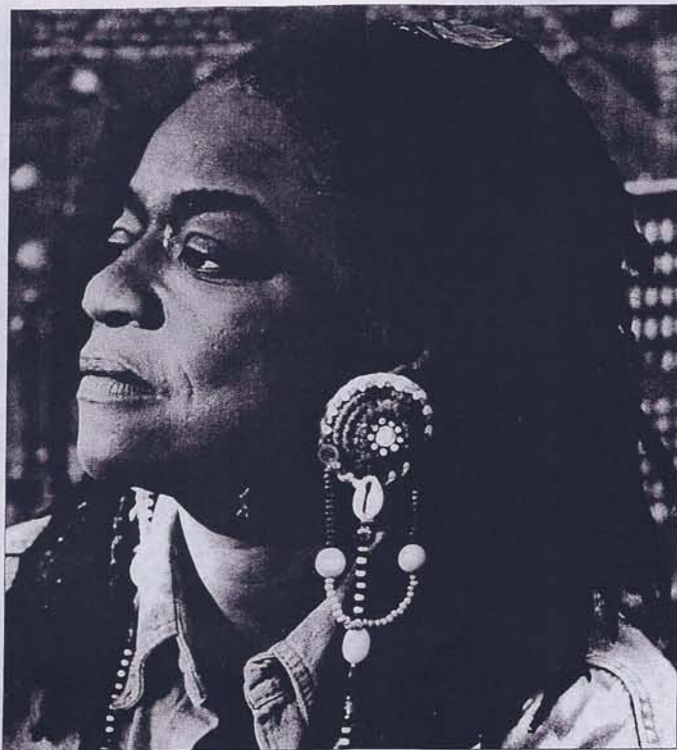
The RINGGOLD CYCLE

Faith Ringgold's vivid paintings take on issues such as slavery, feminism, craft, and art-world politics

BY GAIL GREGG

As a struggling artist, Faith Ringgold concocted an ingenious scheme to propel her work into the national eye. She calculated that if she detached her canvases from their stretchers, framed and backed the paintings with quilted fabric, she could pack an entire show of rolled-up pictures and soft sculpture into oversize trunks—which could then be shipped out to the hinterlands for a mere $35. The small museums and university galleries she contacted eagerly accepted her offer. Ringgold's exuberant paintings could be unfurled and displayed with minimum cost or fuss. And she would be imported from New York to lecture about her work—with another line added to her rapidly expanding résumé.

"There would be a big banner across the campus: *Faaitthh Riinnggoolldd!*" she remembers, emitting her sonorous laugh. This resourceful solution to the common problem of artistic obscurity is vintage Ringgold: original, practical, theatrical, and expansive at the same time. And while these days big-time museums are doing the packing and shipping for her, she continues to conjure up similarly inventive ideas. At the age of 69, having made art since she was a child, Ringgold persists in experimenting with new media and new formats to bring her concerns before ever-wider audiences. Through her children's books, an interactive Web site, a video, commercially produced "Cassie" dolls, and a highly successful traveling museum show, Ringgold's ideas about identity, storytelling, and women's work are traveling far beyond her exhibition trunks.



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Using the medium of quilts, a traditional form of artistic expression, communication, and commerce among African American women, Ringgold has created vivid paintings, some embellished with text, that take on such issues as slavery, feminism, women's work, craft, and art-world politics. She is about halfway through a ten-venue exhibition of recent paintings, the "French Collection" and "American Collection" pictures, as well as seminal older work. The recent paintings are as "demanding and uncompromising as any conceptually based art you can imagine," says Dan Cameron, who organized her traveling exhibition and is senior curator at New York's New Museum.

But even as the painting show has crisscrossed the country—from the Fort Wayne Museum of Art in Indiana (where it

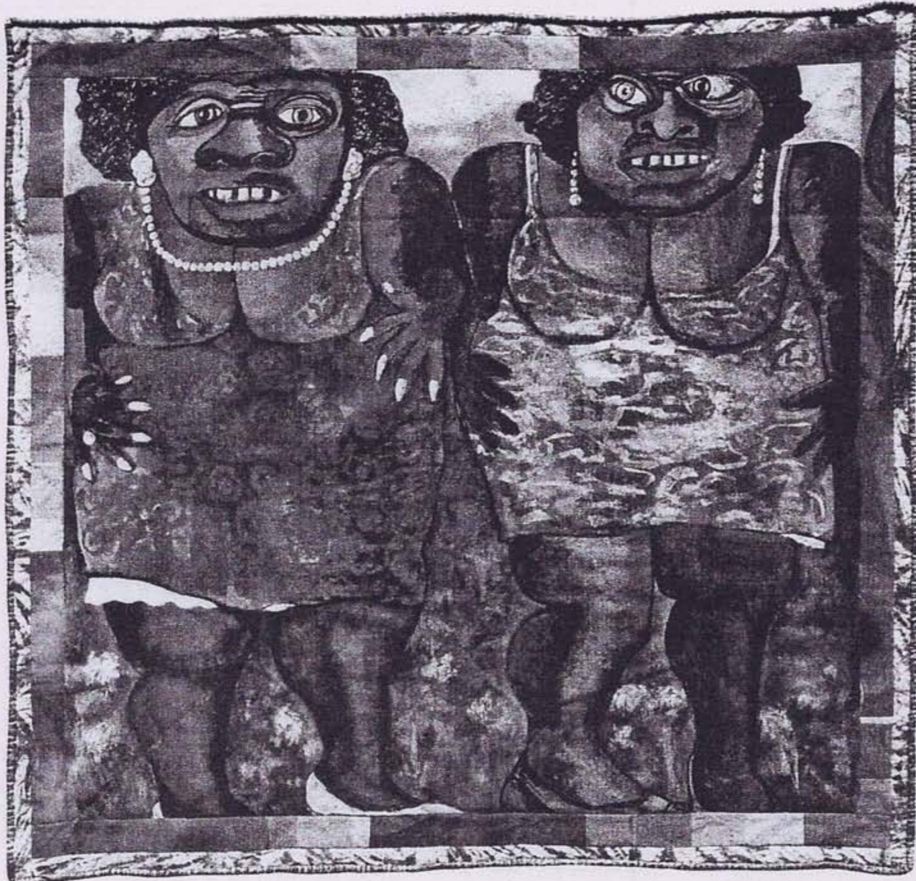
COURTESY THE ARTIST

Matisse's studio is the setting for *The French Collection Part II, #9, Jo Baker's Birthday*, 1993. At left, the artist.

runs through the 18th of next month) to the Chicago Cultural Center (August 7 through October 10)—Ringgold has immersed herself in a new medium: animation, which grew out of the seven children's books she published since *Tar Beach*, her first, came out in 1991. Though Cameron suspects that her involvement with African American juvenile literature may have cost her some "critical respect" among critics and curators, Ringgold dismisses such concerns. "If they won't invite you to the party, why not have your own party?" she maintains. All her life, she says, she has been ignoring the art-world tendency to pigeonhole artists into categories like feminism, abstraction, figuration, realism, postmodernism. Even Ringgold's work in quilts comes with its own potent set of demeaning associations: namely, women's work and craft.

In his introduction to Ringgold's exhibition catalogue *Dancing at the Louvre*, Duke University art-history professor Richard Powell pays tribute not only to the formal qualities of her paintings but also to their "magical realist" storytelling powers. In the "French Collection" series (1991–97), Ringgold sends her fictional alter ego, Willia Marie Simone, from Harlem to 1920s Paris in search of artistic fulfillment. Restraining an urge to fling her wedding bouquet into the Seine and flee, Willia Marie marries a white Frenchman who dies, leaving her with her "art and two babies," and enough money to support herself—a figurative *Room of One's Own*. Her high jinks in France include painting Picasso as he poses nude in Monet's Giverny garden; taking her daughters to boogie under the watchful eye of the *Mona Lisa*; convening a quilting bee at Arles with the great black heroines of 19th-century America; modeling for Matisse while musing about being a muse; and presiding over her own Café des Artistes, frequented by everyone from Paul Gauguin to Jacob Lawrence and Elizabeth Catlett.

Woven through the series is a narrative line that is part chat, part erudite reflection on the great questions in art, part fantastical invention, and part autobiographical confession. In the hand-printed text framing *Moroccan Holiday*, for instance, Willia Marie warns her daughter that "there is a heavy price to pay for being a black woman. For one thing no one ever expects you to know anything, to have anything or to be anything. So you must focus on your dreams and never, never let go."


COURTESY THE ARTIST

***The American Collection #9; The Two Jemimas*, 1993.**

daughter is awakened from her ecstatic dream of slave freedom with an unecstatic question from her brother: "What's tickling you Sis? . . . Wake up and meet Miss Morgan Lou Ann Van Camp," he says. "She's got enough scratch to sink this ship."

Ringgold has never shied from letting her audiences in on the truth about her own life. Her autobiography, *We Flew Over the Bridge: The Memoirs of Faith Ringgold* (Bulfinch, 1995), describes a woman devoted to family—who also knows the toll that family took on her work and sometimes resents it when her sacrifice is not acknowledged. Her parents' marriage ended in divorce, as did her own early marriage. And even her long-standing union with Burdette "Birdie" Ringgold (who retired in 1992 as a General Motors auto worker) has not been without its moments of crisis and separation. She tells of her struggles with her weight; her siblings' drug and alcohol abuse; her children's rebellions. She openly longs for the same kind of collaboration she enjoyed with her own mother, who helped her sew the "tanka" fabric supports for her paintings, inspired by traditional fabric-framed Tibetan works—but seems doubtful that she will ever enjoy it.

Ringgold grew up in Harlem in sight of the George Washington Bridge, the daughter of a fashion designer and a city sanitation worker. Her parents always held good jobs, even during the Depression, and "wanted us to be somebody," Ringgold remembers. Her family was populated by a large number of inveterate storytellers, a talent she absorbed—and, in turn, passed on to her two daughters. Barbara Wallace, 46, is a linguist; Michele Wallace, 47, is the author of the controversial book *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*. Ringgold's first "story quilt" grew out of her frustrated attempts to publish her autobiography. "I figured, I can't get anything published, so I might as well write my story on my art," she once told a reporter.

That first "story quilt," *Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima*, unabashedly advertises itself in its text as a "Quilt and Book by Faith Ringgold." In colloquial dialogue, she tells the story of Jemima Blakey, who inherits the fortune of her New Orleans employers, moves her family to Harlem, opens a restaurant, and finally dies in a car accident back home in Louisiana. "I felt she was my first feminist issue, that I was going to liberate her," Ringgold has said. Visually, the piece has more in common with the kind of quilts her slave great-great-grandmothers made than with the "French Collection" paintings: craft elements such as embroidery and beading adorn the rather static head-on portraits of the various actors in her Jemima drama. Today's pictures are more painterly and visually complex; they can be experienced independent of their texts, unlike *Jemima*.

But no matter how bitter or world-weary the text, the paintings themselves are infected with unquenchable jubilance.

In their quirky way, the "French Collection" paintings also signal Ringgold's high-art intentions. Her politically charged subject matter may center on the African American experience, but she sees herself rooted in Western art traditions. "I had been so influenced by French painters that I thought it was time to start accepting them as equals," she explains. In 1959 she celebrated completion of her master's degree at City College of New York (where she also received her bachelor's in fine art) by taking her mother and two daughters to Paris.

The "American Collection" paintings (begun in 1997) follow Willia Marie's daughter to the United States, where she confronts the legacies of slavery, racism, and sexism. In *We Came to America* (1997), for instance, huge waves have swept a shipful of slaves into the ocean to freedom, with a black Statue of Liberty looming over them as a kind of guardian angel. In *Born in a Cottonfield* (1997), a looming Christ-like figure intersects the picture as if crucified, while a slave couple nestled at his feet smile adoringly at an infant, naked but for a golden halo. Fellow slaves peek from behind puffs of cotton at the tiny female savior who eventually will secure their freedom.

Though this sense of fairy-tale, even religious, redemption infuses much of Ringgold's work, it is also animated by the commonplace and everyday. Her characters' lives are both particular and universal. In *Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima* (1983), for example, Ringgold's heroine has to grapple with her son's marriage to a "scrawny lil ole white gal," and uppity grandchildren who kick her in "her bad knee," even as Providence smites her racist employers' home with lightning. In *We Came to America*, Willia Marie's

Ringgold's latest book will be out in November.

SIMON & SCHUSTER

In fact, Ringgold plans to drop the element of text—though the stories behind the quilts still will be related in her catalogue. "I've done it," she says. "It's not necessary to give it on the quilt anymore." Instead, she will channel her writing skills into books and animation and return to a purer kind of painting.

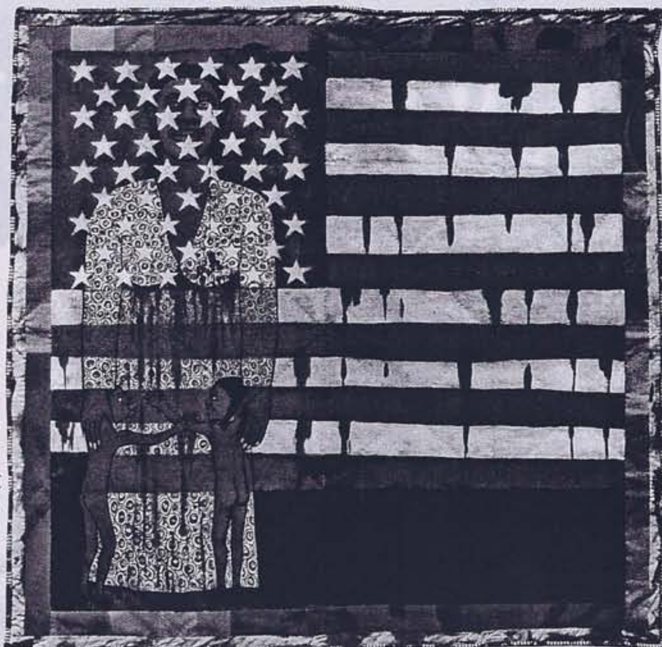
For decades, Ringgold had put that kind of expression aside, realizing that she couldn't "isolate herself from what was going on in the streets." She took on American iconography in such paintings as *Flag for the Moon: Die Nigger* (1969); was arrested in 1970 for participation in a flag-burning protest; strewed a trail of raw eggs and sanitary napkins through the Whitney Museum with the Ad Hoc Women's Art Group to protest a dearth of minorities and women in its galleries; visited Africa; and devoted herself for several years to such performance pieces as *The Wake and Resurrection of the Bicentennial Negro*. As an art teacher in New York City public schools for 18 years, she saw herself as an activist responsible for training a new generation of African Americans to use their eyes, hands, and minds.

But now Ringgold has "flown" across the George Washington Bridge to a suburban home in Englewood, New Jersey. Ringgold's maiden name is Jones—as is her new street address—and she is already working on a story line for a new series of paintings that would place her ancestors on the same piece of ground where she now resides. Her delight in her beautiful suburban home—and her spacious, light-drenched studio—is palpable. It has taken her many decades of hard work and persistence to earn her own piece of paradise, and she seems to be enjoying every aspect of it.

Pinned to her freshly painted studio wall is a primed quilt, soon to be transformed into *Stompin at the Savoy*, part of the "American Collection." Smaller studios radiate from the central space, allowing her separate areas for archives and research, office paperwork, sewing, and illustration. Ringgold has a second studio in San Diego, where she is a senior professor at the University of California at San Diego. Since 1985 she has spent half of each year at the California campus, the other half in New York.

As she conducts an informal tour of the pristine Englewood studio, a Federal Express deliveryman rings the bell with galleys of her latest children's book, *If a Bus Could Talk*—the story of Rosa Parks. "If there's one person in the world I would love to be in the presence of, it's her," Ringgold says. "She never got spoiled by celebrity." As soon as the Rosa Parks galleys are corrected she will begin work on five new book contracts for Random House and Simon & Schuster—including three "board books" for prereaders. The animated version of *Tar Beach* is scheduled to premiere on HBO at Christmas; and two series are in development at Nickelodeon. Also on the drawing board are plans for a second volume of her autobiography, one that would be "more literary."

In her first volume, Ringgold took on the subjects of racism and sexism in the art market. Despite numerous museum and university shows and a national reputation, she had trouble finding dealer representation. Several decades separated her first solo show at Spectrum (a co-op gallery) from her first commercial gallery exhibition—at Bernice Steinbaum in SoHo in 1986. She credits Steinbaum with introducing her to "the four hundred" monied African Americans interested in collecting art. But the two could not agree on how to handle her children's writing and illustration interests, Ringgold says, and they parted ways after a second successful show in 1992.



COURTESY THE ARTIST (2)

***The American Collection #6; The Flag Is Bleeding 2*, 1997.**

In her autobiography Ringgold advocates that artists should act as their own dealers, which she set out to do after leaving Steinbaum. Then a friend introduced her to ACA, which has long exhibited the work of African American artists such as Jacob Lawrence and Horace Pippin. In 1995 ACA opened its new 57th Street gallery with a Ringgold show, and it mounted a second one last fall in conjunction with the New Museum exhibition. "They're really the best possible gallery for me," Ringgold says. "They have an appreciation for artists of color—and for social issues." Prices for her recent paintings range from $75,000 to $80,000; oils from the 1960s sell for as much as $150,000.

***The Wake and Resurrection of the Bicentennial Negro*, 1976, a life-size sculpture.**

Managing this success has added new—though agreeable—challenges to Ringgold's life. Her lecture, exhibition, and teaching schedules keep Ringgold so busy that it's hard to develop the "20 to 30 ideas floating around, waiting to be done." There are meetings with the landscaper, her architect, HBO, publishers, curators. An assistant, Grace Welty, now keeps her calendar and fills in for her mother in sewing the quilt backings for her paintings. And, as ever, a primed canvas awaits her hand at the top of the new staircase. "You *can* fly" is how Ringgold often inscribes copies of *Tar Beach*. She should know. ■

Gail Gregg is a New York painter and writer.