ringgold includes various forms of symbolism to depict the "general" race relations of the time, making it a timeless piece. As one critic noted, "Die is an immense cry of rage, on the order of Picasso's 'Guernica,' with men, women, and children of both races attacking and struggling with one another while more blood drips and spatters over all." Despite her later works taking a more peaceful turn, *Die* still carries strong social overtones.

Anne Monahan's essay, "Faith Ringgold's *Die*: The Riot and Its Reception," explores the inspiration behind Faith Ringgold's iconic work. As Ringgold worked on the piece in her Manhattan studio during the summer of 1967, Black neighborhoods across America were experiencing riots and vandalism. Monahan notes that *Die* captures the chaos of the times and reflects the American anxiety surrounding the rising Black revolution. The essay delves into the themes of the painting and the way Ringgold incorporates various symbols to convey the violent confrontations between Black and White Americans during the Civil Rights Movement. In the end, Ringgold just wanted people to understand that the riots were "not just poor people breaking into stores."¹⁴ They were about white flight, urban blight, and dying industries. They were about, she said, "people trying to maintain their position, and people trying to get away."¹⁵

Die became a significant piece in the Black art world, and its reception had a profound impact on the contemporary art world. Despite some criticism from historians and critics, many failed to

¹⁴ Sebastian See, "This Powerful Painting from 1967 Captures Another Unsettling Time in America," The Washington Post (WP Company, February 12, 2020), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2020/entertainment/faith-ringgold-american-people-series-20-Die/>.

¹⁵ Sebastian See., #.

grasp the true meaning of the painting and its significance to the Black experience in America during the 1960s. *Die* was a visceral and honest portrayal of the violence and struggle that Black Americans faced during the Civil Rights Movement. It was a visual representation of the pain and anger felt by the Black community, and it challenged the dominant narrative of the time. Late modernist critic Barbara Rose published “*Die* in Black Art in America,” stating:

If social realism was discredited in the mainstream, it was not so in the margins, particularly by those keen to revive an aesthetics of protest for the causes of racial equality and peace. I argue that the painting’s seemingly paradoxical embrace resulted from Ringgold’s visualizing riot in terms that allowed *Die* to speak differently to various constituencies, from modernists in the main-stream and African American art establishments to activists in the Black Arts and antiwar movements then beginning to make waves.¹⁶

Over the years, *Die* has become a timeless piece that continues to resonate with audiences today. Its multi-dimensional portrayal of race and violence still speaks to the ongoing struggles for social justice in America. While Ringgold herself may not have experienced the Black experience, she created *Die* as a powerful representation of the struggles faced by the Black community during the Civil Rights era. Today, *Die* is celebrated as a significant piece of American art, recognized for its impact and now displayed in the very museum that inspired its creation. The painting's legacy continues to be relevant, as it reminds us of the ongoing fight for racial equality in America. *Die* since its inception, from almost fifty years ago, you just need a word or two transition here “perhaps the painting’s initial, multi-vocal potential can be recognized and restored.”¹⁷, #20 *Die* now hangs in the Painting and Sculpture galleries at the MoMA, the very museum she was inspired to create it in, bringing the artist’s career full circle.

¹⁶ Anne Monahan, “Faith Ringgold's *Die*: The Riot and Its Reception,” *Nka Journal of Contemporary African Art* 2015, no. 36 (January 2015): pp. 28-39, <https://doi.org/10.1215/10757163-2914295>.

¹⁷ Anne Monahan., #.

Provenance

Gift from Faith Ringgold Collection, 2020.

Exhibition History

MoMA Modern Museum of Art, 2020.

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