

About Faith Ringgold

by
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In the summer of 1963, at age thirty-two, Faith Ringgold created—while away from her Harlem home, and staying on an estate in Martha’s Vineyard—the first five paintings in her American People Series. She was later to describe this pivotal year of 1963 in her autobiography, *We Flew over the Bridge: The Memoirs of Faith Ringgold*.

“James Baldwin had just published *The Fire Next Time*, Malcolm X was talking about ‘us loving our black selves,’ and Martin Luther King Jr. was leading marches and spreading the word. 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 blacks and whites 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 paintings to express this moment I knew was history. I wanted to give my woman’s point of view to this period.”

And this is what Ringgold has been doing ever since for over forty years, giving us her “woman’s point of view” about history and life through her prolific production of magnificently original paintings, soft fabric sculptures of “masks” and “dolls,” story quilts, and children’s books. Now in her late seventies and internationally acclaimed, she works intensely on her art, writes children’s books, runs her Anyone Can Fly Foundation, and lectures and exhibits frequently.

Early Work

In 1967, Ringgold began a new series of paintings, *Black Light*, and in 1969 a series of political posters—all created in a period in which Ringgold was deeply involved in black and feminist activist art groups, including co-founding a black women artists’ group, “Where We At” in 1971.

In 1980, Ringgold began to work with the medium of quilts, first collaborating with her mother, Willi Posey Jones, on *Echoes of Harlem*, and then in 1983-1984, creating the first of her now-legendary story quilts, *Who’s Afraid of Aunt Jemima*, in which Ringgold alternated portraits of Aunt Jemima and her family with short handwritten narratives that presented a revisionist reading of Jemima’s character and life. After this, story quilts, often conceived in series, became a main medium for Ringgold.

The French Collection

Between 1990 and 1997 Ringgold conducted intensive research—including studying the writings of Gertrude Stein and Zora Neale Hurston, and the art and biographies of Van Gogh, Monet, and Picasso and other figures in both French Modernism and African-American art history—and traveled to Paris, the South of France and Morocco. This research and travel shaped the narrative and imagery of *The French Collection*, a series of twelve story quilts with an astonishing fictional African-American artist-model-wife/widow-mother-café owner heroine, Willia Marie Simone. An expatriate, living in Paris, she initially works as a model for two famous French artists (*Picasso's Studio* and *Matisse's Model*) before becoming an artist herself. In *The Picnic at Giverny*, Willia Marie (surrounded by members of Ringgold's own community, plus Picasso as a model) boldly sets up her canvas in Monet's Giverny gardens, and in *The Sunflowers Quilting Bee at Arles* ardently seeks out a group of famous 19th and 20th century African-American women activists who have set up one of their quilting bees in Van Gogh country.

The American Collection

Marlena Truth Simone, an American-based artist trained at Yale University, becomes the central fictional figure of *The American Collection*, and it is Marlena's own paintings—including the three reproduced in this issue of *Persimmon Tree* (*The Flag Is Bleeding, #2; Cotton Fields, Sunflowers, Blackbirds, and Quilting Bees, #8; and The Two Jemimas, #9*)—that form the majority of the series' images. Ringgold had begun to conceptualize *The American Collection* around 1992, but it was only in 1997 that she was to paint the series' twelve story quilts. Here, as Ringgold once wrote, unlike *The French Collection*, it is not the artists of the time but rather "issues of race and sex that peak Marlena's interest and provide fuel for her art."

Over the years I had closely witnessed the research and making of *The French Collection* (including accompanying Ringgold on trips to Morocco and Paris), and so, in 1997, I made a pilgrimage down to Southern California to see firsthand *The American Collection* as it was in the process of being made by Ringgold and her assistants in Ringgold's La Jolla studio. (She was at that time teaching at the University of California, San Diego.)

As I wrote in *Dancing at the Louvre: Faith Ringgold's French Collection and Other Story Quilts* (Dan Cameron, ed.) "At first *The American Collection* seems strangely silent and sparse in narrative guidance [compared to *The French Collection*]. No longer are there

handwritten texts above and below the images to enrich one's readings of it. The removal of the texts radically changes the size and shape of the images within its quilted frame. One is told less verbally and accordingly must imagine more. But, equally, I find myself looking more. I am struck, for example, as I wander around the studio by the series' focus on the American landscape—skies, cotton fields, woods, and water make up settings of over half the series."

I was also struck during my visit by the brilliant intricacies of Ringgold's art references. For example, the research material for *Cotton Fields, Sunflowers, Blackbirds and Quilting Bees* included photographs of the famous late 19th century quilts by Harriet Powers, yet the image in the quilt was a variation on *The Sunflowers Quilting Bee at Arles* in *The French Connection*. The strutting figures in *The Two Aunt Jemimas* were a conscious reference to Willem de Kooning's painting, *Two Women in the Country*, as well as recalling Ringgold's own earlier quilt, *Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima?*

In 1992, Ringgold and her husband, Burdette, moved from Harlem to 127 Jones Road in Engelwood, New Jersey: "I came over here and landed on Jones Road—you know my maiden name is Jones, so I just felt that this was where I was supposed to be—and bought this house." It is here, since 1999, that she has been creating paintings, story quilts and narratives for her Coming to Jones Road Series, a fictional saga that begins with a group of slaves escaping from the South to New Jersey.

"After I came here and began to pursue my dream, I met with resistance from my hostile neighbors, and that inspired me to give greater attention to the history of black people who had come to this area centuries before me . . . I am also trying—which is the hardest part—to speak in the voice of the characters of the Jones Road series in an attempt to place myself back in the 1700s, when my grandmothers and fathers endured the struggle that made it possible for me in the year 2000 to walk free and tell their story."

Coming to Jones Road

In 1999, two years after the completion of *The American Collection*, Ringgold began *Coming To Jones Road*, again a project based on considerable research that imaginatively draws from the black history of New Jersey (the last state in the north to abolish slavery), and obliquely from Ringgold's own family history.

In 1999 Ringgold commissioned an elaborate garden of plants, shrubs, a pool, a little fountain, and small wooden structures for her Jones Road home (see photos below.) This magical garden immediately became incorporated into the visual imagery of *Coming to Jones Road*,

as well as providing a site for her charming, elaborate annual garden parties.

Since its inception in 1999 (it is now in its eighth year), I have been fascinated by the Coming to Jones Road Series and have followed it closely. From the start, the writings that accompanied it read like episodes in a novel: "The sun went down early that night, cotton fields black, and in no time all steppin' quiet to the shacks. 'You all come on just follow me,' Barn Door whispered, 'We going north to freedom this night' . . . We arrived at the Palisades one morning before day-break, dog-tired, starving and aching from head to foot . . . Lord, don't let this be a dream and we wake up choppin' cotton. Well we was here cuz we see Aunt Emmy and Uncle John proud and pretty standing in the morning sun, and the old white farm house with my dead grandma's quilt on the roof and now we can't walk no more. Just fall on our knees makin' a river of tears right there on the ground . . . God be my witness that's how it happened. That's how we got to Jones Road in the year of our Lord 1792."

In #1, *Coming to Jones Road*, this group of slaves, who have escaped from the South, are making their way in an almost choral-like procession (one imagines them singing of history, escape and freedom) by moonlight to Aunt Emmy's white farm house, hidden in the trees above them. Ringgold explains that "I had to bring them to a safe haven. Aunt Emmy had escaped first, and she told them that once she gets settled up North, she is going to send for the rest of them. And so she does . . . I patterned her after my great-grandmother, Susie Shannon, who lived to be 110, dying in 1937 or so. She survived slavery, and had this daughter, Betsy Bingham, who was very elegant. I have a picture of her in her organza dress with a matching hat and little bag and so on."

In #3, *Aunt Emmy* (which is based on this photograph of Betsy Bingham), she stands elegantly dressed in white, and self-assured. Ringgold once explained to me that, although a runaway slave, Emmy had a hold over a powerful New Jersey white family because she knew their criminal secrets and so "Aunt Emmy's silence about this matter bought not only her own freedom but the freedom of those who lived in her house."

In #8, *Only the Children*, under the light of a red moon, six small, exuberant figures throw up their hands with joy, knowing that they are nearing freedom, as they dance in a wood, strangely reminiscent of the trees in Ringgold's garden. Indeed in one of the accompanying narratives, we read that "There were twenty-eight of us and one newborn baby on that long hard sojourn through the woods and swamps. We named the baby Freedom because she was born almost free." (I remember in 2000 seeing a sketch on Ringgold's studio

wall that showed small figures clustering around the birth scene.)

In 2000, having just returned from the second annual garden party, I wrote Ringgold to ask if she regarded the Jones Road Series as a continuation of *The American Collection*. "Yes, I have come to realize this, although it is no longer Marlena's tale. Jones Road is an ongoing tale of black people and events from slavery till now, and I can see how I could be working on this continuing American Collection Series for the rest of my life."

