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FAITH RINGGOLD:
THE EARLY WORKS AND THE EVOLUTION OF THE *THANGKA* PAINTINGS

by

LISA E. FARRINGTON

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Art History in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New
York

1997

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Art History in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Abstract

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Adviser: Professor Rosemarie Bletter

This dissertation examines the early paintings of Faith Ringgold from 1956 to 1973, within the framework of the black cultural and political nationalism of the 1960s and the Feminist Movement of the 1970s. In particular the two *thangka* landscape series (unstretched paintings bordered in fabric), entitled *The Feminist Series* (1972) and *The Slave Rape Series* (1972-73) are examined. These two groups of paintings are critical to the artists later works due to their unconventional format. They form a link between Ringgold's first mature works of 1963-67 and the painted "story quilts" begun in 1980, for which the artist is presently renowned. The *thangka* paintings are unique in that they represent a carefully constructed marriage between the Western tradition of painting on canvas and two distinct Non-western traditions: that of the Tibetan *thangka* (religious paintings on fabric) and that of African textile design.

The research begins with an examination of Ringgold's landscape paintings of the late 1950s which are gestural in brushwork, incorporate Impressionist lighting, and foreshadow the artist's interest in abstraction. This phase quickly evolves into her first mature painting series, *The American People* (1963-1967), which addresses issues of race relations between blacks and whites in America during the period in which the

series was painted. Discussions of subsequent paintings, which militantly and often graphically address issues of sexism and racism, follow. These figurative works include *The Black Light Series*, *The Political Posters*, and *For the Women's House*, and were painted from 1967 to 1971. The 1972 group of watercolor paintings, *The Political Landscapes* are discussed as they relate to the *thangkas* in terms of the integration of text and image. Finally three chapters are devoted to the *thangka*-style works, discussing the artist's material process, the nature of the texts included in the paintings, the use of the nude black female image, and the socio-political environment in which these works were created.

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

*Of my two handicaps, being female put more obstacles in my path than being black.*¹

*Shirley Chisholm
Washington, D.C., 1970*

More than twenty years ago I saw Faith Ringgold's painting, *The Flag Is Bleeding*, for the first time (fig. 1). The American flag dripping blood etched itself into my memory. I was attending a class in African-American art history at Howard University at the time; and over the years I have watched with admiration and interest the progress of Ringgold's career. Looking back, it is astounding to think that her work was already being taught in the classroom only seven years after her first one-person show. I later realized that it was my good fortune to be studying at an historically black college during a time when interest in African-American history and culture was increasing, and universities were beginning to offer courses in black art.

Today, Ringgold is considered a formidable artist and personality. She has been credited with spearheading both the Black and Feminist Art Movements in New York in the early 1970s and for raising the tradition of quilt-making from the realm of craft to that of fine art. She has also pierced the impenetrable armor of the art world--no small accomplishment for an African-American woman. Her "story quilts" (narrative paintings bordered with quilted fabric--fig.2) hold honored places in the collections of many of the great repositories of art, including the Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Guggenheim Museum, and the Philadelphia Museum of Art.²

Ringgold achieved renown in the early 1960s, while raising two daughters in Harlem (both of whom are now accomplished professionals). She developed her craft as an artist, while struggling with her husband's drug addiction, completing a master's degree in art education, and working as a New York City public school teacher. Ringgold developed a mature style, while going from gallery to gallery, convincing art dealers to exhibit her works. By the early 1970s, she was protesting sexism and racism in the art world and simultaneously founding feminist art groups. Over the course of ten years, Ringgold went from being a painter, to a sculptor, to a performance artist; and, ultimately, she came full circle, returning once again to painting, with the story quilts. It seems almost impossible that any one person could accomplish so much in a single lifetime. Yet she has--and the journey is far from over.

In the late 1940s, when Ringgold was a college student, she was told by a professor that she had no talent for art. She had just submitted a drawing assignment--a painting of mountains--and her instructor professed not to recognize what it was. Having spent her entire life in the city, Ringgold's design was of an imaginary mountainscape because she "didn't know from mountains then." Examining her work, her professor asked what the subject was. "These are mountains," Ringgold explained. To which the instructor replied curtly, "Then write it on there." Ringgold was bewildered. "Does this mean you don't think I can draw?" she asked. "I plan to be an artist." The reply came, "I don't see any indication that you can."³ Stunned, Ringgold reacted not with distress or humiliation, but with righteous indignation. The following passage relates her response:

When he said, "You can't be an artist; you can't draw," I said, "Oh, yes I can. I

definitely can. I mean, before I wasn't sure whether I could, but now I know I can, just because you say I can't."⁴

At that moment, Ringgold was more convinced than ever that she would one day become a great artist.⁵

The fact that race and gender might hinder Ringgold's attainment of her goals was hardly a deterrent. Michele Wallace, writer and daughter of the artist, is convinced that these qualities actually strengthened her mother's convictions:

Black women have always insisted upon being artists. They've insisted [upon it] since the first slaves . . . incorporated African design into the making of quilts; since Edmonia Lewis made her first sculpture in the 1860s As a result of this uncanny stubbornness, we today have black women artists who might be called masters in a saner society.⁶

Without doubt, this "uncanny stubbornness" is a quality Ringgold possesses. In fact, she admits to being most inspired by people who overcome adversity.⁷ Ringgold has, after many years of struggle, found her place in the art world, where she is indeed considered a major artist in her own right.

Born the last of three children to a working-class Harlem family in 1930, Faith Ringgold, né Faith Willie Jones, learned early that her parents expected her to "be somebody."⁸ The Joneses were part of the Great Migration, moving north from Florida to settle in New York City in the early 20th century, along with tens of thousands of other African-Americans. They came north looking for better opportunities for themselves and their children. More than anything, the Jones children were expected to attend college and excel intellectually.⁹

Ringgold was born asthmatic, six months after the death of her elder brother

Ralph, who died of pneumonia while he was still an infant. As a consequence, Ringgold's mother, Willie Posey Jones, tended to her young daughter with exceptional care, keeping her home from school for much of the first and second grades, in an effort to protect her from the dangers of asthma. During these early years, Posey occupied her daughter with crayons, coloring books, and bits of fabric from which Ringgold fashioned her first works of art. The artist recalls that

on the days when I was recuperating from an asthma attack, mother would prop me up on pillows in my bed. She would do her housework, cook and clean, wash and iron while I would read, write, and draw 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 [the] bits of cloth my mother would give me.¹⁰

Experiences from Ringgold's childhood such as this one, which have had a great impact on her life and art, are carefully examined in the chapters that follow.

Ringgold was born into a time of great social and cultural change. The tumult of her life and career seemed to parallel her environment. The New York of the 1930s knew both the artistic advantages of the Harlem Renaissance and the economic deprivations of the Great Depression. Ringgold was, thus, no stranger to hardship or poverty. Yet she knew the excitement of the jazz age through performances at the Apollo Theater on 125th Street. She enjoyed the music of the great entertainers of the age—Cab Calloway, Count Basie, Louis Armstrong, and Duke Ellington. The artist's daughter tells us that Ellington and Max Roach lived just around the corner from Ringgold, and “Sonny Rollins drove the neighbors crazy practicing his scales. The world's best music was [only] a short walk . . . away.”¹¹

In the 1940s, Ringgold witnessed the birth of Harlem's first gangs and the violence they perpetuated. Wallace speaks of the inherent dangers Ringgold faced while living in a gang-infested neighborhood:

Your life might depend on you[r] being able to remember how the territory was divided—what gang's turf you were on now—the Lords? the Comanches? the Royals? And my mother tells me they meant something entirely different when they talked about crashing a party. It meant the party got turned out, there was a fight, someone might die.¹²

Ringgold watched as her own brother, Andrew, became involved with gang violence and later, tragically, with drugs.¹³

The rapid evolution of Ringgold's life matched that of the changing society in which she lived. In the 1950s, Harlem was a place of burgeoning political activism as the Civil Rights Movement gained momentum. Ingrained practices of racism and segregation came face-to-face with new laws and ideas that challenged the old tenets. For example, discrimination in city housing was outlawed in New York in 1951 while, that same year, the internationally famous black entertainer, Josephine Baker, was refused service at New York's fashionable Stork Club. The New York of Ringgold's years as a young woman witnessed a variety of important advances for African-Americans during the decade of the fifties. In 1954, the first African-American New Yorker (Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.) was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives; and later, in 1957, New York City passed the first fair housing ordinance in the country, prohibiting discrimination in private housing.¹⁴

During these critical years, Ringgold married Earl Wallace and became a mother. (Her second marriage was to Burdette Ringgold, from whom she takes her professional

name.) When her children were in elementary school, in 1963, a quarter of a million people marched on Washington, D.C. to hear Martin Luther King speak eloquently of children who “will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.”¹⁵ That same year, Ringgold launched her career as an artist. Her first solo exhibition took place amidst the emergence of the Black Art Movement and her first commercial successes coincided with the rise, in the early 1970s, of the Women’s Movement.

Ringgold’s life and career become all the more intriguing when we consider how few role models she had. There were only a handful of African-American men--and even fewer women--who had achieved success as artists by the mid-20th century. Artists of the Harlem Renaissance such as Aaron Douglas, Richmond Barthé, Archibald Motley, Palmer Hayden, and William H. Johnson (whose flat, stylized figures greatly influenced Ringgold), are examples of those who were able to succeed. They achieved national, and even international, reputations with the help of the philanthropic Harmon Foundation.¹⁶ The foundation also helped the careers of African-American women artists such as Lois Mailou Jones, Augusta Savage, and Nancy Elizabeth Prophet, who thrived during the years of the Renaissance and within the nurturing environment of President Roosevelt’s New Deal.

During the 1930s, women artists, through New Deal art programs such as the Federal Art Project of the Works Progress Administration (FAP-WPA), found increasing career opportunities. New Deal programs tried to battle the Great Depression by actively employing artists and promoting the economic interests of women. Additionally, federal

law prohibited sexual discrimination and mandated equal opportunities in the hiring of artists. For the first time in history, thirty to forty percent of the newly hired artists were women. “The WPA afforded women artists an unprecedented opportunity for professional employment . . . under conditions that were theoretically egalitarian,”¹⁷ but few were able to maintain their status as professional artists for very long.

Augusta Savage, for example, after working for the FAP-WPA as a Project Coordinator and later as Director of the Harlem Community Art Center, was offered a professional commission by the organizers of the 1939 World’s Fair to create her sculpture, *The Harp* (which has become known as *Lift Every Voice and Sing* - fig. 3). Unfortunately, at the close of the fair, Savage did not have the funds to cast or store the 16-foot high plaster sculpture, which was subsequently bulldozed when the fair was demolished. To make matters worse, she discovered that, because she had become privately employed (even if temporarily), she no longer qualified for her WPA position, and her employment was terminated. That year marked the last major showing of Savage’s work and her attempts to further her career remained unsuccessful. The authors of *A History of African American Artists*, Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson, tell us that Savage’s endeavors did not produce significant sales or commissions. They explain further that

socialites did not know what to do about her sculptures of black people. And . . . African-Americans . . . did not have the money to buy her work Despite her enormous talent and drive, Savage’s efforts were first cruelly frustrated by discrimination and then crushed by the Depression.¹⁸

Even if the WPA had continued to employ Savage, the position would only have lasted

until 1943, when the Federal Art Project itself was terminated. Savage eventually became an embittered recluse, living out her life on an old chicken farm in upstate New York, preferring to shun both art and the art scene until her death in 1962.¹⁹

Nancy Elizabeth Prophet, a 1918 graduate of the Rhode Island School of Design, at first found the climate of Paris more conducive to artistic success than that of the United States. She exhibited at the *Salon d'Automne* from 1924 to 1927, and again from 1931 to 1932. Like Savage, Prophet was soon able to benefit at home from the atmosphere of cultural expansiveness that pervaded New York in the 1930s. She participated in the Whitney Museum of American Art Sculpture Biennials in 1935 and 1937 and in the Philadelphia Museum of Art Sculpture International in 1940. However, the change in the cultural climate that coincided with the demise of the WPA detrimentally affected Prophet's career as much as it had the career of Savage. After 1945, Prophet was unable to replicate her earlier successes, and her final years, until her death in 1960, were, like those of Savage, "marked by poverty and obscurity."²⁰

K. Victoria Boone, in her essay "Faith Ringgold: An Artist of Political Themes," discusses the rapid decline in opportunities for women artists that took place in the 1940s, when Ringgold was first entering college to study art:

Artistically, the thirties can be considered a decade of change but by the forties Congressional budgets were being cut and often discontinued. As a result, the forties, fifties, and sixties gave way to increasing discrimination against women artists.²¹

Thus, Ringgold was unable to benefit from her artist-predecessors, because these women themselves had lost their brief foothold in the art world. Norma Broude and Mary

Garrard, in *The Power of Feminist Art*, confirm that

the narrow window of opportunity for women artists that had briefly opened during the economic hard times of the 1930s quickly snapped shut again in the forties with the emergence of . . . the Abstract Expressionist movement and its macho mystique --to which women artists were automatically denied access.²²

Ringgold's agrees that "no other creative field is as closed to those who are not white and male as is the visual arts."²³ Ringgold nonetheless found ways to defy the hermetic construct of the art scene, to survive--and even to thrive--as at least one of her predecessors, Lois Mailou Jones, had also done.

Jones (b. 1905), in her desire to become an artist, followed a path not unlike Ringgold's. When Jones was a child, her mother, an expert milliner, supplied her with crayons and exposed her to the art of making beautiful things with cloth. This experience parallels that of Ringgold, whose mother also worked in fashion and also exposed her daughter to the aesthetics of working with fabric. While Jones became a textile designer, Ringgold became a painter of quilted canvases. Both women were well educated in their fields, and both were discouraged by their peers and instructors from becoming artists.

An outstanding student, Jones was distinguished while still in college by having her textile designs purchased by major New York firms such as Schumacher and F.A. Foster. But when she applied for a teaching assistantship at the Boston Museum School from which she had graduated, her mentors were less than receptive. They advised her to "go south and help her people" rather than attempt to pursue a career in her New England home.²⁴ Having never been south, Jones was uncertain of her prospects. But, fearless

and optimistic, she bought a car, mounted a large headlight on the hood (apparently to negotiate those dense southern bayous), and did indeed go south.²⁵

At the age of 23, Jones was hired as the head of the art department of the Palmer Memorial Institute in Sedalia, North Carolina. Two years later she was invited to join the faculty of Howard University in Washington, D.C., where she taught design and drawing for nearly 50 years. Jones allowed teaching to supplement her income while she pursued her career as an artist. (Ringgold, like Jones, taught art for nearly twenty years, to support herself and her family, until her career as an artist was secured.)

During the course of Jones's abundantly creative and productive life, she was honored with over sixty solo exhibitions, and she participated in literally hundreds of group shows, including the Harmon Foundation exhibitions of the 1920s and 30s. In 1952, *Lois Mailou Jones Peintures, 1937-1957* was published in Paris, and in 1955 Jones was awarded the Diplôme Décoration de l'Ordre National, Honneur et Mérite au Grade du Chevalier by President Magloire of Haiti. Most recently, her painting *Les Fétiches* (1938) appeared on the cover of the Smithsonian Institution's 1992 catalog of African-American masters, *Free Within Ourselves* (fig. 4).²⁶ Jones, however, is one of the only African-American women from the generation immediately preceding Ringgold to have achieved artistic renown and longevity. Consequently, Ringgold has suffered from a general lack of pathfinders.

When Ringgold came of age, recognition for women artists of color was still rare and hard won. In order to succeed, Ringgold had to believe that she--a black woman -- could thrive as an artist despite the exclusivity of the art world and, further, that she

could do so without sacrificing one iota of her blackness, her femaleness, or her humanity.²⁷ She had little concrete proof that such a feat was possible. Yet, as the following chapters will reveal, she was undaunted.

* * *

At a recent conference on African-American art and culture, art historian Robert Farris Thompson spoke with great enthusiasm about the visual power of many of Ringgold's paintings of the 1960s. The works of this period have received a great deal of art historical attention. Indeed, Ringgold's painting, *The Flag Is Bleeding* (1967), was reproduced on the cover of the 1995 publication, *The Power of Feminist Art*. Ringgold is also well-known for her works of the 1980s and 90s--her painted "story quilts"--which have been widely exhibited and discussed in the literature. In fact, several of the story quilts have become the basis for a series of recently published and acclaimed children's books, including Ringgold's award-winning *Tar Beach* (Crown, 1991).²⁸

There are, however, questions about Ringgold's art and creative evolution of the intervening period of the early 1970s that have been addressed only superficially. Those questions require in-depth answers if we are to truly understand Ringgold's *oeuvre*. How did she make the transition from conventional works on canvas in the 1960s to the cloth-bordered paintings of the 1980s? Precisely why did she stop painting on stretched canvas, and where did she find the courage and the motivation to abandon this accepted and honored medium to turn instead to fabric art? What circumstances combined to

move Ringgold in this new and unorthodox direction—a direction that would ultimately lead her to success as an artist with an art form that was truly her own? The answers to these questions lie in a series of little known, and rarely reproduced paintings on unstretched canvas, completed in 1972 and 1973. They are the *thangka* paintings (pronounced *ton-kah*)—*The Feminist Series* and *Slave Rape*. These works constitute the missing links, which bridge the gap between two widely disparate styles of Ringgold's art and two distinct moments in her life.

The first time I actually saw the *thungkas*, I was rummaging through an old trunk in the artist's garage. My only prior exposure to them had been in slides that I had seen at the artist's studio-archive in Harlem, and in the occasional brief reference to them in published essays. When I unrolled the first painting, I was stunned by the incandescent intensity of its colors and was delighted by the shimmering gold lettering that ran vertically down each canvas (fig. 5). The paintings had no stretchers, which made them intimate and inviting, especially since I was obligated to handle the fabric as I laid each one out for examination. I had never seen them reproduced. Few of these nearly sixty canvases have ever appeared in catalogues on the artist's works.²⁹ And, since their restoration (with new, more sumptuous fabric borders), they have not been photographed, even by the artist.

The *thungkas* are Ringgold's least known paintings, as virtually all of them are still in her possession. Though her monumental canvases and story quilts have been much publicized, admired, and reproduced in catalogues and essays, little attention has been paid to the *thungkas*, which mark a moment in the artist's career when she turned to

fabric and its manipulation as an integral part of her creative processes as a painter.

Despite their importance in piecing together Ringgold's creative evolution, the *thangkas* remain, for the most part, unexamined.

Historian Mara Witzling once said of Ringgold that in the 1980s she "achieved a breakthrough to perhaps her greatest achievement, in the conception of the story quilt."³⁰ But it is not the story quilt that marks Ringgold's most significant breakthrough. These quilted narrative paintings are the end result of a revelation that occurred much earlier in her career and with far less fanfare. We are told by art critic Amy Jinker-Lloyd that in 1972, when Ringgold turned her back on traditional methods and materials to produce the first *thangkas*, she threw us off balance and forced us to reconsider our terms of artistic judgement "by refusing to work with paint on [stretched] canvas, the classic medium of white, male, patriarchal expression."³¹ It is my intention to explore this phenomenon by closely examining Ringgold's career up to, and during, the inception of the *thangkas*. A thorough analysis of these works is necessary in order to understand the story quilts, particularly since the *thangkas* signal a turning point in Ringgold's career which ultimately led her to success beyond anything she could have imagined-- international acclaim as an artist who elevated quilt-making to the lofty province of high art.

NOTES

References throughout the “notes” to “artist’s archive” refer to Ringgold’s personal archives located at her New York City studio, 345 West 145th Street.

1. Shirley Chisholm, quoted from a speech delivered at the Conference on Women’s Employment Hearing before the Special Subcommittee on Education of the Committee on Education and Labor, House of Representatives, Ninety-first Congress, second session (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1970), pp 909-915.

2. Moira Roth states that “through her new feminist subjects, materials and forms, and collaborative working mode, Faith Ringgold dramatically established her early and key role in the history of American feminist art of the 1970s.” See Roth, “Keeping the Feminist Faith,” in *Faith Ringgold: Twenty Years of Painting, Sculpture and Performance (1963-1983)*, ed. Michele Wallace (New York: Studio Museum in Harlem, 1984), 13; Judith Brodsky outlines the founding by Ringgold and her daughter Michele Wallace of Women, Students and Artists for Black Art Liberation (WSABAL), which publicly condemned the intention of the group Artists’ Strike Against Racism Sexism Repression and War, to exclude blacks and women from their “counter-Venice Biennale” exhibition held in New York that year. Ringgold’s protests were directly responsible for the inclusion in the show of woman, blacks, and Puerto Ricans. See Brodsky, “Exhibitions, Galleries, and Alternative Spaces,” in *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary Garrard (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), 106; WSABAL is credited with helping to launch the Black Art Movement. See Carrie Rickey “Illustrated Timeline: A Highly Selective Chronology” in *The Power of Feminist Art*, ; Maude S. Wahlman, *Signs and Symbols: African Images in African-American Quilts* (New York: Studio Books and the Museum of American Folk Art, 1993), 117; Hilary J. Steinitz, “Faith Ringgold,” in *Gumbo Ya Ya: Anthology of Contemporary African-American Women Artists* (New York: Midmarch Art Press, 1995), 226; Roth, “The Field and the Drawing Room,” in *Faith Ringgold Change: Painted Story Quilts* (New York: Bernice Steinbaum Gallery, 1987), 9.

3. Faith Ringgold, *Faith Ringgold: The Last Story Quilt*, a film produced by Linda Freeman (Chappaqua, N.Y.: L & S Video, 1991).

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

6. Michele Wallace, “Black and Fine: Women’s Art,” *Majority Report* (12 July 1975). (Mary) Edmonia Lewis (1843-1910?) was the first African-American woman to gain widespread recognition as a sculptor in the United States and abroad. Bearden and Henderson indicate that the obstacles “Lewis overcame are unparalleled in American

art.” See Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists from 1792 to the Present* (New York: Pantheon, 1993), 54, 55-77; Samella Lewis, *African American Art and Artists* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 40-43.

7. Ringgold, *Faith Ringgold: The Last Story Quilt*.

8. *Ibid.*

9. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. “New Negroes, Migration, and Cultural Exchange,” in *Jacob Lawrence: The Migration Series*, ed. Elizabeth H. Turner (Washington, D.C.: Rappahannock Press and the Phillips Collection, 1993), 17-21; see also, Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge: The Memoirs of Faith Ringgold* (Boston, Mass.: Little, Brown and Company, 1995), 67-68; Ringgold, *Faith Ringgold: The Last Story Quilt*.

10. Ringgold, *We Flew Over The Bridge*, 9. It is difficult not to draw a parallel between Ringgold’s first exposure to art while an infirmed child and Matisse’s similar experience as a young man. John Elderfield describe’s Matisse as a “sickly, docile child,” and although twenty years old when he first began to paint, he did so while recuperating from an attack of acute appendicitis, and thanks to his mother, who “gave him a paint box to keep him from being bored” during his convalescence. See John Elderfield, “An Impossible Coherence,” in *Henri Matisse: A Retrospective* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1992), 23.

11. Wallace, *Invisibility Blues: From Pop to Theory* (New York: Verso, 1990), 15.

12. *Ibid.*, 15-16.

13. Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 19, 27-28, 59, 83, 138-142, 191.

14. Tom Cowan and Jack Maguire, *Timelines of African-American History: 500 Years of Black Achievement* (New York: Roundtable Press, 1994), 215-235.

15. Martin Luther King, Jr., “I Have A Dream,” address delivered at the Lincoln Memorial, Washington, D.C., on August 28, 1963.

16. Ringgold, quoted in *The Last Story Quilt*; The Harmon Foundation, established by philanthropist William E. Harmon, offered awards for Outstanding Achievement Among Negroes and organized exhibitions to promote the art of African-Americans, the first of which was held in New York in 1928. By the 1930s, Harmon exhibits had traveled to fifty American cities and boasted 350,000 attendees, 30% of whom were African-American. See Elsa Honig Fine, *The Afro-American Artist, A Search for Identity* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1973), 91.

17. K. Victoria Boone indicates that this figure was 40%. See "Faith Ringgold: An Artist of Political Themes," M.A. thesis, University of Oklahoma, Norman, 1990, 8. This data is contradicted, however, by Marlene Park who states that in New York 27% of the artists were women and that New York's figures "were more or less in line with percentages of women on the national WPA" See Park and Gerald E. Markowitz, *New Deal for Art: The Government Art Projects of the 1930s with Examples from New York City and State* (Hamilton, N.Y.: Gallery Association of New York State, 1977), 20. Park's data is confirmed by Francis V. O'Connor whose book *Federal Support for the Visual Arts: The New Deal and Now* (1961; 2nd ed. Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, 1971) includes a numerical and gender breakdown of participating artists in all states. This breakdown indicates that 30% of the WPA artists were women. For additional information on the Federal Art Project, see Jonathan Harris, *Federal Art and National Culture: The Politics of Identity in New Deal America* (Cambridge University Press, 1995); Broude and Garrard, *The Power of Feminist Art*, 13.

18. Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 180.

19. *Ibid.*, 168-180; see also Gary A. Reynolds and Beryl J. Wright, *Against the Odds: African-American Artists and the Harmon Foundation* (Newark, N.J.: The Newark Museum, 1989), 251.

20. Reynolds and Wright, *Against the Odds*, 248.

21. Boone, "Faith Ringgold: An Artist of Political Themes," 8.

22. Broude and Garrard, "Introduction: Feminism and Art in the Twentieth Century," in *The Power of Feminist Art*, 13.

23. Sylvia Fergus, "Portrait of Artist as Woman: Ringgold," in *The Wellesley News* (2 November 1973): 4.

24. Lois Mailou Jones, *Against the Odds: Artists of the Harlem Renaissance*, film produced by the New Jersey Network (1994).

25. *Ibid.*

26. See Regina A. Perry, *Free Within Ourselves: African-American Artists in the Collection of the National Museum of American Art* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1992), 122; for further information on Lois Jones, see Tritobia Benjamin, *The Life and Art of Lois Mailou Jones* (San Francisco: Pomegranate Artbooks, 1994).

27. Fergus, "Portrait of Artist as Woman: Ringgold," 4.

28. "Continuity and Change in African-American Art," symposium sponsored by the City University of New York Graduate Center, 3 February, 1995; program coordinators, Professors Morris Dickstein (Director of the Center for the Humanities) and Rose-Carol Washton Long (Executive Officer of the Ph.D. Program in Art History); moderator Michele Wallace, Associate Professor of English. Speakers included Robert Farris Thompson and Lowery Sims, among others; Broude and Garrard, *The Power of Feminist Art*; For useful bibliographical listings of writings on Ringgold's story quilts, see "Faith Ringgold Chronology," in Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 275-278; see also, the bibliography in Michele Wallace, ed., *Faith Ringgold: Twenty Years of Painting, Sculpture, and Performance*, 35-36, as well as essays in the same publication by Terrie S. Rouse, Roth, Freida High-Wasikhongo, Eleanor Monroe, and Wallace; selected bibliography in *Faith Ringgold: Painting, Sculpture, Performance* (Wooster, Ohio: College of Wooster Art Museum, 1985), 29-30; "Faith Ringgold Chronology," in *Faith Ringgold: A 25 Year Survey* (Hempstead, N.Y.: Fine Arts Museum of Long Island, 1990), 61-63, and essays in the same publication by Thalia Gouma-Peterson and Roth; *Faith Ringgold Change: Painted Story Quilts*; and Ringgold, *Faith Ringgold: The French Collection Part I* (New York: Being My Own Woman Press, 1992); Ringgold's *Tar Beach* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1991) won the Caldecott Honor Book Award and the Coretta Scott King Award for Illustration, 1992.

29. Only one of the *thangkas*, *Fight* (1972), appears in catalogues on the artist. It was created at the beginning of the second *thangka* series, *Slave Rape* and is differentiated from other paintings of the series by its size (87 x 48", as opposed to the approximate size of the others in the series, which is 26 x 42"). *Fight* is reproduced in color in *Faith Ringgold Twenty Years of Painting, Sculpture and Performance*, 41, and in *Faith Ringgold: Painting, Sculpture, Performance*, 16. All other representations of the *thangka* paintings appear in the backgrounds of photographs of exhibition installations or performances by the artist. Most notable of these are *Run, You Might Get Away* (1972), reproduced in the background of a photograph of the artist and her mother in *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 173; the same photograph appears in *The Home News*, New Brunswick, N.J. (Sunday, 4 March 1973): C21; an installation photograph of the smaller *thangkas* from a 1975 University of Tennessee, Chattanooga exhibition appears in the background of a photograph of the artist in *The Chattanooga Times*, Sunday, 8 September 1975; one *thangka* each from *Slave Rape* and *Feminist Series* appears in the background of photographs in *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 202, 205, and 233; and one from *The Feminist Series* appears in similar photographs in Ringgold, Linda Freeman, and Nancy Roucher, *Talking to Faith Ringgold* (New York: Crown, 1995).

30. Mara Witzling, "Faith Ringgold," in *Voicing Our Visions: Writings by Women Artists* (New York: Universe, 1991), 353.

31. Amy Jinkner-Lloyd, "Faith Ringgold at the High Museum" in *Art in America* (January 1991): 141.

CHAPTER 2

THE MAKING OF AN ARTIST

Faith Ringgold grew up in Sugar Hill on Harlem's west side. She and her family moved there when she was eleven years old, having left a less affluent area of central Harlem (known as "The Valley") in the search of a better home and finer schools. Indeed, quality education was so important to Ringgold's mother, Willie Posey Jones, that she had already placed her children in public schools on the west side, even before moving there. She was able to do this by using a friend's address instead of her own on her children's school records. This well-known tactic was employed by parents living in lower income neighborhoods in order to situate their children in schools with better facilities, particularly when their own local institutions were under-funded or poorly maintained. Ringgold tells us that the only drawback to attending school outside of her own neighborhood was this: whenever she was asked her address, she had to lie.¹ Nonetheless, her mother was determined to avail herself of the best possible education for her children. The artist explains that her parents' conviction about the importance of a good education greatly impressed her and her siblings: "What we knew and what we were trained to think about was that we were going to college."² The study of art, however, was not exactly what the family had in mind.

Ringgold entered City College as an art education major in the fall of 1948. Her experience there taught her that many people believed art to be an inappropriate career for a woman, as she recalls:

In my freshman year at City College, I selected art as my major only to discover that women were not allowed to declare a major in the school of Liberal Arts. So I registered in the School of Education, majoring in art and minoring in education. This was the only way I could get a degree in art at City College³

Ringgold was compelled to pursue a teaching career, though this had not been her original intention. She had to couch her goal of becoming a visual artist in the promise that she would become a teacher first—an occupation that was thought to be more suitable for a young woman in the 1940s. Although Ringgold went on to teach for nearly twenty years in the New York City public school system, soon after finishing her graduate studies in 1959, she also began to pursue a career in the visual arts, securing her first one-person show less than a decade later.⁴

Ringgold's experience at City College was not her first encounter with a society that made it difficult for women to pursue artistic careers. Ringgold recounts another time, in high school, when her creative abilities were called into question:

I remember bringing in my work to show [my teacher] and she said, "Oh, I think this is nice, but from now on [it might be be] better for you to do original work." I said, "What do you mean?" [and she replied], "As opposed to copying, you should do original work."⁵

Although the artwork that Ringgold had presented was indeed of her own making, her teacher clearly found it inconceivable that she might be capable of exhibiting advanced skill or talent at such a young age.

Ringgold's student experiences hardly improved after she entered college. Her gender, her race, and her domestic situation (she married and became the mother of two children well before graduating in 1955) made it difficult for faculty members to support her hopes of becoming a successful artist. Ringgold received little encouragement from

her professors, who took it for granted that wifely and motherly duties would become her “career,” with teaching serving as a possible secondary pursuit. Despite their preconceptions, however, Ringgold’s professors nonetheless acknowledged her talent by giving her consistently high grades—she was an “A” student throughout her college career. Ringgold worked diligently, always turning her work in on time, following assignment instructions to the letter, and copying classical busts as she was instructed to do. “We copied everything,” says Ringgold, “and I was a good copier!” Under the tutelage of the City College faculty, Ringgold spent her student years making likenesses of the works of the European masters. As a result, it took her nearly ten years to develop her own style, one that was distinct from those she had been taught to emulate.⁶

The artist did meet an instructor who was, unlike others, supportive of her career aspirations—professor and artist, Robert Gwathmey. Gwathmey encouraged Ringgold to explore her own idiosyncratic approach to color, which comprised a narrow range of tones and a dependence on intense and abrupt color contrasts rather than chiaroscuro to create form. Ringgold avoided the Renaissance tradition of modeling with subtle gradations of light and shade and, despite her classical training, often shunned three-dimensional illusionism altogether. In doing so, she invited ridicule. In class one day, several male graduate students, who were teaching assistants, gathered around to scoff at her painting, which to them appeared untutored. Their laughter was silenced when Professor Gwathmey said to Ringgold, “This is interesting You’re . . . trying not to even think about [modeling]. I think it’s wonderful. Just keep right on.”⁷

Not only was Ringgold heartened by Gwathmey’s words but she learned something

valuable about effective pedagogy, which she has since tried to incorporate into her own teaching. Even today, as a professor at the University of California, when Ringgold sees a student's work, she does not criticize it simply because it does not conform to her conceptions of beauty or talent. She believes that criticism of this type is an expression of the instructor's ignorance and close-mindedness, not necessarily a reflection on the student's capabilities. Instead, she offers to her students words of reassurance and support, similar to those which she received from Gwathmey. "That's interesting," she tells them. "Let's see more of that. Try to develop that. Explain what it is you're doing."⁸ In this way, Ringgold encourages her students to find their own voice and to develop it, as she was once encouraged to do.

Ringgold learned from experience that art teachers and critics are sometimes wrong in their initial evaluations of an artist's work. The French Impressionists are a conspicuous example. Their works, when first exhibited, were ridiculed because they had an unfinished quality. Critics cited the "blotches" and "licks" of paint used by the new artists as examples of their lack of talent. Indeed, the very term "impressionism," from which the group took its name, was originally intended as a derisive one.⁹ The initial reactions of many critics to Impressionist painting parallels the reactions of Ringgold's early critics, who regarded her work as unsophisticated or naïve. Ringgold understands, however, as Gwathmey did, that an artist must believe in his or her own work and not be overly concerned with how it is perceived. The confidence that Gwathmey gave Ringgold to further explore her unconventional color techniques—ones that employed flat, intense, unmodulated paint application—continues to affect her art even today. She

believes that creative expression can be neither right nor wrong because as the Impressionists proved and as the artist has stated, “nothing stays right or wrong in art. And who’s got the right answer? Nobody!” Of Robert Gwathmey, who instilled in Ringgold a fundamental belief in her own creative instincts, the artist says with gratitude, “He gave me that and I’ve never let it go.”¹⁰

When asked what style of painting she cultivated after college, Ringgold maintains with enthusiasm, “I was an Impressionist!”¹¹ During the 1950s and early 1960s, her carefully calculated *plein air* compositions were influenced, not surprisingly, by the painterly style of these French artists. However, some of Ringgold’s color choices were decidedly unlike those of the Impressionists. For example, she used black in the shaded areas of her landscape paintings and avoided pastel tints such as lavender and pale blue (fig. 6). Hoping to shed some of the more pedantic aspects of her university training and preserve a sense of her own unconventional approach to form and color, Ringgold experimented with various techniques that ranged from illusionistic landscapes and harbor scenes to more expressive, often abstract outdoor compositions that incorporated broad, calligraphic brush work. (fig. 7).

While Ringgold was searching for her creative identity, she was also teaching art to children. Throughout the 1950s and 60s, she shared her ideas and inspired young artists from elementary to high school age. Conversely, she also learned from these children as much as they learned from her. Ringgold has said that they opened her eyes to new creative possibilities; and the artist is convinced that one of the great advantages to teaching lies in its ability to keep the artist-teacher exposed to new ideas, in a state of

constant flux, which prevents one from becoming hackneyed or stale.¹² During her years as a teacher, Ringgold's painting style matured and evolved, often molded by the very teaching process that was intended to mold others.

Unfortunately, the unquestionable enrichment of the teaching experience was marred by incidents of racial discrimination, which Ringgold has never forgotten. Most of the artist's difficulties occurred in her attempts to secure and retain teaching positions. "In those days," she remembers, "it was very hard to teach in a high school [if you were] a black person."¹³ Indeed, in 1955, when she first began to interview for jobs, many of Ringgold's colleagues warned her that it would be virtually impossible for her to get a teaching position in a New York City high school. They suggested, instead, that she apply for an elementary school position, where blacks were more likely to be hired. Having obtained a license to teach secondary school, however, Ringgold stubbornly ignored this advice and set out to find work.

She interviewed at two schools in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn: Taft and New Utrecht High Schools. She made appointments by telephone in advance, only to be turned away once she arrived and the interviewers realized that she was an African-American. As Ringgold sardonically puts it, "Those people were fine on the phone, but when I got there, you would have thought the boogie man had walked in."¹⁴ She was refused a job at both institutions, and when she complained rather vehemently to members of the Board of Education, they directed her to the High School of Manual Training (now, John Jay High School). Again, Ringgold made a telephone appointment, but this time she was prepared to do battle. It was her good fortune (and indeed the school's as well) that

someone from the school board had phoned ahead to warn the school's administrator, Max Greenberg, that a very unhappy candidate was on her way to see him; that she had gotten "the run around" from New Utrecht and Taft; and that she was not about to settle for another rejection.

Ringgold walked into Greenberg's office and, without waiting for him to speak, pounced upon him with a well thought out speech. She told him that she had no intention of sitting through another interview in which she was asked irrelevant questions, such as "What did she have for breakfast?" because, as she puts it, everyone was "so shocked to find out that they were looking at a black woman" they forgot what questions they were supposed to ask. She demanded of Greenberg, "Do you have an opening or don't you?", to which he blithely replied, "Look, you've got the job, okay? Now let's talk."¹⁵ Greenberg turned out to be a good friend and an avid supporter. He was kind and gracious and taught Ringgold a great deal about teaching. Her ordeal in securing this first of her teaching positions taught her that perseverance and righteous anger had their advantages. These qualities have served the artist well over the years.

While at Manual Training, Ringgold also studied for her Masters Degree in art at City College (completing the program in 1959) and raised two daughters, Barbara and Michele, who had been born to the artist and her husband, Earl Wallace, in January and December of 1952. Ringgold and Wallace separated in 1954 and two years later their marriage was annulled.¹⁶ After that time Ringgold began spending summers with her daughters in Provincetown, Massachusetts, the locale that inspired her first harbor and landscape paintings. For the next five years Ringgold was a teacher, a graduate student,

and a single parent, until she re-married in 1962. While deftly managing her many tasks and roles in life, the artist used her time during summer vacations to develop her painting skills further.

In Provincetown, Ringgold began to experiment with different modes of painterly expression. “The kids were very young,” she tells us, “and I’d take them up to Provincetown and rent a cottage. I would paint and we would go to the beach and spend the whole summer there.” She worked alone, without guidance or influence, and avoided the many New England artists’ colonies. Ringgold also painted flowers and figures on the furniture of local residents, thereby giving release to her desire to make useful objects of beauty. Ringgold’s paintings from this period have eluded public exposure. They have rarely been examined or exhibited. It may be that because the artist believes that she was still “groping” for a style at this time, she has been reluctant to display these early works.¹⁷ Nonetheless, they reveal a great deal about her artistic evolution because they serve as the foundation of her creative endeavors and as indicators of the formal direction her later art would take. Though generally representational, these early paintings also reveal the artist’s interest in the expressive qualities of abstract form.

Provincetown (1957), for example, depicts a harbor scene from Ringgold’s first New England summer (fig. 8). On the surface, it appears to be a straightforward, painterly rendition of fishing boats and a pier on a gray summer day. However, closer examination reveals inklings of Ringgold’s later exploration of flattened forms, distorted perspective, recurring lines and shapes, and deliberately naïve execution. For instance, in the upper left hand corner of the composition there are three small boats whose bows

face the viewer. As the boats increase in size from left to right, their wide berths and the cruciform lines of their masts rhythmically echo each other. Repetition such as this has since become a hallmark of Ringgold's paintings.

The exaggerated slant of the roof of the largest and most distant building, and the freely articulated, imprecise squares that represent its windows are examples of the abstraction and distortion that mark Ringgold's mature style. Also evident is her proclivity for both strong and dark colors, as manifested in this case in the use of somber grays, rich blacks, and touches of intense reds and yellows. Ringgold's emphasis on either dark or pure hues eventually evolves into a series of paintings known as *Black Light*, which are devoted to the exploration of color as an expression of Ringgold's identity as a black woman (see chapter 3).

The momentum with which Ringgold's style evolved can be seen in another harbor painting from later that same year, also entitled *Provincetown* (fig. 9). In this work, the shapes of the bows of the two boats are similar to those of the earlier painting, but the forms are now stylized; and they echo one another more deliberately as they abut, almost creating mirror images of each other. Rhythm and repetition are also further emphasized in the later painting. Seven square, black portholes are placed horizontally across the composition, about mid-way up the canvas. The three openings on the vessel to the left decrease in size slightly from left to right. The four portholes on the second vessel appear to repeat this pattern. The effect achieved creates a kind of staccato rhythm of black squares of diminishing sizes, like the notes on a piano keyboard.

The two horizontally placed life boats strapped atop each of the larger vessels, and

the diagonally situated lifeboats at the upper right hand corner of the design further enhance the motif of repeated forms. Ringgold's previous painterly style has been replaced here by a more controlled surface that is made up of broad areas of flat color. Distinctions between hues are more pronounced, while modeling with tones has been minimized. Warm yellow and rich sienna are the predominant colors; these are offset by heavier black outlines and accents, black waters, and murky gray skies.

From 1957 on, Ringgold's work evolved rapidly, showing unmistakable evidence of the creative directions that her art would soon take. The beginnings of her mature style can be dated to her first years in Provincetown when the artist was working in contented isolation. Here, perhaps due to the lack of extraneous influences, Ringgold was able to investigate the many creative possibilities that were open to her. The broad areas of dark, as well as intense, flat color that first appeared in the latter 1957 painting would soon resurface in Ringgold's figurative imagery of the *American People* series which she began in 1963. At this time, the artist began painting in earnest after events in her personal life motivated her to devote her energies to becoming a professional artist.

In 1961, prior to painting the *American People* series, Ringgold traveled to Europe, along with her mother and children, to see the art of the great masters whom she had studied in college. Although she had established her career as a teacher by this time, Ringgold was still uncertain about her artistic future. "Somehow," she recalls, "I felt that being in Europe--where Picasso, Matisse, Monet, and the other great painters had lived--would lead me to the answer"--and, perhaps, to a decision to pursue her career as a visual artist more seriously.¹⁸ Ringgold visited Paris, Nice, and Monte Carlo. As she and her

family traveled throughout Europe, they learned from local newspapers about the Freedom Riders who were being attacked by segregationists and being beaten, hosed, and arrested by police back in the United States. Ringgold felt blessed, at least for the moment, to have escaped the political and racial upheaval that plagued America in the summer of 1961; but her euphoria was short-lived.

Soon after arriving in Rome, she learned that her brother Andrew, age 37, had died of a heroin overdose. Hurriedly, the family booked passage back to the United States, where they were abruptly reinitiated into the bitter aspects of American life-- discrimination, economic depression, violence, and, most intimately, the tragic epidemic of drug abuse that plagued the country. More decisively than any trip to Montmartre or Nice might have done, Andrew's death changed Ringgold's outlook on life, greatly affecting her need for self-expression. Coupled with the burgeoning unrest of the Civil Rights Movement, Andrew's demise fueled the artist's desire to communicate through painting, to tell her own story, to vent her rage, and to picture the world from her own place within it.

The racial tensions and disparities that were the fabric of African-American life became the subject of the artist's first mature works--*American People*--painted in a style that Ringgold termed "Super Realism." She describes, in her own words, her objectives:

That 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.¹⁹

Ringgold thus embarked on a creative journey that would ultimately gain her a

reputation as one of the most consistently political and candid artists in recent American history. The “super realist” style that she chose for this series incorporates consistently stylized figures (as opposed to individual portraits) that express political ideas and psychological, rather than biological, realities.

The *American People* series includes images of social satire and isolation, depicting the middle-class African-American as a lonely figure playing an unnatural role in a hostile environment. As Mary Schmidt Campbell, curator and art historian, points out, this series attacks “the social pretensions and hypocrisies of black and white Americans, and the bogus camaraderie of integration”—although it must be said that, even within the context of this series of paintings, attempts at integration are not always perceived as “bogus,” as we will see.²⁰ Literary historian Linda Dittmar, in an analysis of Nella Larsen’s 1928 novel, *Quicksand*, describes a black woman’s attempts to assimilate into white society as being akin to a journey into chaos and emptiness.²¹ Though such qualities cannot be said to have marked every attempt at integration in the 1960s, they are the characteristics that we find most often reflected in the *American People*.

Ringgold’s tells us that her visual interpretation of these turbulent times was inspired by the African-American writer, James Baldwin, who had just published *The Fire Next Time*:²²

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.²³

It can be argued that Ringgold’s abstract, schematic approach to the figure is not an

accurate visual depiction of the African-American appearance--one which in actuality manifests itself in an endlessly wide range of skin tones, facial features, and body types. What the artist has tried to capture in her work, however, and what she is referring to in this passage is a way of depicting black Americans that is unique to the African-American artist, and an aesthetic approach that has ties with the abstracted forms of African art--in other words, a decidedly Non-western approach to the figure.

Baldwin's influence on the *American People* can be traced to the essay from *The Fire Next Time*, "My Dungeon Shook," in which Baldwin described black American urban centers such as Harlem as "cities of destruction," where blacks were intended to remain and perish. With regard to those people of color who, like Ringgold, sought to broaden their experiences by venturing outside of the "cities of destruction," Baldwin declared that blacks were "not expected to aspire to excellence" but rather to accept mediocrity and do what they were told.²⁴ He advised his young nephew, to whom his essay was addressed, to be suspicious of words like "acceptance" and "integration," which suggested the impertinent assumption that African-Americans must become like whites to be accepted into American society. For Baldwin and Ringgold this was a false goal. An African-American, no matter what the effort, could never actually be white and would never be perceived as such by anyone.

Ringgold's paintings illustrate Baldwin's view of the sad absurdity of the black bourgeoisie attempting to coalesce with white society. The first of some twenty paintings in the series, *Between Friends* (1963), depicts two women--one black and one white--coming face-to-face in a tightly compressed setting composed of two rectangular

spaces, like entryways whose thick red door jamb serves effectively to separate the two women even while allowing them to come together (fig. 10). The white woman presents to us a stern, implacable profile. The black woman looks questioningly into her companion's shadowy eyes, smiling slightly, as if hopeful that a friendship might be forged. In her own relationships with white women, Ringgold could sense the invisible racial chasm that separated them, and she tried to capture this feeling in *Between Friends*.²⁵

During the summer of 1963, Ringgold was the guest of wealthy acquaintances who owned a home in the interracial, upper middle-class community of Oak Bluffs, Massachusetts. These friends, Dr. and Mrs. Goldsberry of Wooster, hosted weekly poker parties that featured a high-powered group of socialites who greeted Ringgold with little more than formal courtesy. The artist's style for the *American People*—a figurative version of the flat, hard-edged forms of her late 1950's paintings—was ideal for representing the stiff formality and psychological tension of these interracial encounters.²⁶

Although curator Terrie Rouse describes the faces of the African-American figures in Ringgold's *American People* as looking “shocked,” as they participate in “unwilling interactions” with their white counterparts, their expressions are in fact very calm and marked not by emotion, but by the lack of it. Moira Roth notes in her essay, “Keeping the Feminist Faith,” that *Between Friends* is about “the distribution of power in America,” emphasized by the formal barrier (the painted door frame) which divides these two middle class women. However, it is the artist's hierarchical approach to size that

highlights the issue of power relations (as will be discussed shortly). The door frame serves a different purpose. Roth points out that the original title of the work was *The Wall Between Friends*.²⁷ This title indicates the artist's intention is to emphasize, through the configuration of the pictorial space (placing an architectural obstruction between the figures), the socio-psychological barriers that prevented women of different races from sharing genuine friendship.

Curator and art historian Lowery Sims states that

[Ringgold] outlines individual planes or segments of her figures in black—like stained glass. Her simplification of form was influenced by Cubism and African art [and the art of her teacher] Robert Gwathmey . . . who was noted for his angular style [and] strong outlines. Ringgold designs her faces like masks This stylization allowed Ringgold to present a portrait of black people that was neither caricature nor adaptation from white standards.²⁸

Though it is stated that Ringgold does not adapt from white standards, Sims acknowledges the influence of Cubism (itself reflective of the abstract forms of African art). The influence of Picasso's pre- and post-cubist works, in particular, is apparent. Picasso's mask-like faces painted in 1907, for example, also incorporate heavy outlines and large, staring eyes like those that appear in works of the *American People* series (see figures 11, 12, and 16). The quality of stained glass that Sims identifies in Ringgold's work is not unlike that found in Picasso's 1932 *Girl Before a Mirror*. In fact, the use of heavily outlined flat forms to represent the human figure can be identified in a wide variety of artistic movements from Art Nouveau to Pop. It does not diminish Ringgold's work to acknowledge her use of either Western or Non-western sources; and it would be difficult to imagine that her years of Western art training had not, in some way,

influenced her art. What makes Ringgold's style unusual is the way in which she has combined various influences with her own aesthetic ideas to create a new and individual approach to human form.

Sims also states above that Ringgold's stylization was used to create portraits of black people that were not caricature. Although there is at least a superficial element of caricature in the artist's approach to the figure, this is mitigated by the fact that Ringgold does not reserve her mask-like style for black figures alone, but applies it generally to *all* of the figures in her paintings, both black and white, as is evident in *Between Friends*. The eyebrows of the two women curve in the same manner, reiterating the downward turn of the hairline shadows, the eyes, and the shapes of the heads. Sims describes this as an interplay of ovoids and circles which the artist has termed "polyrhythmical space," or "polyspace."²⁹ Both women in *Between Friends* have long, prominent noses and elongated faces; even their hairdos are the same. But these similarities serve paradoxically to point out the stark differences between the two subjects.

There is a softness to the forms of the African-American woman; her breasts are fully rounded and larger than those of the seemingly older second figure. The curves of this younger woman's cheeks and jaw are more delicate than those of her companion. The white woman's face is gaunt, and her lips are turned down slightly at the corners. Her breasts, while clearly articulated, are pressed flatly against her chest. And her head, which dominates the composition, is notably larger than that of the African-American woman. This hierarchical treatment of proportions gives one the impression that the larger woman is more powerful, if not more important, than the more diminutive figure,

and that she is clearly in control of the relationship. This scenario, taken in broader context, may of course be interpreted as symbolic of the relationship between the more dominant white majority and the minority black population in America.

Another painting from this series that shares much in common with *Between Friends* is the 1964 work, *American Dream* (fig. 12). In it an elegantly presented, somewhat haughty woman raises her right hand to display a rather large diamond ring. Her fingernails are long and well-manicured; her low décolletage reveals a swelling bosom; and her large head with its expressionless face, rests like an oversized melon on a thin, attenuated neck. Again, Ringgold incorporates repeated forms, ovoids for the brows and lines under the eyes; circles for the breasts; and similar organic shapes to form the highlights on the neck and the shape of the upper right arm.

The use of repeated, flattened forms, enlarged heads, and minimal perspective are characteristics that one finds in traditional African art. Ringgold reassures us, however, that while she recognizes the similarities between her forms and those of African art, she is not always consciously aware of utilizing them, particularly when she is in the throes of the creative process:

I think something happens without me meaning to make it happen Often when I'm painting something, a lot of things come in, and I don't know why I do them, necessarily. Many of the things I see [in my own works] reflect African art I make heads larger than bodies, and a large head in African art means the soul or seat of intelligence [The head] is more significant than just the mere body. Also I like to keep my paintings flat. It's not because I don't understand perspective, but I don't want perspective in my work.³⁰

Ringgold's work indeed bears comparison to African art, particularly that of the Yoruba people of Nigeria, whose traditional art emphasizes the repetition of forms and patterns,

and the Luba, Hamba, and Songye of Zaire, whose sculpture combines an accentuation of the head with a preference for angular forms.

Understanding the artist's awareness of the symbolic importance of the head is essential to an accurate interpretation of her *oeuvre*. Robert Farris Thompson, art historian of the African diaspora, expounds upon the importance of the human head in African art in his book, *Flash of the Spirit*:

A main focus of the presentation of ideal character in Yoruba art is the human head, magnified and carefully enhanced by detailed coiffure or headgear.³¹

An Ikerre palace door, carved by the Yoruba artist Olowe (fig. 13) at the beginning of this century, illustrates Thompson's observations. The head on each of Olowe's carefully sculpted bodies dominates each figure, particularly that of the primary one—the king who is situated in the left panel (second register from the top). The king's head is enhanced by a large conical crown which Thompson refers to as the “shrine of the head or *ilé ori*.” This headdress is often a pointed, crown-like box, lavishly covered with a sheath of cowrie shells to represent the riches that a “good head”—good character—will bring.³²

The specific likenesses between Ringgold's *The American Dream* and the art of the Yoruba do not end here. Ringgold's painting includes geometric patterning similar to that found in the background of each of the scenes of Olowe's door. These forms serve to flatten the space by pushing the figures forward to the picture's surface. Another characteristic that Ringgold's *American Dream* shares with African imagery is the enlarged, ovoid eyes, which Ringgold emphasizes by adding heavy crescent shapes above

and below them. We can see one such affinity in a Songye power figure (from Zaire), whose eyes are similarly accentuated (fig. 14). All of these relationships between Ringgold's approach to form and that of the African sculptor make it difficult to imagine that the parallels being drawn are not, at least some of the time, deliberate and conscious on Ringgold's part.

Historians have suggested that the woman in *The American Dream* represents a duality of races, both black and white, because the left side of her face and body (the viewer's left) is darker than the right side.³³ However, the left side of her face is comprised of an organically shaped, darkened form that carries over to the right side. Outlining the nose and continuing under the brow, the form ends by edging the cheek and jaw of the so-called "white" half of the figure. Keeping in mind Freud's maxim, which insists that "sometimes a cigar is just a cigar," I am suggesting that the darkened area represents, not racial symbolism, but a shadow cast by a strong light source emanating from the right side of the picture. Because the artist, as we have discussed, eschews gradations of light and dark as a way to model form, these flat, unmodulated areas appear to demarcate the face abruptly, creating the illusion of symbolism.

A comparison of this figure with the two women in *Between Friends* confirms this hypothesis. What is revealed is a formal similarity between the woman in *The American Dream* and the white (not the black) woman in the second painting. The woman in *The American Dream* and the white woman in *Between Friends* both manifest a hard-edged, angular gauntness and coldness of expression which Ringgold routinely employs to articulate "the other" (not herself) as an icon of American racism. In this series, when

portraying figures that represent, for the artist, positive cultural and social values (often, but not always, African-American figures), Ringgold uses full, rounded forms and sympathetic facial expressions. The African-American woman in *Between Friends* would be one example of this methodological approach, since the contours of her body are gently curved and she wears a kindly smile. Another example can be seen in the painting *Watching and Waiting* (fig. 15, discussed below), wherein the sole African-American figure is differentiated from all others by his softer expression.

The shapes found on both the dark and light sides of the figure in *The American Dream* are elongated and hard-edged, indicating that she, like the older woman in *Between Friends* is white and not a mixture of two races. The only notably rounded form to be found in *The American Dream* is that of the woman's breast on the viewer's right—a detail which also challenges the black/white reading of the painting, since the soft, circular form of this breast is on the supposedly white/negative side of the figure. Although Ringgold's paintings are often rife with meaning, her formal approach sometimes makes that meaning difficult to decipher. *The American Dream* is best read more ingenuously as a painting that equates the idea of "the American Dream" with the accumulation of material wealth by depicting a white woman flaunting a valued possession. Supporting this reading is the fact that Ringgold has included two arrows in the flat, geometric background of the *The American Dream*. The arrows frame the woman's face and point decisively downward, invoking a subtle yet insistently negative reading of the painting's symbolism, while directing our eye to the oversized diamond—an obvious symbol of material wealth, one which Sims has interpreted as "the most banal

of human pretensions.”³⁴

Another powerful female image of this series is seen in the 1964 painting *God Bless America* (fig. 16). In this painting the frontal, disembodied head of an aged white woman stares out at us with cold, lifeless eyes. Her furrowed brow is deeply etched with heavy black lines. Dark, ghostly shadows completely encircle her pale eyes. The woman’s jowls hang loosely, and her mouth is a mere black horizontal line, lipless and apparently toothless as the jaw seems sunken and without inner structural support. Sims describes this woman as symbolic of “the type that swells the ranks of organizations such as the Daughters of the American Revolution.”³⁵ The figure’s head is situated both in front of and behind the stripes of the American flag which is turned on its side. As she clutches a star over her heart, we realize that she represents the demise of American ideals, imprisoned as she is behind the stripes of the flag she so reveres.

Other works in the series further emphasize the “shifting relationships between race and gender, class and power” that characterized the 1960s.³⁶ These images focus on the black male. Especially poignant is the painting mentioned earlier, *Watching and Waiting* (1963) in which four white men are gathered around a table examining an open book (fig. 15). In a darkened doorway to the right stands a black man. As is the case with the black female figure in *Between Friends*, this male figure is removed from his white counterparts by the rectangular frame of the door, and he stands at the entryway, not yet able or allowed to enter the room that occupies the foreground space of the painting.

The black man is further differentiated from the other figures by his darker shirt--

the white figures all wear white shirts. Ringgold directs our attention to him by way of several formal ploys. He is highlighted by his handkerchief, which provides a spot of white in the darkness of the shadows that envelope him, so much so that only his head and shirt collar (and, of course, the handkerchief) are visible. This is clearly a metaphor for his position within the dominant culture. The look on his face is enigmatic—perhaps sad or uncertain—and milder than the stern, unseeing, and unresponsive faces of the other men.

There is one subtle deviation from the broader emblematic reading of this work, however. As if to give us a small glimmer of hope, Ringgold turns the eyes of one of the white businessmen toward the outsider. The two exchange glances. One might almost imagine a look of welcome in the eyes of the tall, blond haired man. Ringgold has softened the contour of his face just slightly, as if to emphasize his potential kindness; and the corners of his mouth turn up, in a tentative smile that contrasts with the thin-lipped grimaces of the other men.

In the *American People* paintings, Ringgold poses questions but does not supply answers. In the uncertain expressions of the black figures who stand in open doorways that provide no access, and in the equivocal “friendships” that are illustrated in these narratives, there is an ambivalent iconography which indicates not only the artist’s unresolved feelings about integration, but similar feelings held by many African-Americans. Those feelings are best framed by James Baldwin in *The Fire Next Time*, in which he asks the simple question, “Do I really want to be integrated into a burning house?”³⁷ Baldwin, like Ringgold, leaves the query unanswered.

In the 1966 painting, *Hide Little Children* (fig. 17), the artist's love of both children and landscapes, particularly trees, is evident.³⁸ As Ringgold explains, her choice of landscape for this painting relates to a more natural and unadulterated quality that she equates with adolescence: "In the backgrounds of my canvases, arrows had been supplanted by leaves and flowers, which seemed more appropriate for the . . . children I was painting."³⁹ Later chapters will deal with the ways in which landscape becomes a significant formal and theoretical construct for Ringgold's feminist works.

The scene depicted in *Hide Little Children* comprises an intensely colorful jungle setting in which children are playing the game of hide-and-seek. The artist uses broad, flat areas of color, creating an abundance of large leaves of various verdant hues that envelop the faces of the five children. Their wide, staring eyes, sparkling like jewels against the fertile backdrop, peer out impishly from behind the lush leaves. Their disembodied heads dot the horizontal composition like the musical notes on a staff. One can follow the position of each head--down, up, down, up--as if reading music. This conflation of different artistic genres is one of Ringgold's hallmarks. In later works, the artist combines the visual and the literary as effortlessly as she blends painting and music here (see discussions in chapters 3 and 5).

Despite the apparently playful theme, this painting also suggests a more sober interpretation.⁴⁰ In *Hide Little Children*, Ringgold also addresses the issue of race, but does so in a manner distinct from her approach to this subject with regard to adults. Because the group of children is racially mixed, the word "hide" in the title takes on greater meaning, alluding not so much to a children's game as to a directive from the

artist to avoid the hypocrisies and pitfalls of race relations that have plagued adults. The artist's own description of the work confirms this interpretation:

In Hide Little Children, two black children and [three] white child[ren] are hiding in the trees with only their little faces showing. This painting was inspired by my own children and the fears I had about their friendships with white children with whom they socialized in and out of school. New Lincoln School [where Barbara and Michele attended] had a reputation for being ultra-liberal, but what about the parents? What kind of reputation did they have? ⁴¹

Ringgold worried that her children might be shunned by their schoolmates, once the white parents learned that Barbara and Michele were black. Her fears were not unfounded since children are known to learn racist behavior from their parents.

An incident that occurred in my own life in 1966 (the same year that *Hide Little Children* was completed) illustrates the significant and problematic issues that adolescents faced as integration became a reality throughout the United States. I was attending private school similar to New Lincoln, in Queens, New York. I and a classmate, Diane, were playing together after school, as we often did. Diane made the announcement that her family was moving to a new neighborhood, causing me to ask why. "Because negroes are living on our block," she told me. Diane, of course, was white, and we had been best friends for several years. Neither of us realized at the time that I was one of the "negroes" that her family was moving away from. Even now, as I write this, some 35 years later, I am surprised by the powerful emotions elicited still by this recollection. Such incidents have been statistically documented since the beginning of the Great Migration at the turn of the century. For example, in the decade of the 1920s, some 87,000 African-Americans moved into Harlem, while nearly 120,000 white

Americans moved out.⁴²

The *American People* series accurately reflects this difficult stage of race relations that epitomized the 1960s. The artist confirms that the series constitutes a deliberate attempt to analyze and understand this complex dialogue:

The American People Series is about the condition of black and white America. There was so much going on at that time in our history. James Baldwin had written *The Fire Next Time*, . . . Malcolm X was talking about “us loving our black selves,” and Martin Luther King was leading marches and preaching the word . . . I felt called upon to create my vision of the black experience we were witnessing.⁴³

Ringgold’s desire, however, to address social and political issues in her painting was not considered an expedient choice for an artist wishing to make a name for herself in the mainstream art world. Sims explains how political art of the 1960s, which eschewed the idea of form as content, was viewed:

A funny thing happened to the art of the 1960s. It got cool . . . in the sense of non-personal, mechanical, non-involved. In an intensely political world, art was to have no politics. As a result, the politically engaged art of [African-Americans] was seen to be . . . retarditaire, out of sync with the current values of the art world, and in an insidious way, invalid.⁴⁴

Sims sees a critical difference between mainstream and black art of the 1960s in that many black artists refused to objectify their imagery by detaching it from its original associations.⁴⁵ By drawing upon symbolic, emotive, and political figuration in her painting, Ringgold risked being labeled “invalid.” Like her colleagues in the Black Art Movement, she embraced the ideals of one system which effectively excluded her from another.

As Ringgold’s comments suggest, she was well aware of this dynamic and the

dangers it posed to her professional future:

Mainstream art was the art of the sixties, despite the “revolution” going on in the street. The art was . . . not “about” anything. Issue-oriented art was dismissed as being naïve, if not downright vulgar. Art was a conceptual or material process, a commodity and not a political platform To be emotionally involved in art was considered primitive.⁴⁶

Ringgold does not mean to say that the often highly emotional process of art-making itself was considered primitive, but rather that revealing one’s personal emotions about cultural and social issues within the context of a work of art was unpopular. Despite these pitfalls, however, Ringgold chose to risk her career (unestablished at this point) in order to adhere to an aesthetic language that was vital to her self-expression.

Ringgold continued to work on the *American People* series over a period of four years. By 1967 the subtle nature of her work was supplanted by an amplified style that comprised two key methodological changes. First, the size of her canvases increased from approximately three by four feet to as much as twelve by six feet. Second, the thematic content of Ringgold’s painting became conspicuously more political as the series unfolded. The indeterminate exchange of glances seen in works from 1963 to 1966 was replaced by violent images of conflict and confrontation that unequivocally acknowledged and condemned racism.

The battle-worn, blood-stained scenes portrayed in *Die* (fig. 18) and *The Flag Is Bleeding* (fig. 1), and the overt political message in *U.S. Postage Stamp Commemorating the Advent of Black Power* (fig. 19), all from 1967, mirror a new stage of American social interaction embodied in the rash of race riots and violent confrontations with police that plagued the country beginning in 1964. In these last three paintings of the

series, Ringgold articulated the political climate in America as she had experienced it from her vantage point in New England:

America was changing in the summer of 1967. We were moving out of the Civil Rights period and were at the start of the Black Revolution. In 1966 Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. and Stokely Carmichael had sounded the battle cry for Black Power, and by 1967 everyone was taking sides. I was at a public meeting in Provincetown where white diehard liberals openly expressed their dismay over the words *Black Power*. One of them tearfully asked, "Why would blacks want power? I thought we were all going to be equal?"⁴⁷

As white liberals in Provincetown worried over the increasing hostility of blacks, the 1967 "long, hot summer" of race riots erupted in Newark, Atlanta, Buffalo, Milwaukee, and in Ringgold's own home of Harlem. The duality of Ringgold's position, as an educated black professional, seeing the "revolution" from both sides, is what the *American People* series is all about. As Ringgold prepared that summer for an exhibition of her work scheduled for December, she could not help but address the issues of fear and violence that were on the minds of both black and white Americans.

Personal and political events alike, which occurred during the summer of 1967, influenced the change in Ringgold's mode of artistic production that we see taking place. She arranged for her family to make a second trip to Europe, but this time without her. Ringgold had designated that summer as time for herself. She had a solo exhibition to prepare and needed the time alone, away from family obligations, to complete the final paintings of the *American People* series. Ringgold remembers that this time was very precious to her:

For the first time since the girls were born, I had two months to myself. Had it not been for mother taking them to Europe, I would not have been able to complete the paintings for the show.⁴⁸

Without intending to, however, the artist also freed herself (under less-than-happy circumstances) from wifely responsibilities, by separating from her second husband after five years of marriage.

Ringgold had married long-time friend, Burdette Ringgold, in 1962, eight years after her separation from her first husband, Earl Wallace. Ringgold recounts that Birdie (as she affectionately calls him) was a persistent suitor:

Burdette Ringgold had been a frequent visitor to our house ever since [my eldest daughter] Barbara was born. I paid little attention to him at first [Sometimes when] I was walking up 155th Street to catch the bus, rather mysteriously, Birdie would come darting out of his building to accompany me to the bus stop whenever I walked by. Slowly I began to pay attention to him.⁴⁹

Birdie provided Ringgold with much needed friendship and support especially during the years from 1954 (when she separated from Earl) to 1962 (when she and Birdie were first married). His aid and comfort meant a great deal to Ringgold who was raising her daughters without spousal support. “Birdie was my confidant during this period,” Ringgold explains, and “from the beginning he was easy to be with.”⁵⁰

Of course, even the best of marriages has its ups and downs; and at the start of that fateful summer of 1967, Ringgold and Birdie argued. Even though the children were abroad, Birdie anticipated that his wife would still spend much of her time cooking, cleaning, and caring for him and their home. Ringgold, on the other hand, saw the children’s absence as an ideal opportunity to shed the drudgery of household chores. The ensuing disagreement resulted in Ringgold’s decision to take a two-month vacation from domestic life and to move into her mother’s apartment, which was empty because Mrs. Posey was in Europe with the children.

The temporary separation allowed Ringgold to paint well into the night, throughout the months of July and August. She describes her recollection of this new-found independence and its importance for her painting:

Living alone was a new experience for me. All my life I had been either a daughter living with my parents, or a wife and mother living with a husband and children. Now I could get up whenever I wanted to and had only myself to cook for, to clean up after, to amuse, and to generally consider. It was lonely but pleasant because for two months there was nothing between myself and my work.⁵¹

Though taking this time out for herself proved creatively productive, the artist paid a great personal price for choosing her career over her husband. The rupture caused by her moving out lasted beyond the end of the summer. When she returned home, at about the time that her children were arriving from Europe, Ringgold found that Birdie had left her.⁵² Although they attempted a reconciliation, it was short-lived and a second separation again marred their marriage late in 1970.

For several years during the 1970s, while Ringgold worked intensively to promote her art, she and Birdie continued to live apart. A chance meeting brought them back together in 1977. Their lives had both changed. The children were grown; Ringgold's career had taken off; and the couple now understood that despite their mutual requirements for independence, they needed each other and were still very much in love. Even before their chance encounter, Ringgold (who had not had any contact with Birdie for over three years) had already begun to feel a need to renew their relationship. When she did, at last, run into him, she remembers how different he seemed:

He was older, more vulnerable. He needed me, and he was not ashamed to admit it But could we stay together? That was the question. Birdie was very independent We were two independent people [each] doing our own

thing.⁵³

The couple decided that it might be easier on both of them if they amicably chose to maintain separate residences, even though they would official be “together.” They rationalized that if they both had a place of their own, they would feel less “trapped” by the marriage. Ringgold explains: “So Birdie kept his apartment and I kept mine. Our new arrangement was like dating instead of being stuck in a tired old marriage.”⁵⁴

As a result of Ringgold’s decision to give precedence to her art, her career took a great leap forward. The critical success of her one-person exhibition at New York’s Spectrum Gallery in December 1967 thrust her into the limelight and launched her career. Looking back, the artist affirms, “I have never regretted all that the summer of 1967 cost me. It was well worth it.”⁵⁵ Feminist literary critic, Josephine Donovan, situates Ringgold’s choice to place her art before her family within a larger context that affects many women artists:

Any ambitious artist—male or female—must, in order to succeed, . . . repress the domestic, emotional, collective side of herself. She must become an autonomous actor in a prescribed, reified system; she must engage in alienated labor, commodifying her gift in order to succeed.⁵⁶

Ringgold had postponed this moment until she was 37 years old and her children were nearly adults. Even so, when she took the first step toward success and away from home and hearth, she jeopardized her marriage. It is a testament to her (and Birdie’s) adaptability that now, almost thirty-five years later, they are still married and, more importantly, still friends. Though there are those who believe that “women cannot hope for perfection in both art and life,” Ringgold seems, by dint of will, to have achieved

this.⁵⁷

While working on her paintings that summer, Ringgold received much encouragement from Robert Newman, the director of the cooperative gallery (Spectrum) which was to host her first solo exhibition. It was Newman who advised the artist to increase the size of her canvases. He told her that she was living in a historic era and that 1967 was a “big” year that called for big pictures.⁵⁸ “Everyone was doing huge pictures,” Ringgold recalls. “I was the only one in the gallery doing little pictures.” Taking Newman’s advice the artist began her first large-scale paintings. The change in format was an important turning point for her—one that she had not anticipated, but that she welcomed, nonetheless:

When I’m getting ready to [t]ake a big step, I kind of fall into it. I have no idea what’s [going] to happen. All the things that I’ve done that can be marked as big steps for me and my career, I have stumbled into them.⁵⁹

Until Newman suggested it, Ringgold had never considered painting monumental canvases. However, once she accepted the idea, she proceeded with earnest. She “went from having the littlest pictures in the gallery to having the biggest.”⁶⁰

In the first of these works, *The Flag Is Bleeding* (fig. 1), Ringgold renders an arresting image of the American flag superimposed over three figures—a white woman flanked by two men, one black and one white. The red stripes of the flag ooze blood. It seeps down the canvas and stains the flag’s white stripes as well as the clothing of the two men. The female figure, however, is untouched by the blood, indicating her role as arbiter rather than participant in the antagonistic relationship between the two men. She serves to unite the two by linking arms with each of them. Significantly, though, half of

her hair turns red where the red bands of the flag touch it, as if the flag has metaphorically bloodied her, just as it has actually bloodied the men. A further indication of the role of the female figure as mediator can be seen in the fact that while the right side of her face is obscured by the stripes of the flag (as is the case with her white companion) the left side of her face takes its place behind the stars with the black man, whose head and torso are almost completely concealed. He bleeds from a wound near his heart and holds his hand there, simultaneously stemming the flow of blood while apparently saying the Pledge of Allegiance. He is armed (holding a knife in his left hand); and he is the only member of the group whose body is actually bleeding.

The tall blond male looms large in the composition. His head, an indication, as we have seen, of his status in the hierarchy of American society, is half again as large as the black man's and twice the size of the woman's head. The white male figure has a broader body as well, which gives him the appearance of being more powerful than the other figures. He stares out at the viewer with cold blue eyes. His hands are placed firmly on his hips, and his legs are spread apart, emphasizing his implacability as a form and as an icon. In fact, the artist assures us that he stands this way, like a cowboy ready to draw his guns, because he (at least metaphorically) "packs a gun on each hip," thus confirming his potential for violence.⁶¹ As the embodiment of patriarchal white America, he assumes responsible for mortally wounding the black man (and by extension, black men as a group).

The Flag Is Bleeding is part of a genre of African-American art of the 1960s that used the American flag to highlight racial injustices. In the 1960s the burning and

defacing of the flag became an oft-employed, if illegal, form of political expression that was recognized by an entire generation of Americans who revolted against everything from racism, to sexism, to war, and sobriety.⁶² Ringgold was partly inspired by Jasper Johns' flag paintings of the late-1950s, but she felt that Johns' images were incomplete in that they did not depict the "hell" of racial violence that had erupted in America in the mid-1960s.⁶³

Other African-American artists have also utilized the flag as a subversive political symbol. Betye Saar's 1972 *Black Crows in the White Section Only* (fig. 20) uses the flag as a backdrop for two Ku Klux Klan hoods in a mixed media "window" construction which features "Sambo" cartoons (degrading caricatures of blacks common to American popular culture) and a black man behind prison bars. Two works by David Hammons, *Pray for America* and *Injustice Case* (1969 and 1970, respectively), illustrate black men whose figures are symbolically engulfed by the flag (figs. 21-22). In *Pray for America*, the flag serves as a "shroud-like shawl" that envelopes the head and torso of the figure so that one is reminded of a lamentation image in which the imploring Virgin and the victimized Christ conflate into a single icon, represented by a boldly graphic, poster-like image whose impact is powerful and immediate.⁶⁴ In *Injustice Case*, Hammons makes reference to the Black Panther leader Bobby Seale who, during his 1969 trial for conspiracy to incite a riot, criticized the judge, and was consequently gagged and chained for the remainder of the proceedings.⁶⁵ Hammons used his own body coated in oil to imprint his bound and gagged likeness onto the canvas (afterward sifting powdered pigment over the oil-covered areas to create an image). He then framed this

disconcerting “photo-negative” portrayal with an inverted flag. *Injustice Case* graphically illustrates the paralyzing frustration experienced by many African-Americans in their struggle for equality.

The painter and print-maker, Charles White, devoted an entire series of works—*The Wanted Poster Series* (figs. 23-24)—to the depiction of monumental images of black men, women, and children, superimposed over pre-Civil War wanted posters that offered rewards for the return of runaway slaves. These stunning works juxtapose noble portraits and faded images of the Union and Confederate flags with the bounty offered for human chattel.⁶⁶ In Cliff Joseph’s 1968, *My Country Right or Wrong* (fig. 25), nine figures stand in a desolate landscape amidst rotting bones, each blindfolded with the flag. In the distance, another patriotic banner flies atop a flag pole—but it does so upside down.

More accusatory than any of these are the works of Dana Chandler who describes himself as

a black artist whose work is directed expressly toward the education of blacks as to their true position of oppression in a white racist society.⁶⁷

Chandler’s print series, *Genocide*, includes a stridently graphic image of a black man’s erect penis choked in shackles that are emblazoned with the stars of the flag. This stark silhouette is presented against an imprint of the flag which papers the wall of the jail cell in which the figure is confined.

Ringgold once said that the “the flag is the only subversive and revolutionary abstraction one can paint,” and she intends for her flag paintings to convey precisely these revolutionary ideas—ones that call for the dismantling of racial hierarchies.⁶⁸ *The*

Flag Is Bleeding was part of a rapidly evolving trend among artists of the 60s to use America's symbol of freedom as a means to highlight the hypocrisy inherent in its promise of equality for all.

One troubling aspect of *The Flag Is Bleeding* lies in the notable absence of a black woman in the narrative. Few historians have directly addressed this question, and those who have, have preferred to leave the question unanswered.⁶⁹ Ringgold asks and answers the question herself, however, when she says:

And why is there no black woman in this picture? Let us just say that in 1967 she was reluctantly standing behind her man. The white woman was, too, but somebody had to get between these two men, and since she was the daughter of the white power structure, she inherited the role of the peace-maker.⁷⁰

In other words, the woman with the most political and social clout was given the task of preventing a battle between black and white men. However, this does not explain why the female figure, if indeed representative of power, appears so helpless. As art historian and curator, Thalia Gouma-Peterson, has noted, the figure is that of a "limp, slender, and powerless blond girl," whose image does not exude authority.⁷¹

One might also ask why a woman of Ringgold's personal strength and conviction might choose to eliminate herself, so to speak, from her own iconic interpretation of America. This question can be answered in a number of ways. Ringgold, after all, was not a child of the sixties--she was of an older, more conservative generation. She was brought up to believe that a woman's place was indeed behind her man; and though this was the summer that she shed her domestic cloak, it was her first attempt at doing so, and her sense of guilt at having put herself, for once, before her husband and children, may

have been overwhelming.

Her own words and actions support this interpretation. Instead of sending her children to camp that summer, as she had originally intended (and saving herself a great deal of money), Ringgold spent a small fortune sending them to Europe to study at the Alliance Française. The artist also enabled her mother, who was a fashion designer, to accompany them and to visit couturiers in Paris and Rome. The enormous expense of this European tour left Ringgold “penniless” back in New York. It is not hard to imagine that the act of sending her children off, to be cared for by their grandmother for several months, may have caused tremendous feelings of guilt for Ringgold. If we accept that she felt badly about dispatching her children, and that she worried about neglecting her motherly duties, then we can begin to understand why Ringgold was willing to spend several months’ salary (perhaps by way of atonement) on such an elaborate vacation, especially when a trip to camp would have sufficed. We can also begin to see why, after placing her own needs before those of her children, Ringgold may have unconsciously counter-balanced this act of self-assertion with one of self-negation when she eliminated herself—or the image of a black woman—from *The Flag Is Bleeding*.⁷²

In addition to alleviating her motherly burden, Ringgold also, as we know, extracted herself from her domestic life altogether by deciding to spend the summer away from her husband. The feelings that she was likely already experiencing over the children were compounded by this action. Evidence for this can be found in the artist’s memoirs in which she explains why Birdie decided to make their temporary separation more permanent when he chose to move out. In recollecting the event, Ringgold

expresses, not anger, but sympathy. “Who could blame him?” she asks, suggesting that she may well have blamed herself.

Although Ringgold is today well-known for her militant feminist activities, it is important to remember that in 1967 the Women’s Movement had not yet begun and the artist was not to become active in it until 1970. This sheds further light on the deeper meaning behind the missing black woman in *The Flag Is Bleeding*. Prior to 1970, Ringgold devoted much of her energy to doing precisely what she says her absentee figure was doing—reluctantly standing behind men. Despite her numerous high-profile battles for better representation of blacks in New York museums, discussed below, Ringgold found herself, as a woman artist, continually passed over by galleries and museums in favor of black male artists.⁷³

Ringgold elaborates on her efforts, which though effective for some, did little for her own advancement:

During the years from 1968 to 1970, I was caught up in a steady stream of activities protesting MoMA’s exclusion of black artists. I stayed up many nights typing press releases All the men got something—a show, a sale, a grant I got nothing.⁷⁴

The pressure for black women to take a back seat to men during the era of Black Power (discussed at length in chapter 6) was tremendous and Ringgold, both actually and psychologically (as the black woman’s absence from *The Flag Is Bleeding* indicates) nearly buckled under the weight of this burden. The trend was reversed in 1970 when she embraced feminism. It was then that Ringgold was able to extricate herself from the social constructs that minimized her importance as a woman and marginalized her needs.

In 1967, however, Ringgold reified in *The Flag Is Bleeding* her sense that society placed all women at its periphery, with black women even farther from the center.

U.S. Postage Stamp Commemorating the Advent of Black Power (fig. 19)

represents the artist's response to the concept of Black Power. She admits that she had her doubts as to whether or not the movement was truly sympathetic to all blacks, or only to men:

My own need to feel a sense of personal as well as public power was in direct contrast to a world that ignored women For me the concept of Black Power carried with it a big question mark. Was it intended for black men or would black women have it, too?⁷⁵

Ringgold's uncertainty about her place in the struggle for black liberation is expressed in the conflicting messages of *U.S. Postage Stamp*. It includes close-up representations of one hundred faces—eyes and noses only—in Ringgold's, by now, characteristic style. A single arcing line forms the eyebrows and nose of each face; modeling is minimal; the eyes are large and staring; and symmetry and frontality mark each portrait. Of the one hundred faces, ten are black and ninety are white, roughly approximating the percentage of African-Americans to white Americans in the United States at that time.⁷⁶

An indication of the artist's uncertainties regarding the validity and potential effectiveness of the Black Power Movement can be extrapolated from the way in which she has juxtaposed, for the first time in her *oeuvre*, both image and text. The words and numbers—“U.S. Postage,” “Airmail,” “10¢,” and “1967”—are written in red. In slightly larger, black letters, inscribed sideways and diagonally are the words “Black Power.” Along with the ten black faces, these words form an “X” crossing the composition and

visually dominating it, giving precedence, at least superficially, to the idea of power for African-Americans.

Upon closer examination, however, the viewer realizes that the camouflaged words, “White Power,” are inscribed sideways, making them at first invisible, when, in fact, they completely engulf the design, surrounding and cutting through all of its other components. These words, painted of course in white, are substantially larger than those that spell out “Black Power.” Having seen that Ringgold is sensitive to size hierarchy as an indicator of domination and control, the relationship of the letters suddenly calls into question the authority of the Black Power Movement itself. At the time the work was painted, however, not everyone understood its complex symbolism.

Robert Newman is a case in point. In his press release for Ringgold’s Spectrum exhibit, Newman described the one hundred faces as

locked together in a subtle and mysterious structure, and the faces show every gradation of skin color, people together in the historical and constitutional reality of its being this way.⁷⁷

Though Newman describes the myriad Americans as inexorably linked in an almost utopian fashion, he overlooks the more obvious fact that the two groups are linked, not in harmony, but in conflict. The artist explains that the words “White Power”

represent the white (racist) power whose challenge led to the creation of the Civil Rights Movement and its rallying cry for “Black Power.”⁷⁸

Thus, in *U.S. Postage Stamp*, words and people are confined and compressed within the rectangular space of the picture, which serves as a metaphor for the America—a country divided and at odds with itself.

Ringgold exploits in this painting the means but not the meaning of Pop art. She recreates the flat images and mechanical reproducibility of masterworks such as Andy Warhol's 1962 *Marilyn Diptych*, which features one hundred head-only portraits of Marilyn Monroe. Scholar K. Victoria Boone points out that the Pop element serves Ringgold well:

Painted in a flat Pop art style, the effectiveness of this painting emerges from its juxtaposition of ten black faces and ninety white faces . . . in a grid pattern These layers of words and faces have the impact of Andy Warhol's *Campbell Soup* series. Like Warhol, Ringgold uses the common image of the face . . . to signal the message of social inequality⁷⁹

Ringgold took advantage of the artistic techniques of the 1960s, adapting, Sims tells us, from such reductive Pop sources as commercial printing, grid patterning, movie star magazine images, and comic books; and reconfiguring the Pop genre to suit her own emotive, symbolic, and political ends. Sims calls Ringgold's ability to conflate Pop art techniques with social realist symbolism, a "psychic freedom" within which "she produced some of the most powerful icons of the 1960s," not the least of which was *U.S. Postage Stamp*.⁸⁰

This painting also marks the beginning of Ringgold's career-long interest in language as a form of expression used in conjunction with visual art. Curator, Terrie Rouse, confirms that the *U.S. Postage Stamp* painting

signaled the beginning of Ringgold's experimentation with using messages and symbols in poster like presentation, a development that would later result in a series of political posters.⁸¹

The political posters, discussed in the next chapter, represent the first of many series that Ringgold devotes to uniting image and text. The posters, for example, are immediately

followed by two additional groups of paintings completed in 1972--*The Political Landscapes* and *The Feminist Series*--which further combine words and images.

Eventually, as will be demonstrated, the artist's interest in verbal expression evolves into the hallmark style of her painted "story quilts" of the 1980s.⁸² In this later stage of her work, Ringgold also begins a second career as a published author and illustrator of children's books, which gives precedence to her literary talents..

The last of the monumental paintings in the *American People* series, *Die* (fig. 18), is perhaps the artist's best known work.⁸³ It has been described by African-American poet, playwright, and scholar, Amiri Baraka, as

a violent confrontation between slave and slave master in the modern American Streets [which] . . . terrorized gallery directors and house *nogrews* too. They didn't want to be associated with such violence. They certainly didn't want to be the objects of it.⁸⁴

In the hard-edged, angular style of Jacob Lawrence's race riot scenes from *The Migration Series* (fig. 26), Ringgold has created a violent spectacle in *Die*. Chaos reigns and blood is everywhere--spattered on children's faces, staining women's clothing, dripping from knives, pooling beneath the head of a fallen man, and spotting the tile-like background that serves as the only stabilizing element in the morbid composition. Arms flail, guns point, mouths, agape, are screaming. *Die* is the embodiment of the artist's "concerns as a mother, citizen of Harlem, and an American" about the racial violence that plagued U.S. cities.⁸⁵

Rouse remarks that by making the riot interracial, Ringgold reinforces the validity of the kinds of predictions made by James Baldwin in *The Fire Next Time*.⁸⁶ Baldwin

promised an apocalypse, not unlike the one illustrated in *Die*, if the races did not soon find common ground:

If we . . . do not falter in our duty now, we may be able . . . to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world. If we do not now dare everything, the fulfillment of that prophecy, re-created from the Bible, in song, by a slave, is upon us: *God gave Noah the rainbow sign, No more water the fire next time.*⁸⁷

In *Die*, it is as if God's wrath has indeed been visited upon us; and, as in Noah's time, virtually no one escapes the conflagration. If there is a way out—a Noah's ark for refuge—Ringgold does not reveal it. She presents us, instead, with a *fait accompli* of doom.

There is, however, a hint of salvation represented in the painting, in the women and children who refrain from fighting. Though the women are distressed by the violence which explodes all around them, their frantic movements do not result from their participation in the violence but from their desperate attempts to prevent the men from killing each other. In order to do this, the women must imperil their own lives, as manifested by the female figure who stares into the barrel of a handgun, held by a man engaged in a life-and-death struggle. Moira Roth explains that in both *The Flag Is Bleeding* and *Die* “women play a pacifying role in the racial battle between black and white men.”⁸⁸ However, in the latter of these paintings, it would appear that the opportunity for pacification has passed.

Significantly, in *Die*, a black woman is now prominently featured. Her body rushes into the melee from the right, reaching across the fray in the direction of a falling man and two small children, who offer a second indication of possible redemption. Barefoot and with large frightened eyes, a small blond-haired boy and brown-skinned girl crouch

in the foreground of the composition, fearfully clutching each other. The little girl huddles, curled up in the lap of the boy, who holds her protectively despite his own fear. This lone gesture of intimacy and friendship is mitigated by the almost ghoulish, oversized faces of the children which mirror the heavily articulated, grotesque expressions of the adults.

The distortion of forms, the gaping mouths and flailing arms of the screaming women, and the harsh angularity, combined with the subject matter of violence perpetrated upon innocence, calls to mind Picasso's 1937 *Guernica*. Ringgold acknowledges the Spanish master's influence and tells us that she often took the opportunity to view her "favorite" Picasso at The Museum of Modern Art, where it was still on view at that time.⁸⁹ Ringgold describes *Guernica* as a painting

that one first "sees" as a whole flat image, and only later does one become aware of its parts. Everything happens up front. Perspective can be the enemy of a mural, creating holes in the composition instead of distance.⁹⁰

Though far less abstract in figuration than Picasso's painting, the forms of the limbs and torsos in *Die* are positioned at sharply diagonal angles that echo the directional forces of *Guernica*. The formal features of *Die*, including the diagonally-placed knives, the razor-sharp pointed shoes, and the V-shaped negative spaces between parted legs, mirror the jagged angularity of Picasso's masterpiece.

The Spanish painter's disorienting synthesis of multiple perspectives is abandoned by Ringgold for an implacable, tile-like wall that presses the figures to the picture plane. And, unlike Picasso, Ringgold also rejects grisaille (the technique of painting entirely in tones of gray), preferring instead intense pigmentation. Throughout the *American People*

series, it is evident that color is vital to Ringgold's expression. Having established a language of metaphor through contour and form, the artist now began to examine the symbolic potential of her palette. In her next series, *Black Light*, Ringgold identifies and programatically utilizes those colors that best represent her African heritage and her unique way of seeing the world.

NOTES

1. Faith Ringgold, "Faith Ringgold: Archives of American Art Oral History," interview by Cynthia Nadelman, transcript, 6 September to 18 October, 1989, Archives of American Art, Washington, D.C. and New York, N.Y., 41-42.

2. Ringgold, *Faith Ringgold: The Last Story Quilt*, a film produced by Linda Freeman (Chappaqua, N.Y.: L&S Video Enterprises, Inc., 1991).

3. Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge: the Memoirs of Faith Ringgold* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1995), 34. At City College, women were first admitted to the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences in the fall of 1951. Until then women, while allowed to take courses in Liberal Arts, could not officially obtain a degree from that college. The colleges that did offer degrees to women at the time that Ringgold attended were the colleges of Business, Engineering, and Education; for records of this change in policy, see Board of Directors meeting minutes, Spring, 1951 and City College course catalogues for spring 1951 and fall 1951, City College Library Archives, Barbara Dunlap, Research Archivist.

4. Ringgold's first commercial success would occur with her first one-person exhibit, entitled "American People," which opened at Spectrum Gallery in New York in December of 1967.

5. Ringgold, "Faith Ringgold: Archives of American Art Oral History," 46-47.

6. *Ibid.*, 43, 51.

7. *Ibid.*, 48, 53- 54.

8. *Ibid.*, 54.

9. See, for example, the following articles and reviews reprinted in *Monet: A Retrospective*, ed. Charles F. Stuckey (New York: Park Lane, 1985), 57-59: Louis Leroy, "The Impressionist Exhibition," *Charivari*, 25 April 1874; and Jules Castagny, "The Exhibition on the Boulevard des Capucines," *Le Siècle*, 29 April 1874.

10. Ringgold, "Faith Ringgold: Archives of American Art Oral History," 46-47.

11. *Ibid.*, 56.

12. *Ibid.*, 76.

13. *Ibid.*, 79.

14. Ibid.
15. Ibid., 79-80.
16. Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 54-55, 59, 149.
17. Ibid., 104-105, 108.
18. Ibid., 131.
19. Ringgold, "Archives of American Art Oral History," 144.
20. Mary Schmidt Campbell, *Tradition and Conflict: Images of a Turbulent Decade, 1963-1973* (New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 1985), 54.
21. Linda Dittmar, "When Privilege Is No Protection: The Woman Artist in *Quicksand* and *The House of Mirth*," in *Writing the Woman Artist: Essays on Poetics, Politics, and Portraiture*, ed. Suzanne W. Jones (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), 148.
22. James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (1962; rpt. New York: Random House, 1995).
23. Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 146.
24. Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 6-7.
25. Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 145.
26. Moira Roth, "Keeping the Feminist Faith," in *Faith Ringgold: Twenty Years of Painting, Sculpture, and Performance (1963-1983)*, ed. Michele Wallace (New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 1984), 13; see also Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 144-146, 150, 157, 161, 164, 173, 222 and images on pages 97, 100-101, 145-146, 148, 151, 180.
27. Terrie S. Rouse, "Faith Ringgold—A Mirror of Her Community," in *Faith Ringgold: Twenty Years of Painting, Sculpture, and Performance*, 9; Roth, "Keeping the Feminist Faith," 13-14.
28. Lowery S. Sims, "Race Riots, Cocktail Parties, Black Panthers, Moon Shots and Feminists: Faith Ringgold's Observations of the 1960s in America," in *Faith Ringgold: A 25 Year Survey*, ed. Eleanor Flomenhaft (Hempstead, N.Y.: Fine Arts Museum of Long Island, 1990), 19-20.

29. Lucy Lippard, "Beyond the Pale: Ringgold's Black Light Series," in *Faith Ringgold: Twenty Years of Painting, Sculpture, and Performance*, 22.
30. Ringgold, "Interviewing Faith Ringgold/A Contemporary Heroine," interview by Eleanor Flomenhaft, in *Faith Ringgold: A 25 Year Survey*, 10.
31. Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and African-American Art and Philosophy* (New York: Random House, 1983; rpt. New York: Vintage, 1984), 11.
32. Ibid.
33. Roth, "A Trojan Horse," in *Faith Ringgold: A 25 Year Survey*, 51; and Sims, "Race Riots, Cocktail Parties, Black Panthers, Moon Shots and Feminists," 20.
34. Sims, "Race Riots, Cocktail Parties, Black Panthers, Moon Shots and Feminists," 20.
35. Ibid.
36. Roth, "A Trojan Horse," in *Faith Ringgold: A 25 Year Survey*, 52.
37. Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 93.
38. In 1969, the artist stated, "I've always painted . . . objects in nature, like trees and waterfalls and mountains. But lots of trees. I love trees." See Lewis Brooks, "Her Art Is Soul," in *The Afro-American Woman Magazine* 1, no. 1 (March-April 1969): 10.
39. Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 154.
40. The title and subject matter of *Hide Little Children* suggests Ringgold's awareness of Pavel Tchelitchew's (1898-1957) painting *Hide and Seek* (1940-42) which was prominently displayed on the third floor of New York's Museum of Modern Art while Ringgold was completing *Hide Little Children* in 1966. Tchelitchew's work also depicts a group of children's heads and a distorted tree trunk, although the imagery in the Russian painter's composition is far more surreal and macabre. Ringgold admits that she spent a great deal of time examining paintings at the Museum of Modern Art during this period: "So I researched. I went to the Modern, I went everywhere." See Ringgold, "Faith Ringgold: Archives of American Art Oral History," 120.
41. Ibid.

42. Gilbert Osofsky, *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto, the Making of a Ghetto: Negro New York, 1890-1930* (New York: HarperCollins, 1966; rpt. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1996), 128, 130; quoted in Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "New Negroes, Migration, and Cultural Exchange," in *Jacob Lawrence: The Migration Series*, ed. Elizabeth Hutton Turner (Wash., D.C.: Rappahannock Press in association with The Phillips Collection, 1993), 18.

43. Ringgold, quoted in *Faith Ringgold: Painting, Sculpture, Performance*, ed. Thalia Gouma-Peterson (Wooster, Ohio: The College of Wooster Art Museum, 1985), 8.

44. Sims, "Race Riots, Cocktail Parties, Black Panthers, Moon Shots and Feminists," 17.

45. Elsa Honig Fine, *The Afro-American Artist: A Search for Identity* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, Inc., 1973), 198, 201.

46. Ringgold, *We Flew Over The Bridge*, 154.

47. *Ibid.*, 156.

48. *Ibid.*

49. *Ibid.*, 53.

50. *Ibid.*

51. *Ibid.*, 156.

52. *Ibid.*

53. *Ibid.*, 214.

54. *Ibid.*

55. *Ibid.*, 156.

56. Josephine Donovan, "The Pattern of Birds and Beasts: Willa Cather and Women's Art," in *Writing the Woman Artist*, 88.

57. Allison Booth, quoted in Margaret Diane Stetz, "Anita Brookner: Woman Writer as Reluctant Feminist," in *Writing the Woman Artist*, 103. (Stetz identifies the quote as having been taken from Booth's essay in the same anthology, "Incomplete Stories: Womanhood and Artistic Ambition in *Daniel Deronda* and *Between the Acts*. It

may have appeared in an unpublished version of Booth's article as it does not occur in the published one.)

58. Ringgold, "Faith Ringgold: Archives of American Art Oral History," 116.

59. *Ibid.*, 117.

60. *Ibid.*, 119.

61. Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 157.

62. It was not until June 21st of 1989 that the Supreme Court ruled that burning the American flag was a legal form of political expression. See Vincent de Paul and Ken W. Sayers, eds., *It Was a Very Good Year: A Cultural History of the United States from 1776 to the Present* (Holbrook, Mass.: Bob Adams, Inc., 1994), 503.

63. Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 158.

64. Campbell, *Tradition and Conflict*, 61.

65. Tom Cowan and Jack Maguire, *Timelines of African American History: 500 Years of Black Achievement* (New York: Roundtable Press, 1994), 261; see also Campbell, *Tradition and Conflict*, 61.

66. See Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists from 1792 to the Present* (New York: Pantheon, 1993), 416-417.

67. Elsa Honig Fine, *The Afro-American Artist: A Search for Identity* (New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1973), 203.

68. Ringgold, quoted in Fine, *The Afro-American Artist*, 209.

69. See Moira Roth, "Keeping the Feminist Faith," 13-14, in which Roth discusses this work in a general feminist context, indicating that "women play a pacifying role in the racial battle between black and white men," without addressing the issue of the woman's race. See also Sims, "Race Riots, Cocktail Parties, Black Panthers, Moon Shots and Feminists," 17-21, in which Sims does acknowledge the conspicuous absence of a black woman in the painting, stating the following: "In . . . *The Flag Is Bleeding* . . . several questions are posed, and remain unanswered, . . . For instance: why a white woman and not a black one?" The questions, however, is left unanswered. In other discussions of the work, for instance in Campbell's *Tradition and Conflict* and in the essay by Yolanda M. López and Roth, "Social Protest: Racism and Sexism," which appears in Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard's *The Power Of Feminist Art: The*

American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), 140-157 (whose cover, in fact, features a reproduction of *The Flag Is Bleeding*) the painting is again only mentioned descriptively and in passing; the missing black woman does not enter the discussion.

70. Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 157-158.

71. Gouma-Peterson, *Faith Ringgold: Painting, Sculpture, Performance*, 6. Thalia Gouma-Peterson was director of the College of Wooster Art Museum in Ohio in 1985 when she curated a major exhibition of the art of Faith Ringgold entitled, "Faith Ringgold: Painting, Sculpture, Performance." The exhibition was held from August 25th to October 13th and included 33 works as well as an exhibition catalogue.

72. Ringgold, "Faith Ringgold: Archives of American Art Oral History," 115, 118; Idem, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 156.

73. A detailed description of Ringgold's political activities of the late 1960s occurs in chapters two and five.

74. Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 172. Carroll Greene, Jr. received an appointment in 1970 as "researcher for black artist development," see Mrs. Martin Luther King, Jr. to John Hightower, 23 July 1970, letter, artist's archive; Romare Bearden and Richard Hunt were honored with exhibitions of their works at the museum in the Spring of 1971, see Fine, *The Afro-American Artist*, 158, 231.

75. Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 158.

76. Sims, "Race Riots, Cocktail Parties, Black Panthers, Moon Shots and Feminists," 19; the 1980 census indicates that the black population of the United States at that time was 11.7%.

77. Robert Newman, "American People," press release for Faith Ringgold's exhibition of the same name, held at the Spectrum Gallery, 54 West 57th Street, New York City, 19 December 1967 to 6 January 1968, artist's archive.

78. Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 158.

79. K. Victoria Boone, "Faith Ringgold: An Artist of Political Themes," (M.A. thesis, University of Oklahoma, Norman, 1990), 17.

80. Sims, "Race Riots, Cocktail Parties, Black Panthers, Moon Shots and Feminists," 17.

81. Rouse, "Faith Ringgold--A Mirror of Her Community," 9.

82. For a discussion of the story quilts see the introduction and chapter 4; as well as *Faith Ringgold, Change: Painted Story Quilts* (New York: Bernice Steinbaum Gallery, Ltd., 1987).

83. Campbell, *Tradition and Conflict*, 55.

84. Amiri Baraka, "Faith," *Black American Literature Forum* 19, no. 1 (Spring 1985): 12. The term "house nogrews" refers to the house negro or slave who, in the colonial American South, was not compelled to work in the fields, but rather was given presumably easier work in the slave master's home and sometimes better living conditions than those of the field worker. The house negro came to be seen as an "Uncle Tom" character who catered to the white slave owner and imagined himself superior to the field slave. "Nogrews" suggests an unchanging condition on the part of the African-American bourgeoisie who continue to cater to white society.

85. Campbell, *Tradition and Conflict*, 55.

86. Rouse, "Faith Ringgold--A Mirror of Her Community," 9.

87. Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 104-105.

88. Roth, "Keeping the Feminist Faith," 13.

89. Picasso always intended *Guernica* as a gift to the people of Spain but at the time of its creation in 1937, Spain was in the throes of a violent civil war that resulted in more than one million deaths and a new totalitarian regime headed by General Francisco Franco. Instead of bequeathing the painting to Spain, Picasso shipped it to The Museum of Modern Art in New York where it remained on "extended loan" until a "democratic" government was established in Spain. Not until Franco's death in 1975 did reforms occur under King Juan Carlos. In 1981, eight years after Picasso's death, the consensus was that Spain's government had become sufficiently "democratic" to satisfy the artist's conditions. At this time *Guernica* was sent to the Prado Museum in Madrid. In 1992 the painting was moved once again to the Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, also in Madrid where it remains today. See Rita Gilbert, "Art Issues: Protecting a Masterpiece," in *Living With Art* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1985; rpt. New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1995), 57.

90. Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 157.

CHAPTER 3

PAINTING, POLITICS AND “BLACK LIGHT”

It was a wonderful beginning--a really wonderful beginning--in 1967.¹

Faith Ringgold

The 1967 exhibition of “The American People” at Spectrum Gallery was the highlight of a ground-breaking year for Ringgold. *Artnews* critic Ralph Pomeroy called the paintings at Ringgold’s Spectrum show “big, bold protest[s] against the black-white situation.” John Fischer of *Arts* stated that Ringgold showed “exceptional talent;”² and another critic, Celia Conason, described Ringgold as

a new artist emerging upon the American scene with verve, zest, originality and purpose Her talent came blazing across to all who attended her recent showing at the Spectrum Gallery. Everything about Faith Ringgold’s show is in the superlative--the bombastic color, the immense expanses of canvas, the searing message Faith Ringgold promises to be a force to be reckoned with in the art world.³

Critical attention such as this moved Ringgold out of obscurity and into limelight.

Not all of the attention that Ringgold received was positive, however. For example, Fischer also stated that the “American People” exhibition was, “as might be expected of a Negro, about the struggle for equality.” His assessment, revealing an element of condescension, was typical of the attitudes of many formalist critics of the period who saw political subject matter as “vulgar,” “retardataire,” and unique to the works of black artists.⁴ Fischer found Ringgold’s insistence upon dealing with political subject matter typical of a “negro” orientation. In just a few brief words, he relegated the artist to the status of racial “other,” effectively excluding her from the broader context of

contemporary art. The critic, however, could not deny the power of Ringgold's imagery. He concluded that she had a penetrating sense of irony which she graphically and successfully translated into pictorial emotion.⁵

Ringgold's second one-person show held in 1970, also at the Spectrum Gallery, featured her next series, *Black Light*. Similarly, this exhibition received positive critical attention and was once again reviewed in both *Arts* and *Artnews* magazines, as well as in *The Amsterdam News* and *The East Village Other*. Ringgold was described by critics as an "honest and strong painter" and an "accomplished artist" whose work was symbolic of the "the inner conflict that the artist faces, in which racial origin plays a dominant role." Ringgold was also praised for her examination of the "positive values of race" through the use of "word-painting statements."⁶

The reviewer for *Artnews*, William Johnson, found Ringgold's work especially intriguing, stating the following:

Faith Ringgold paints in a polemical poster style. Her presentation is simple, straightforward, and effective. Esthetics and "message" intermingle so that one becomes curious as to why the stripes of an American flag are irregular only to realize that these stripes are in fact elongated letters. *Caveat* Maddox, but he should be made to see them.⁷

Johnson is referring to Ringgold's painting *Flag for the Moon* (fig. 27) whose hidden "message" spells out the words "Die Nigger" within the context of an American flag; thus mocking the flag's symbolism as a metaphor for freedom and justice. (Johnson's reference to "Maddox" is directed at Lester G. Maddox, then governor of the state of Georgia. Maddox resoundingly refused to comply with federal desegregation laws, causing Georgia to become the first state to be sued for such an offense by the U.S.

Department of Justice.⁸)

As Johnson noted, Ringgold's *Flag for the Moon* combined aesthetics and message; however, it did so in a way that was out of step with contemporaneous art trends. As discussed in chapter two, for Ringgold, and many black artists of the period, there were no clear distinctions between art and the social and political oppression that minorities faced. Ringgold and many of her black artist-contemporaries created works of art that were subjective and political as opposed to objective and apolitical (characteristics more readily found in Pop art) by using bold and simple forms and color relationships, and by emphasizing content over individual style or technique.⁹ Pop artists, minimalists, and color field painters, in contrast, stressed methods such as "staining the canvas and blocking geometric patterns with masking tape" over subjective content.¹⁰

Despite critical acclaim from the press, Ringgold's efforts to garner the attention of museum curators and to find an art dealer to represent her continued to be unsuccessful. (Spectrum was a cooperative gallery that did not provide adequate dealer representation.) Ringgold's images were topical and offered critics an opportunity for substantive discussion, but the style of these images and the intense racial vehemence of their content did not pique the interest of curators. For the same reasons, the artist's portrayals also discouraged potential buyers.

Ringgold could, however, boast at least one success as a result of the publicity she received from her Spectrum shows. In 1969, following the success of "The American People" exhibit, the artist received a personal invitation from David Rockefeller to

participate in a benefit exhibition and sale, which was sponsored by the Chase Manhattan Bank. Proceeds from the show went to benefit the Studio Museum in Harlem; and all unsold works were purchased by the bank. Included was a painting by Ringgold, *American Spectrum*, for which Chase paid \$3,000.¹¹

With the exception of this noteworthy purchase, sales of this magnitude eluded Ringgold; and her teaching job remained her primary source of income. For six years, until 1973, the artist continued to find it impossible either to obtain a dealer or to secure additional one-person exhibitions.¹² In the following passage, she describes this frustrating predicament:

In New York I found it difficult to exhibit my work because of my figurative style, the political content, the lack of social connections in the art world, and, also, because being black and a woman was not as fashionable as the Civil Rights Movement and [the] Women's Liberation Movement might suggest.¹³

Although the socially-conscious content of Ringgold's painting, as mentioned, did not conform to art trends of the 1960s such as Op and Pop art, Photo Realism, Kinetic art, and Minimalism (styles which, for the most part, de-emphasize highly political subject matter and existed separately from the intense political activism of the decade, especially from that of the Civil Rights Movement), Ringgold, nonetheless, was determined to continue to make issues of race the content of her paintings.

Like Ringgold, more and more black artists began to emphasize social and political content in their work. The resulting "Black Art Movement," which began in the late 1960s, was comprised of groups such as "Spiral" and "AfriCOBRA," whose mission it was to explore ways in which black artists could play a more active role in the fight for

racial equality. “Black Power Murals” became a popular genre within the Black Art Movement. Emulating the precepts of the Mexican muralists, artists painted the walls of abandoned buildings in the inner-cities, intending to bring art to disenfranchised black communities, while simultaneously educating African-Americans about their rich heritage through cultural and historical motifs.¹⁴

The philosophy of the Black Art Movement was perhaps best described by the artist Dana Chandler, who was wholly committed to social issues:

I am a black artist whose work is directed expressly toward the education of blacks as to their true position of oppression in a white racist society, and to the development of a new third world concept in black art. We must develop our standards concerning black art and move away from past identifications with, and adherence to, castrating white standards. Black art is a tremendous force for adult education and political development which we have ignored [As an artist,] I’m not trying to be aesthetically pleasing, I’m trying to be relevant.¹⁵

Although the idea of using art (especially murals) as a teaching tool had not been “ignored” by African-Americans, as Chandler suggests, use of the genre had waned since the 1930s. The renewed interest of black artists in socially-conscious art arose from a desire to make art pertinent to the public and reflective of pressing social issues. Such concepts of artistic relevance were of fundamental importance to the Black Art Movement, and to Ringgold, as *The American People Series* demonstrates. Like Chandler, Ringgold saw herself as “a political reporter in terms of art,” and she saw her painting as a way to educate viewers about the realities of racism. This conviction subjected her to the types of qualifications she had received from John Fischer of *Arts*; that is, criticism which effectively excluded her from the mainstream by virtue of her race and choice of subject matter.¹⁶

Realizing her position as an outsider, Ringgold chose to engage the biased forces of the art world in a direct confrontation. She began by targeting New York museums, since they exerted so much influence over what was, or was not, perceived as good art. In a surprisingly successful attempt to break down the racial barriers that excluded black artists from the mainstream by limiting their exposure, Ringgold, over the next several years, launched herself into museum politics. She began her campaign with the Whitney Museum of American Art.

Standing in front of the Whitney with her daughters, Michele and Barbara, on a Sunday in November 1968, Ringgold was called “nigger” for the first time in her life. She was with an interracial group of artists, critics, and curators who were protesting the Whitney’s exclusion of black artists from a recent exhibition entitled, “The 1930s: Painting and Sculpture in America.” While Ringgold, Michele, and Barbara were picketing, a man and his daughter walked up to the museum entrance. Ringgold handed them some protest literature. Although the man ignored her, his daughter instinctively reached out to take the flier. The young girl was abruptly stopped by her father who admonished her, saying, “You don’t want to take anything from those niggers.”¹⁷ Despite the intervening years, Ringgold has not forgotten the incident. She was far from discouraged, however, since she saw this as an example of the very attitudes she had come to the Whitney to protest.

In the 1960s, artists objected vociferously to the limited representation of minorities in the collections of American museums. “The 1930s” exhibition was an example of the racial exclusivity of the art world that had brought Ringgold to the

doorstep of the Whitney that day. The show, which had opened the previous month on October 15th, included the works of Georgia O’Keeffe, Grant Wood, Reginald Marsh, Josef Albers, Arshile Gorky, Hans Hofmann, Jackson Pollock, and others. “The 1930s” featured more than 100 examples of painting and sculpture from the Depression years and was intended “to upset the widespread notion that ‘30s painting was almost exclusively an art of social realism.”¹⁸

Within this context, the art of the Harlem Renaissance—one of the most prolific periods of African-American art in U.S. history—was summarily excluded, despite the fact that a number of artists of this era worked in abstract styles and with content that was outside of the confines of social realism.¹⁹ The Whitney’s director, John I. H. Baur, exacerbated matters by intimating publicly that the entire body of work by black artists of the 1930s was of lesser quality than that of white artists. He said:

I have deep sympathy with the black artist’s struggle to find a place for himself in our civilization, but I think he has to be judged on the same basis as any other—on the quality of his work.²⁰

Baur’s comments suggest that the reason the Museum excluded black artists from “The 1930s” exhibit was because its curators had been unable to find any African-American works of quality. Ironically, Baur’s comments also seem to indicate that the Whitney believed its own holdings of Harlem Renaissance art were of substandard quality.²¹

Black artists responded to the Whitney exhibition and to Baur’s statements with indignation. *The New York Times* reported that some thirty black artists (including Ringgold) picketed the Whitney that November, waving signs that read “Ignored in the ‘30s, Ignored in the ‘60s.”²² In her memoirs Ringgold recalls how, during that winter of

1968, she first became involved in the heated arena of art politics:

Things were beginning to come around. Black artists were beginning to meet. And organize. I was invited to a meeting that [Henri Ghent] called because the Whitney Museum had put together an exhibition of artists of the thirties and had left out all the black artists²³

The meeting mentioned by Ringgold took place before anyone had considered picketing the Whitney. A group had convened, not to organize a demonstration, but to discuss ways to appease the Whitney's hurt feelings over criticism directed at its exhibition policies by the Brooklyn Museum curator, Henri Ghent.

The first reaction to "The 1930s" exhibition had come from Ghent, who hastily organized a "counter-exhibition" of black art of the 1930s that was mounted at The Studio Museum in Harlem in November. Ghent's exhibition included artists such as Hale Woodruff, Richmond Barthé, Palmer Hayden, Augusta Savage, William H. Johnson, Archibald Motley, Aaron Douglas, Jacob Lawrence, and others. Ghent's problems began when Grace Glueck of *The New York Times* reported that he was shocked to read that not one black artist of that period had been included in the Whitney exhibition, making it abundantly clear to Ghent that the "Establishment" was as bent on ignoring black artists in the 1960s as they had been in the 1930s. According to Ghent, nothing had changed. In a press release announcing the Studio Museum exhibition, Ghent had used the phrase "Black Artists of the 1930s Snubbed!" In the wake of criticism which the Whitney directed at Ghent for his use of the word "snubbed" (supposedly to misrepresent their intentions), a meeting of interested parties was called to discuss whether or not Ghent should formally apologize for his statement. At this

meeting, held in the *Artforum* offices of Charles Cowles, a group of curators, critics, and artists, both black and white, debated the issue.²⁴

Though later Ghent, himself, would be given credit for boldly responding to the Whitney's criticisms with a picket line, it was originally Ringgold's suggestions that prompted the action.²⁵ It was she who pointed out to the group at the meeting that, far from being inappropriate, the word "snubbed" did not describe the Whitney's oversight in nearly strong enough terms. Ringgold words to the group were these:

Listen. I don't see anything wrong with ["snubbed"]. I don't think the Whitney Museum is even thinking about us and whether we feel "snubbed," or what we feel. They're doing what they want to do. What you're doing is what you want to do Actually, I don't think that [we] are doing enough. I think that . . . we need to . . . demonstrate. We need to make a line around the Whitney Museum and show them how we feel. Not just say "snubbed," [or] write it, but do something.²⁶

Ringgold volunteered her own cooperative gallery space at Spectrum as a meeting place for the group. There, she and other organizers of the demonstration made protest signs, and Ghent made phone calls to help rally support. Ringgold remembers the sense of accomplishment that she felt after the demonstration had ended: "I was proud of myself . . . [because] I knew that I was the originator of the first black demonstration against a major museum in New York City." This undertaking was to be the first in a series of political actions Ringgold would take to draw attention to racism in the art world.²⁷

At the Whitney demonstration Ringgold met the sculptor Tom Lloyd, who became the only African-American founding member of the Art Workers Coalition (AWC), which was formed a few months after the Whitney action, in April of 1969. At the time of its inception, the AWC publicly denounced elitism and racial discrimination in the

policies and curatorial practices of New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), and made a series of demands which the museum, at least in part, felt obligated to meet.²⁸ The AWC required that admission to the museum be free at all times, and that public hours be extended to accommodate working people. They also campaigned for MoMA to include branch galleries and outreach programs in minority communities, and for its board to have a more diverse membership comprised of artists, museum staff, and patrons. Finally, in the tradition of the Musée du Luxembourg in Paris, the Coalition insisted that MoMA become a receptacle for contemporary art only, passing older works on to more historical institutions such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art.²⁹

Ringgold and Lloyd shared a commitment to political activism and, more importantly, to black art. Because of this, they joined forces as the United Black Artists' Committee (UBAC) to address specifically black issues that the AWC had overlooked. The two artists launched their own full-scale attack on the Museum of Modern Art to protest the limited representation of minority artists in its collections and programs. They demanded that a separate wing be established for black and Puerto Rican art by October 1970. They also demanded that a curator be appointed to the staff of the museum specifically to supervise the exhibition and acquisition of African-American art, and that three exhibitions of black art be planned forthwith: one group show, one 3-person sculpture exhibition, and a retrospective of the works of Romare Bearden.³⁰

The efforts of Ringgold, Lloyd, and the UBAC--which included an extensive letter-writing campaign, the distribution of questionnaires and leaflets, meetings, demonstrations, and incalculable phone calls--were unquestionably successful. In

response to the UBAC's activities, Museum of Modern Art Director, John Hightower, in a letter to Ringgold dated 4 November 1970, stated the following:

I can say that you and Tom Lloyd, along with others . . . have made an enormous difference in the outlook of the Museum of Modern Art and its awareness of valid artistic expression, [which] has been overlooked by the Museum in the past. As a result . . . curatorial training programs for blacks and Puerto Ricans will begin early next year; acquisition policy has already been augmented to include a conscious attempt to buy works of artists [that] . . . reflect a sense of black and "oppressed" consciousness Finally the exhibition of Richard Hunt and Romare Bearden . . . is scheduled for late March.³¹

In the space of one year, the UBAC, under the leadership of Ringgold and Lloyd, had brought about several major and unprecedented changes in the Museum of Modern Art's curatorial agenda. The museum guaranteed the acquisition of black art by way of a sub-committee (formed by Blanchette Rockefeller) which voted to set up a special fund for the purchase of minority works. Curator, Carroll Greene, Jr., was hired to supervise the integration of black art into the museum's exhibition schedule. Moreover, a Romare Bearden retrospective and a sculpture exhibition (albeit, of the works of only one artist--Richard Hunt--and not three artists, as requested) were mounted in the spring of 1971.³²

The separate wing for minority art, which the UBAC had hoped to dedicate to Martin Luther King, Jr., did not materialize. Ringgold and Lloyd had attempted to solicit the aid of Coretta Scott King in pressuring the museum to concede to this particular demand, but their efforts were thwarted. Although Ringgold wrote to Mrs. King asking that she intervene on the UBAC's behalf, the artist's letter was never answered, at least not directly. Mrs. King did send a letter to John Hightower, praising him for the steps the museum had already taken to broaden its interests in minority art, but her letter,

excerpted below, did not mention the minority wing:

Please accept my sincere commendations on your appointment of Carroll Greene, Jr., as a researcher for black artist development. This appointment by an institution as renowned and prestigious as the Museum of Modern Art gives unquestioned credibility to a hitherto little recognized area in which the black man has made a significant contribution. It is my hope that the project will accomplish its goal and fill the black art vacuum which has existed for too many centuries.³³

These comments suggest a belief that the museum had already sufficiently addressed the issue of minority art. Ringgold was, of course, disappointed with Mrs. King's response, as she explains in her memoirs: "I never did understand her reasons for ignoring our request I received a copy of the letter she sent to John Hightower at the museum [and it] was less than enthusiastic."³⁴ (Mrs. King has never publicly addressed this matter.) Ringgold was also disappointed that the museum had not scheduled any group shows. These would at least have afforded her and other black women artists and opportunity to exhibit at the museum.

In the end, after a tremendous effort, which had monopolized Ringgold's time for nearly two years, the artist found her career no further along than it had been when she had begun. Worse yet, as she points out, her creative productivity had suffered:

I stayed up many nights typing press releases. I spent many days at the museum distributing questionnaires to museum-goers in an attempt to expose the racist exclusion of black art from the MoMA exhibition schedule. Needless to say I did not produce much art during this time.³⁵

At the end of this period of intense political activity, Ringgold decided at last to return to painting. Unexpectedly, however, she soon became embroiled in another controversy concerning the militant content of her *Black Light* series. This time Ringgold's dedication to social critique would end in her arrest by police.

Ringgold's 1969 *Black Light* paintings incorporate both figurative and geometric abstraction. Stark, two-dimensional silhouettes of African-American faces, or social commentary in large, bold letters, are superimposed over geometric patterns of rectangles, squares, and triangles. This fusion of a variety of formal elements results in dramatic design-oriented compositions that integrate Ringgold's interests in modernism, African art, and symbolic color. Figures and typography are rendered in a clean, simple, and consciously naïve manner. The *Black Light* compositions employ elements of abstraction that are either stark and minimalist in configuration or reflective of African textile patterns. This combination of Western and Non-western influences relates conceptually to the artist's earlier works; however, what makes *Black Light* unique in Ringgold's *oeuvre* is its treatment of color.

In the *Black Light* paintings, Ringgold utilized a new approach to color, intended to express what she termed "essential truths" about blackness. The artist felt "that since black America was confronting racism in almost every area of American life, why not in art?"³⁶ Of course, Ringgold had been addressing these issues in her art since 1963 but with the 1967 series there was an important difference: socio-political content no longer existed solely as narrative but also as a component of the artist's palette and in her choice of design elements. The series represented, in Ringgold's own words, a new commitment to

"Black light" and subtle color nuances, and compositions based on [an] interest in African rhythm, pattern, and repetition.³⁷

In *Black Light*, both colors and shapes became symbolic of the artist's racial heritage. In

this way, form and content were merged.

Ringgold believed that her ethnic identity influenced how she saw the world and how she made art. With the *Black Light* series, Ringgold began to investigate ways of using black pigment as a metaphor for her racial orientation. In the following statement the artist describes her new color techniques and her motivation for re-examining her palette:

I had begun to explore the idea of a new palette—a way of expressing on canvas the new “black is beautiful” sense of ourselves. I made my early black paintings in 1967 by very crudely mixing ivory black into other colors to darken them. Because ivory black has a high oil content, it dries slowly and produces an uneven glossy sheen. Continuing to perfect my new palette, I switched from ivory black to Mars black which dries faster and has a beautiful matte finish. Then I decided to add burnt umber, which also has a beautiful surface quality and emulates dark flesh tones.³⁸

Ringgold saw black as a transforming pigment that could create a unique palette and had the ability to facilitate a new and symbolic treatment of darker skin tones. Ringgold concluded that by mixing black with other colors, she could create shades that were more conducive to painting black people and more expressive of her concept of “black light,” which was intended to replace the more traditional methods of using white pigment to create “light” in painting.

As a student, Ringgold had been trained to paint light and shadow through the use of *chiaroscuro* (contrasts of light and dark). As a result, her attempts to paint portraits of black people had been unsuccessful. Whenever she used gradations of light and dark to model form, the dark brown skin tones of her sitters became invariably subsumed by the shaded areas. Although she tried persistently to paint portraits of black people using

chiaroscuro, she quickly became frustrated with a formula that, while ideal for painting lighter skin tones, left much to be desired when the sitter's skin was the same color as the background. (A rather conspicuous and satirical demonstration of this problem occurs in Manet's *Olympia* of 1862-3, wherein the black maid is barely distinguishable from the dark wall behind her.) In Ringgold's experience, dark-skinned images that were painted using traditional *chiaroscuro* lost their clarity and luminosity, and she was determined to find a better way to render them.³⁹

Mommy and Daddy (1969) exemplifies Ringgold's new approach to color (fig. 28). The artist uses like tones and reductive, organic shapes to render the faces of an African-American couple. The woman's face is animated and her lips, smiling slightly, are painted a bright crimson. Electric blue make-up adorns her eyelids. Closely valued shades of brown delineate her nose, brows, and eyes. By contrast, the long mouth, flaring nostrils, and heavily-lidded eyes of the male face are less animated and enveloped in a muted brown, amoebic form that contains and isolates them. His features differ from those of the woman, whose eyes seem larger than they actually are because of the artist's repeated use of circles in the pupils, irises, eye-sockets, and eye-brows. These repeated forms or "polyrhythms," as Ringgold calls them, comprise a multiple repetition of shapes that creates a symbiotic union of forms. The two heads in *Mommy and Daddy* come together to create one organic whole.⁴⁰ This interlocking of forms recurs in another painting from the series entitled *U.S. America Black* (fig. 29).

Ringgold has divided this 1969 painting into eight pie-shaped modules. She derived the triangular motif from the Kuba textile designs of Zaire in Central Africa (fig.

30). Each wedge contains a different face or faces in alternating color schemes of dark brown and crimson that are accented with blue. The faces of the kissing couple in the upper left-hand section of the painting are pressed tightly together. The nose and mouth of the male figure are hidden behind the woman's profile so that their faces (like those in *Mommy and Daddy*) seem to fuse into a single rounded form. Ringgold's technique of expressing the emotional and physical union of two people in a loving embrace by merging their figures has its roots in earlier 19th and 20th century art. Examples occur in such works as *The Kiss* by Edvard Munch (1895), Gustav Klimt (1908), and Constantin Brancusi (ca. 1912), which achieve a similar fusion of forms (figs.31-33). (It must be stated, however, that Ringgold was not directly influenced by the works of these artists.)

Each triangle in *U.S. America Black* serves to compress and, partly, to cut off the face or faces that it frames. The result is an intense, close up view of each character. Eyes, hair, and sometimes heads are cropped by the triangle's edge. The images become vignettes--individual pieces of some larger whole--and we are vaguely aware of additional activity occurring outside of our line of vision. An examination of the work of the Russian Suprematist artist, Kasimir Malevich, would be beneficial in illustrating this idea. Something akin to Ringgold's cropping technique was achieved, on a more abstract level, by Malevich in his 1913 drawings for the set of the futurist play, *Victory Over the Sun* (fig. 34). Malevich has drawn a single, slightly arcing line on the inside of a "box" that serves as the setting for the universe of the future. It has been surmised by historian Charlotte Douglas that this line represents a section of the perimeter of the sun, seen in extreme close-up.⁴¹ Though we only see part of the sun's circumference, we have a sense

of its vast wholeness (as we imagine it lying just beyond the framework of the box).

This awareness of unknown and unseen activity is what Ringgold creates with her compressed Kuba wedges (although the artist, admittedly, was not not influenced in this regard by the work of Malevich). The artist includes just enough information about each figure to pique one's curiosity. The viewer's attention is sustained by small narrative details--make-up, jewelry, necktie--which hint at the identities of the figures. Also arresting is the mask-like quality of the faces, which is especially evident in Ringgold's inclusion of an Egyptian-style eye in the profile of a face at the lower right. The eye, placed frontally within the profile, momentarily "captures" the viewer's gaze with its own.

As Ringgold explains, the multiple triangular configuration of *U.S. America Black* reflects her interest in African design and philosophy:

This system--eight triangles in a square--is African; it is a . . . design from the Kuba people that I've used over and over again in endless variations. It's ancient. It's just the basis for everything.⁴²

The Kuba grid served the added function of helping Ringgold organize her compositions, to create an equilibrium of opposites (note the variety of emotions expressed by the figures), and to bring order to disorder. In the following passage, Ringgold describes how the Kuba pattern enhances her handling of the pictorial space:

It helps me to deal with space. It makes the space richer, and it also helps me with rhythm I try as much as possible to keep that going, to have different sizes of things, even people in different directions, moving in different places, almost in different spaces, within the same composition⁴³

Ringgold's triangular forms encapsulate each image, strengthening the narrative by

allowing one to read each “episode” like a succession of comic strip panels. Though the scenes may change, and though the configuration of space, shapes, and proportions may vary from one panel to another, the Kuba grid serves to hold these myriad elements in place.

Art critic, Lucy Lippard, once stated that the *Black Light* series was “born with the death in 1967 of Ad Reinhardt” because Ringgold first conceived the series in that year, and because Reinhardt’s *Black Paintings* had such a tremendous impact upon her.⁴⁴ Ringgold recognized in the blackness of Reinhardt’s pictures a multiplicity of color nuances that symbolized for her the diversity of the African-American people. Reinhardt’s complex exploration of color inspired Ringgold to adopt his formal approach. She recontextualized it, however, so that color became a symbolic, as well as formal, element which allowed Ringgold to reconcile painting with “blackness” as a cultural construct.⁴⁵

Lippard also contrasts Ringgold’s handling of space with Reinhardt’s negation of it. The critic asserts that while Reinhardt’s paintings insist upon the nullification of “light, space, time, form, design, object, subject, and symbol”—indeed, of life itself—Ringgold’s works function instead to celebrate life.⁴⁶ Although Lippard’s interpretation of Reinhardt’s works may ring true for some observers, it clearly does not reflect Ringgold’s reading. Ringgold saw, not death, but the affirmation of life in the murky depths of Reinhardt’s pictures. She recognized in his work an approach to space, form, and color that emphasized not the void, but myriad prismatic possibilities. Ringgold responded to the reds, blues, and greens that filled Reinhardt’s so-called “colorless”

works with a new palette of her own as well as with and a new sense of the possibilities of color.

Man (1968) pays homage to Reinhardt both through color and through the incorporation of a cruciform design (fig. 35).⁴⁷ Ringgold uses the cross pattern to create a complex grid that highlights the African features of *Man*. This portrait is perhaps the most abstract of the series and comprises simplified forms that overlap and interlock like a jigsaw puzzle. The frontality and symmetry of the face presents an implacable, flattened image that is pressed to the picture plane like a child's face to a window. By eliminating hair, eyelashes, eyebrows and texture of any kind, Ringgold reduces the portrait to a pictographic icon which stares out at us unblinkingly—as immobile and as timeless as an Egyptian death mask.

Ringgold has covered the lower one-third of *Man* with a broad, dark indigo band which blocks out (though not completely) the figure's jaw and chin. In this area of the canvas the artist creates a grid within a grid, dividing the larger band into three smaller rectangular units. Borrowing a technique from Reinhardt, Ringgold achieves this effect (which also serves to differentiate the lower half of the face from the background) with subtle changes in color. The shift is so slight that one has to carefully scrutinize the image in order to read the silhouette clearly. While working out solutions to these formal problems, the artist became convinced that only by juxtaposing dark colors to other similarly dark hues would she be able to reveal the nuances and inherent beauty of her palette. Ringgold's intention was also to utilize pigment and formal techniques to encourage the viewer to prolong his or her examination of the image.⁴⁸ In this way, she

was better able to engage the viewer's consciousness and provoke alternative ways of seeing.

In order to better understand her use of color, it is helpful to examine the works of another artist, Dan Flavin, whose light installations, while differing in form from Ringgold's paintings, in fact illustrate a similar awareness of, and insistence upon, the subtleties of color. In Flavin's three-dimensional environments, colored neon lights are mounted in pristine white rooms. The rooms become glowing, prismatic visions which are mitigated by the whiteness of the walls. The walls change color--from green to pink to red to orange--depending upon the use of neon bulb. The sharpest contrasts occur when the viewer moves quickly from one room to another. If one remains in the same room for a period of time, the light appears to soften and even change hue. Whenever a new color is introduced, subtlety and nuance are temporarily lost in the dramatic contrast. Such installations are studies in color--white as affected by other hues, and those hues by each other. The purpose of these installations is to investigate the myriad ways in which white can be affected by juxtaposition to other colors in the spectrum.

Black Light works on the same principle (as do the *Black Paintings* of Ad Reinhardt) but with the use of black, instead of white, as a point of departure (and, of course, in a very different medium). Just as many tints of white can be produced on a white ground, so endlessly varied shades of black can be produced on a black ground, causing the subtleties of black to become evident. In other words, the prolonged contemplation of a single color without the distorting influence of a contrasting one leads to a truer reading of the color at hand. The racial symbolism of *Black Light* can be

understood within this context. Just as different colors, compared abruptly, tend to emphasize difference, so the difference or supposed “otherness” of African-Americans becomes intensified when blacks are compared to whites or judged by white standards.

Ringgold has encoded these ideas in *Man*, conflating both objective and subjective content. She emphasizes those features which identify *Man* as a person of color—a broad, rounded nose and full lips—so that they become focal points of the composition, both formally and symbolically. The undulating lines of the upper lip and the glowing coral-pink pigment that surrounds the nose and stains the lower lip further enhance the features so that they are immediately understood as full and round. In this way Ringgold celebrates the ethnicity of the figure, as well as her own.

There also exists a correlation between Flavin’s use of neon lights and Ringgold’s choice of title for her series, “Black Light.” The use of “black” or ultraviolet lights during the 1960s and 1970s was widespread among youth, as was the use of “strobe” (stroboscopic) lights. Ultraviolet lights enhanced vision (highlighting small particles of lint on clothing and other white objects), while strobe lights distorted vision by way of high-speed “flashing.” The phenomenon of strobe and black light use coincided with the popularity of psychedelic drugs such as LSD (lysergic acid diethylamide). Use of these lights was intended to stimulate the spectator into new modes of perception and feeling and to “expand his consciousness in a way similar to that accomplished by use of a psychadelic drug.”⁴⁹ (Indeed, psychadelic drugs are not hallucinogenic, but rather chemicals that increase awareness.⁵⁰) The psychadelic art of the 1960s, most often in the form of iridescent posters, served a similar function, using a bombardment of sensory

stimuli to excite the eye of the viewer.⁵¹ By choosing the title “Black Light” for the series, Ringgold indicated her awareness of this complex phenomenon as well as her intention, through her painting, to metaphorically “expand the consciousness” of her spectators, without the use of drugs or neon; instead she created a unique palette of light-color to communicate her message.⁵²

The African-American scholar and philosopher, Alain Locke, in his 1925 essay, “The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts,” wrote of the impact that African art had upon both European and African-American artistic development. Locke urged African-American artists to draw upon their ancestral legacy. “The Negro,” he said, “is not a cultural foundling without his own inheritance” and should, certainly with the same vigor as the French and German Modernists, allow African art forms to shape his art.⁵³ Ringgold’s bold stylistic approach to form, exemplified in *Man*, achieves precisely this goal. Like Locke, Ringgold finds African sculptural forms powerfully engaging. She states that

when you look at African sculpture, you are immediately arrested by the strong geometric forms that sometimes clash with each other; which takes the nose and the mouth . . . and makes them into the most drastically contrasting forms.⁵⁴

One sees similar contrasts in *Man*—vertical and horizontal shapes, organic and geometric lines, muted and intense colors. The face is reduced to a single form, hard-edged, and two-dimensional. As is the case with much of traditional African sculpture, Ringgold does not render visual reality; rather, she captures “the mood and spirit of the person and visualize[s] that.”⁵⁵

Ringgold’s desire to express in the *Black Light* paintings “the whole lifestyle and feeling of black people” can be traced to an earlier interest in finding a formal style that

could express the African side of her African-American heritage.⁵⁶ Even before painting her first “super-realist” works in 1963, Ringgold had struggled to devise a way to render the human figure that would be realistic, yet not illusionistic. She explains:

I was trying to express myself, my life, my yearnings. And I finally got what I wanted, and it is a kind of abstract realism, shall I say . . . forms [that] are stronger than life, so that they are able to confront you . . . like African art does.⁵⁷

Ringgold’s intention is to create a design that is “as different from what life looks like as possible,” but which expresses, through abstract form, the intangible essence of human existence.⁵⁸ African art scholar Susan Vogel has stated that modern artists “have always projected their own fantasies and desires on African (and other) objects in their ken.”⁵⁹ While the traditional African artist/shaman likely does not see his art, as Ringgold does, as “different from what life looks like,” to the Western eye, African sculptural forms do indeed appear abstract; and these forms have, for nearly a century, offered modern and contemporary artists formal solutions to their own formal problems.⁶⁰ Ringgold has reconfigured African art forms to accommodate her own expressive preferences. Like the contemporary African-American artist, Mel Edwards, who stated recently that “African art = Life,” Ringgold, too, perceives the conceptual focus of African art as expressive of life’s “intangible essence.”⁶¹

The philosophical basis for *Black Light* was grounded in the concept that a new definition of beauty, based on non-European standards, was necessary to counteract the Western definition of beauty, which identified persons of European descent as more attractive than persons of African descent. European standards, for example, were

responsible for the homage paid to the exotic “Octoroon” who was considered more beautiful than other African-American women because of her white appearance.⁶² A hair straightening system that enabled African-American women to emulate the physical appearance of whites was so popular that it allowed its inventor, the black entrepreneur Madame C. J. Walker (1867-1919), to become America’s first self-made woman millionaire.⁶³ The overwhelming popularity of the “Walker System” is not surprising if we consider that derisive words such as “kinky” and “nappy” have been reserved to describe the curly nature of black hair, while expressions like “good hair” have been used by African-Americans to refer to hair that is straight.

In the 1960s, African-Americans vehemently rejected the white standards to which they had adhered for so long. They stopped straightening their hair and no longer hid it under hats and kerchiefs. Black Americans, instead, began to wear their hair naturally and they began to see it as beautiful. In *Black Light* paintings such as *Soul Sister* (1967), *Mommy and Daddy*, and *U.S. America Black* (figs. 36, 28, 29) Ringgold visually affirms the ideology that “black is beautiful.” (More recently, other African-American artists such as Adrian Piper have continued this trend with works such as Piper’s 1981 “Self-Portrait Exaggerating My Negroid Features.”⁶⁴)

After addressing and resolving matters of racial symbolism in the series, Ringgold turned from figurative representations to the exclusive use of text. Since she believed that, with the exception of the American flag, words were the only other “valid abstractions” with which to communicate ideas effectively and unambiguously, language became increasingly important in her work. In the same way that Ringgold found

African art to be streamlined and unmitigated in its directness, she also found the written word to be an appealingly straightforward form of communication.⁶⁵ Ringgold deftly combines these two abstractions--words and flag--in the 1969 painting *Flag for the Moon* (fig. 27) which, as mentioned earlier, superimposes the words "Die Nigger" over an American flag. The design is meant to subvert the patriotic image of the flag while aggressively confronting the viewer.

Flag for the Moon expresses the artist's anger over the billions of dollars spent to put a man on the moon in 1969 while millions of Americans at home continued to live in poverty.⁶⁶ This painting was exhibited, along with *The Flag Is Bleeding* (fig. 1) and *God Bless America* (fig. 16), in "The People's Flag Show," held in 1970 from November 9th to the 14th, at the Judson Memorial Church on Washington Square in New York City's Greenwich Village. The opening announcement for the show emphatically stated that the exhibit was designed "as a challenge to the repressive laws governing so-called flag desecration."⁶⁷

Approximately two hundred artists participated in order to protest the war in Vietnam and political and racial oppression at home. They expressed their displeasure with the U.S. government through images such as Kate Millet's flag emerging from a toilet and Alex La Cross's flag-covered penis.⁶⁸ On the night before the close of the exhibition, Ringgold, Jean Toche (né van Imschoot), and Jon Hendricks, all active members of the Art Workers Coalition and participants in the exhibit, were arrested and charged with flag desecration. At that time, the United States district court of New York required that

any person who shall publicly mutilate, deface, defile, or defy, trample upon, or cast contempt upon either by words or act any flag, standard, color, shield or ensign of the United States or the State of New York shall be guilty of a misdemeanor.⁶⁹

Although Ringgold's paintings were not considered the most offensive works in the exhibit, she was arrested as an organizer of the show, and she subsequently became known as one of the infamous "Judson Three."

The arrest of the three artists became a *cause célèbre* in art circles both at home and abroad. Defense funds were set up in New York, and donations amounting to nearly \$60,000 were received from as far afield as Germany to pay for the artists' appeal. In the end, however, the appeal was lost. Despite the tremendous outpouring of support received from such persons as John Hightower of the Museum of Modern Art, Lucy Lippard, and Allen Schoerner of the New York State Council on the Arts (all of whom testified for the defense), Ringgold, Toche, and Hendricks were found guilty on 24 May 1971, and sentenced to pay a one-hundred dollar fine or spend one month in jail. They opted to pay the fine.⁷⁰

Ringgold's flag pictures had been exhibited as a group once prior their appearance in *The People's Flag Show*. They were featured at the artist's second one-person exhibit at Spectrum Gallery in 1970. As a portent of the legal battles to come, Ringgold became embroiled at this time in an argument over the title of the exhibition with Robert Newman, the gallery's director. Newman objected to Ringgold's choice of title, "America Black," because he felt it was too exclusive and might be deemed offensive by some of the gallery's patrons. He wanted to choose another title. Ringgold responded to Newman's objections with an impassioned letter that asked,

If *America Black* is wrong, it is no more wrong than America is wrong I must daily deal with the very real experience of segregation, second class citizenship, and [the] powerlessness that every black person in this country knows I also can sympathize with your longing to feel unthreatened by that word “black” but that is why you should hear it and use it. Soon it will be as natural as negro once was.⁷¹

The artist’s words could not have been more prophetic. The term “black” indeed rapidly replaced “negro” in the late 1960s as African-Americans began to embrace and celebrate those physical and cultural characteristics of their African heritage that had so long been used to disenfranchise them from the American experience.

The *America Black* exhibit included four paintings that incorporate the word “black” into their designs: *Ego Painting* (fig. 37), *American Art Black*, *Love Black Life*, and *Red Black White*. These four works consist mainly of typography. In *Ego Painting*, the words “black,” and “America,” appear twice and fill four Kuba triangles. The artist’s own name (hence the title, “Ego Painting”) fills a fifth triangle, which occupies the traditional position of an artist’s signature, in the lower right hand corner of the composition. Yet, it does not function as a signature. Like “black” and “America,” the word “Ringgold” is block-printed and elongated so that it fills the entire triangular space, resulting in an asymmetrical glyph of sorts that replaces a signed name.

America Art Black consists of five horizontal and three vertical bands (forming a grid) which range in color from red and brown to blue and greenish-gray. Employing symmetrically balanced rectangular and circular forms, Ringgold places the words “America,” “dance,” “black,” “music,” “poetry,” and “art” within the grid, to create a design comprised of a series of abstract shapes and lines that function both as design and

intelligible text.

In *Red Black White*, the square format of the canvas is divided into three horizontal registers, each emblazoned with the word “nigger” in large block type. Centered over each of these panels, in smaller letters, are the words “red” (in the uppermost band), “white” (in the central band), and “black” (at the base). Ringgold has used closely analogous colors to emphasize nuance over contrast, which conforms to her thematic intentions for the series. The ground of the upper portion of the canvas, for example, is painted an intense red, while the word “nigger” is superimposed in a darker shade of the same hue, and the word “red” applied in a lighter shade. The central portion consists of grayish-white over darker grays, and the bottom panel is comprised of three shades of blue (blue-black, navy, and light blue).

As *Red Black White* indicates, Ringgold repeatedly experimented with her palette, juxtaposing like hues to express her personal and symbolic vision regarding the complexities of the black race. *Love Black Life*, also square in format, comprises, as does *Ego Painting*, eight triangular sections, grouped around the center in a pinwheel configuration. The artist utilizes the colors of the American flag to spell out the painting’s message—“love black life.” However, the white which Ringgold employs is a grayish-white; the red, a brownish-red; and the blue, a blackish-blue. In this way, she continues to equate her palette with subjective concepts of black art as a genre that requires its own particularized color scheme.

Ringgold refers to these non-figurative paintings as the “American Black Art Posters,” differentiating them from the figurative works of the *Black Light* series by

identifying them as graphic design. The artist explains that her decision to use words in painting resulted from a need to “speak” in a language that was more literal than images and more readily comprehended.⁷² Indeed, the “America Black Art Posters,” though painted in oil on canvas, very closely resemble picket signs. It was, thus, a natural progression for Ringgold to turn to graphic design as she did in July of 1970.

Her first poster, *Defend the Panthers*, was conceived to help raise money for the Black Panther Party’s legal defense fund. (This design quickly gave way to a series of others, which Ringgold created throughout the decade of the 1970s.⁷³) *Defend the Panthers* boldly displays popular Panther maxims such as “Free All Political Prisoners” and “All Power to the People,” and utilizes the hallmark colors of the Black Power Movement—red, black, and green. The 1971 poster, *Woman Freedom Now* (fig. 38) repeats the theme of the Kuba triangle. However, the diamond-shaped configuration of this work (effected by the joining of four triangles) reverses the linear thrust, making the directional forces centripetal rather than centrifugal, thus drawing the energy toward the center. Words are written backwards and reversed as if reflected in a mirror. Nevertheless, their bold angularity and crude clarity allow a quick reading. The words “woman,” “freedom,” and “now” are again written in red, black, and green against alternating backdrops of the same color scheme. This makes the poster as much a form of Op art as a straightforward placard to be read for literal content. The optical illusion transfixes one’s gaze on its kaleidoscopic and ever-changing planes, while the color scheme links women’s liberation with black liberation by making reference to the idea of black feminism as a distinct component of the Women’s Movement (see chapter 6).

Amiri Baraka has said of *Woman Freedom Now* that it should have the status of a “modern classic” because it is one of the very first posters designed to address the issue of feminism within the context of black liberation.⁷⁴ This poster, however, is virtually unknown. (Its obscurity may be attributed to the fact that black feminism has yet to gain wide acceptance as a concept or a movement, and is looked upon by many in the African-American community with suspicion because of its potential to alienate black men and women from one another.⁷⁵) Says Baraka of Ringgold’s political posters:

The substance of these works is political because this is the substance of all our lives. Particularly for the oppressed, politics is an overriding passion, because finally, it is the will to change, [which] 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*

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.⁷⁶

Baraka refers to the “rumbling” or tendency toward revolution that has historically been the purview of the field slave.⁷⁷ Left often to toil longer hours and under far worse conditions than the “house slave” or Uncle Tom, the field slave was always the first to rebel. This slave has come to represent the antithesis of complacency and acceptance by representing the idea of revolution. Baraka thus equates the revolutionary spirit of the field slave with Ringgold’s art.

Ringgold’s 1971 poster *The United States of Attica* (fig. 39) brings to life Margaret Walker’s prose, so aptly cited by Baraka: “There’s a rumbling and a grumbling and the

walls of prisons breaking.”⁷⁸ The Attica riot, which occurred in 1971, was the worst prison riot in U.S. history. It involved over 1,000 state troopers, guards, and policemen. The uprising, which began when a group of predominantly black and Puerto Rican convicts protested discrimination and poor treatment, resulted in the deaths of over 40 people, including several hostages.⁷⁹ Deeply troubled by the violence perpetrated not only by police at home, but also by the U.S. government abroad, Ringgold conceived *The United States of Attica* as a map, and on it listed many of the incalculable acts of violence, including the Attica riot, that have sullied U.S. history.⁸⁰

Ringgold painstakingly recorded dozens of military and racial confrontations, inscribing them in black on a red and green map. A Sioux massacre is noted in northern Minnesota; the lynching and mutilation of 14-year-old Emmett Till is recorded in Mississippi; the anti-Chinese riots in Oregon; and the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King, Jr., in Texas, New York, and Tennessee, respectively. Lowery Sims, in an essay on Ringgold’s paintings of the 1960s, discusses the effectiveness of *The United States of Attica* as an arresting image of perpetual conflict:

[It is] the accumulative impression of all the marks on the map that makes us aware of the gravity and persistence of the injustices. Also, where once one region of the country [the South] bore the brunt of all the blame for racial conflict, this map clearly demonstrates that the guilt was collective.⁸¹

One might add to Sims’ observations that the casual, hand-written manner of the artist’s notations, which requires the viewer to examine the image closely in order to read the text, also enhances the impact of the poster. As the content of the inscriptions is

identified, the viewer-turned-reader is compelled by a kind of morbid fascination to continue to scan the image at close range in order to absorb all of its macabre details. Viewed at a distance, the riots, massacres, wars, lynchings, shootings, and rapes listed on the map seem to disfigure the landscape like scars on the portrait of Dorian Gray, subverting the patriotic and utopian image of America as effectively as the artist's flag paintings had done.⁸²

The shift to this kind of poster art and, later, to murals as an alternative to the work she had been doing, is described by Ringgold as a natural development. She writes:

Having over the years become more and more disgusted with the elitism of the museum and gallery system which rejected me on no less than four levels--because I was black, and a woman, because my form [was] African as opposed to European, and because my content [was] abrasive and political--I began to look at poster and mural art with a new eye. Posters and murals appealed to me because they were both traditionally political forms. Furthermore, posters could be sold inexpensively, and murals could be exhibited in places where people . . . did not ordinarily see art.⁸³

Ironically, the difficulties that Ringgold faced as she tried to gain recognition helped to shape her art. Reacting as stubbornly to the hermetic construct of the art world as she had to the college instructor who once told her she had no talent, Ringgold embraced with vigor the very criteria that the contemporary art scene eschewed--political painting and poster art. Ringgold's commitment to political content was strengthened by a newly confirmed belief that art should be made accessible to those who were most often deprived of it. Also, by making her art available to a lower-income audience (through the multiple reproduction of her paintings as posters and through "neighborhood" murals), Ringgold hoped to increase the sales of her work.

The posters were Ringgold's first step toward a more accessible art form. The public mural was her second. Undoubtedly inspired by groups such as AfriCOBRA, which, as mentioned, brought art to the black community by painting murals on the walls of abandoned tenement buildings, Ringgold decided to join the public art campaign. In 1971, with the help of funds received from a Creative Artists Public Service grant, Ringgold conceived a mural for a group of people who were even more disenfranchised than were the residents of America's inner-city ghettos--women in prison.⁸⁴ As the site for her mural, the artist chose the Women's House of Detention on Riker's Island in New York City; she titled the mural *For the Women's House* (fig. 40).

The choice of the location for the mural was one of significance for Ringgold. She explains that her purpose in choosing a prison site was twofold:

[My intention was] to broaden women's images of themselves by showing women in roles that have not been traditionally theirs (a gun carrying policewoman, busdriver, construction worker, President of the United States, professional basketball player) . . . And to show women's universality by painting a work which crosses the lines of age, race, and class.⁸⁵

For the Women's House achieves precisely the goals that the artist intended. It depicts, within the Kuba grid, eight scenes of women of various ages and races, in non-traditional roles, engaged in activities that were considered atypical for women. After interviewing a number of the Riker's Island inmates, Ringgold decided to base her mural on their desire to see represented such ideas as

justice, freedom, a groovy mural on peace, a long road leading out of here, the rehabilitation of all prisoners, [and] all races of people holding hands.⁸⁶

The comments made by the inmates communicated to Ringgold a sense of their need to

see depicted an optimistic image that would offer hope for their futures and a positive vision of life after prison. The artist set out to capture these ideas in her painting.⁸⁷

For the Women's House is a large oil painting--eight-feet square in two panels, each eight by four feet. It includes a middle-aged white woman (whom the artist describes as "fiftyish") driving a city bus. The bus number--2A--and its destination--Sojourner Truth Square--together make a somewhat prosaic play on words: "To A Sojourner Truth Square," which alludes to the "long road out of here" that the inmates so desperately wished for.⁸⁸ The artist rescues the pun from becoming too intrusive by making it barely visible at the upper edge of the canvas.

Below the busdriver appears a black woman doctor teaching a class on drug rehabilitation at the imaginary "Rosa Parks Hospital." The next panel includes three figures: a bride, her mother, and a priest. The artist describes this portrayal as "a controversial wedding scene" because the bride is being given away by her mother instead of her father, and because the priest who presides over the ceremony is a woman.⁸⁹ Not only are the traditional male roles of priest and father usurped by women, but the groom is not present. The wedding ceremony is thus transformed from an event marking a woman's union with a male partner, into a pivotal moment--an initiation of sorts--that ushers the woman from childhood to adulthood.

An Asian woman wearing a leotard and playing a drum completes the left side of the painting. This scene combines both dance and music as possible career options for women. At the top, right-hand side of the mural, an African-American woman has just been elected President. (At the time the mural was painted, Ringgold held out hope that

U.S. Representative Shirley Chisholm would be elected President.⁹⁰) This image is followed by another of two professional women basketball players, one of whom plays for the New York Knicks. The other wears the jersey of the famed Wilt Chamberlain, who was the NBA's (National Basketball Association's) scoring champion in 1960, MVP (most valuable player) in 1966 and 1967, and the only NBA player in history to score one hundred points in a single game.⁹¹ Ringgold, as ever, aimed high, replacing the male icon with a female one of equal athletic prowess. This vignette is followed by one portraying a policewoman and a construction worker.

Ringgold's final scene is more complex in its symbolism. The artist has rendered a young white woman embracing a child of apparent mixed race. The woman reads from a book that features quotes from Coretta Scott King and Rosa Parks. The artist has stated that the woman is unmarried (as suggested by the lack of a wedding ring on her left hand) and that the half-black child is her own.⁹² Ringgold explains, further, that the scene calls attention to the matter of children's rights:

Unwed mothers are a reality and there is no such thing as an illegitimate child. Although sometimes we have illegitimate parents. It is unfortunate that all children don't have the right to equality in this society, but one thing we can do is stop calling children illegitimate Rather than stressing the importance of the father who is absent, let us stress the importance of the mother who is present.⁹³

The subject of unwed motherhood was critical for the Riker's Island inmates. It was also important for the artist who, though not an unwed mother, was in fact a single mother. The annulment of her first marriage to Earl Wallace and subsequent separations from her second husband, Birdette Ringgold, required that, for much of the time, she raise her daughters without a male presence. Ringgold almost certainly would have sensed the

disapproval of those who, not knowing her circumstances, assumed that her children had been born out of wedlock. This may account for the artist's sensitivity to illegitimacy and for her decision to include this particular scene in the painting.

Ringgold's purpose in conceiving *For the Women's House* was to inspire, uplift, and give hope to the women incarcerated at Riker's Island as well as to "challenge patriarchal, sexist, and racial stereotypes."⁹⁴ What we see developing here, and in the content of several of the political posters, is the artist's newfound interest in the Women's Movement. In fact, the completion of the prison mural marked two critical changes in Ringgold's development--the beginning of her feminist painting and the end of painting large-scale works on stretched canvas.⁹⁵ Ringgold's subsequent paintings were reduced in size and issues of gender oppression inexorably became their primary subject.

This metamorphosis first finds expression in a series of works entitled *The Political Landscapes*--a theme that had not appeared in Ringgold's *oeuvre* for nearly ten years. The series includes not only landscape imagery, but a new element--written narrative. Unlike the succinct, documentary texts found in earlier works, the narratives in *The Political Landscapes* take the form of conversational writings that resemble prose. Ringgold's inspiration for this series came from Chinese landscape painting, which also incorporate vertically written texts.

President Richard Nixon made a much publicized state visit to China in February of 1972, shortly before Ringgold began work on the series.⁹⁶ The artist remembers that books on Chinese art were prominently displayed in bookstores. I began noticing

Chinese landscapes and the messages written on them—often merely descriptions of who did the painting and who bought it, with the purchase price, date and place.⁹⁷

Traditional Chinese landscape artists commonly inscribed their paintings not only with the straightforward, informative data that Ringgold describes above, but also with an assortment of other personal statements and notations ranging from discussions of the advantages of giving paintings as gifts to government officials to detailed descriptions of price negotiations between artist and patron. Ringgold took her inspiration from these Chinese works, whose inscriptions were often lengthy and conversational in tone.⁹⁸

The Political Landscapes, completed in the spring of 1972, comprise fifty-seven small watercolors.⁹⁹ They incorporate abbreviated, semi-abstract images of flora, painted over unmodulated, monochromatic backgrounds of intense red, orange, ultramarine, and other saturated hues (fig. 41). A wooded area occupies the lower half of each composition and paint has been applied thinly in loose, almost calligraphic brush strokes, which are reminiscent of the artist's *New Lincoln School* landscape of 1962 (fig. 7). The gestural style used to render the vegetation complements the hand-lettered inscriptions, which are written vertically in columns along the upper half of the canvas.

Ringgold's approach to these works is similar to that of the Chinese scholar/painter who employed "natural forms like plum blossoms, orchids, birds, bamboo and pine trees" to communicate multivalent literary meanings and "to express political context while simultaneously presenting innocuous alternate readings."¹⁰⁰ As curator Lowery Sims has suggested, "it gives one pause as to how much we miss in Chinese and Japanese painting if we cannot read the calligraphy" or understand the complex symbolism.¹⁰¹ The

texts in Ringgold's *Political Landscapes*, because they are written in English, offer an advantage to the Western viewer who is given a clear understanding of the artist's thoughts and intentions.

The inclusion of written, conversational narrative in *The Political Landscapes* reflects Ringgold's interest in story-telling which has its roots in her childhood. A favorite family pastime was that of telling colorful tales as a form of both entertainment and education. Ringgold's preoccupation with narrative, first seen in the 1967 painting, *U.S. Postage Stamp Commemorating the Advent of Black Power* (fig. 19), and elaborated in *The Political Landscapes*, eventually became an overriding focus in her art –one that lasted for nearly two decades. Ringgold combined the Asian idea of “story-telling” within the context of painting with African (and African-American) concepts of oral and written literature, to create a narrative style that mimicked neither tradition yet retained elements of both.

In her introductory essay to the 1995 anthology, *Gumbo Ya Ya*, art historian Dr. Leslie King-Hammond identifies a style of conversation that is unique to African-American women. *Gumbo Ya Ya* documents, through artists' statements and biographies, the careers and works of over one hundred and fifty contemporary African-American women artists. In decoding for her readers the meaning of the anthology's title, King states that

a gumbo is a rich stew [and] “ya ya” is women's talk. The phrase “gumbo ya ya” originated in New Orleans in the experience of black women who, upon meeting each other, would talk simultaneously, each in her own style.¹⁰²

Rich and colorful verbal exchange is a time-honored tradition among African-Americans,

both male and female, and has its roots in African oral literature and writing traditions.¹⁰³

Although the early African-Americans were expressly forbidden from using their native languages, their love of creative forms of communication did not diminish with the passing centuries. Instead, it survived—even thrived—in a rich story-telling legacy.¹⁰⁴

Ringgold, who wished to express in her art “more than just beauty or form,” has written messages directly on to the surfaces of *The Political Landscape* paintings—messages which unfold like conversations.¹⁰⁵ This practice can be placed within the inveterate context of the African-American narrative tradition and, more specifically, within the “girl-talk” tradition of “gumbo ya ya.”

In traditional African philosophy it is generally believed that “all magic is word magic.” Scholar of African philosophy, Janheinz Jahn, has stated that within African ideology there is the belief that, “If there were no word, all forces would be frozen, there would be no procreation, no change, no life.” In addition to the power of the word as a life force in African philosophy, Jahn tells us that it is also a vehicle for exorcism, which gives the individual “dominion over things” or the ability to change events.¹⁰⁶

The power of words has long been acknowledged in both Western and Non-western cultures and has played an important role in African-American expression. This is partly due to the fact that Americans of African descent have been influenced by both European and African beliefs regarding the transforming potential of words. For example, as in African religious philosophies, Judeo-Christian traditions, which have also influenced African-American culture, assign miraculous capabilities to words.

The Gospel according to St. John, for example, states: “In the beginning was the

Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” This text equates the “word” with God, Himself. St. John goes on to declare, “And the Word was made flesh.”¹⁰⁷ Psychoanalyst Ernest Jones has likened this phrase to the belief that the Virgin Mary was impregnated through her ear when the angel Gabriel imparted Gods words to her, announcing Christ’s impending birth. In this context, words are imbued with the power to create material human form.¹⁰⁸ Lastly, in John 6:68, St. Peter tells the Lord, “Thou hast the words of eternal life.” This statement suggests that immortality itself can be achieved through language alone.

The importance of “the word” as expressed in the Bible offers evidence of the affinity between Christian systems of belief and those of Africa. In Africa, writing is associated with power and knowledge and is considered both sacred and protective. In West Africa, specifically, Bamana women paint textiles with a form of syllabary hieroglyph called *Bogolanfini*. Hunters then wear clothing made from these textiles to protect themselves.¹⁰⁹ The Ejagham people of Cameroon and Nigeria developed ideographic writing which included signs, called *Nsibidi*, that represented ideas and embodied many powers, “including the essence of all that is valiant, just, and ordered.”¹¹⁰

Historian, Maude Wahlman, explains that, after Africans became enslaved in the New World, writing continued to have protective powers in African-American culture, even if the writing was Christian and not African. According to Wahlman, in America the Christian belief in the power of the word fused over time with African ideas about “word magic,” resulting in African-American cultural practices that imbued words with protective power. For example, Wahlman notes that

newsprint has been put on the walls of Southern homes, and in shoes to protect against evil enslaving spirits This concept derives from the African-American practice of leaving the Bible open at night so that the power of the religious words would protect a family against nighttime evil.¹¹¹

These customs are indicative of the relationships between African and Christian ideologies as manifested in the cultural practices of African-Americans. Ringgold's *Political Landscapes* can be interpreted as embodiments of an integrated, African-American perspective which foregrounds language as a result of a dual cultural tradition. In other words, the artist's use of narrative was motivated by an African-American legacy that combines both Western and Non-western sensibilities, as well as by a personal belief in the transforming potential of words. If we approach the *Political Landscapes* from this particular angle of vision, which is indeed the orientation that Ringgold intends, we can begin to see this series as a vehicle for exorcizing the demons that plagued the artist's personal world.¹¹²

For example, in Political Landscape #17, *This Is the American Landscape*, Ringgold writes as a postscript, after her signature, the words, ". . . help us Shirley." This phrase refers again to the presidential hopeful, Shirley Chisholm, and to the artist's own ardent wish that Chisholm be nominated as the Democratic candidate for President.¹¹³ Ringgold gave voice to her wish within the context of her painting, as if by the act of writing out in words her deepest desires, she would be given "dominion over things" and could somehow compel her wish to come true.

Ringgold's painted prose, understood as both written and potentially oral in nature, can also be related to African poetry and the *griot* or African poet/musician. In his book,

Muntu, Jahn notes the importance of poetry in traditional African societies. He states that “to practice word magic is to write poetry African poetry is never a game, never *l’art pour l’art*, never irresponsible.” Jahn also tells us that the word of the poet functions not only to announce events and occurrences—but to *produce* them.¹¹⁴ If we examine the verses of the *Political Landscapes* within this context, we can begin to comprehend that Ringgold wrote them with the intention of producing results. (Of course, she did not actually expect tangible or guaranteed results any more than, for example, someone making a birthday wish actually believes that the ritual blowing out of candles will make the wish come true. This intellectual skepticism, however, does not prevent one from wishing nonetheless.)

The human impulse to control events functions, as does creativity, on both conscious and unconscious levels. Freud suggests that our very dreams are wish-fulfillments in that dreams allow us, in sleep at least, to realize our hopes (be they conscious or unconscious). Contemporary psychoanalysis, too, while refuting the rigid Freudian perception that *all* dreams are wish-fulfillments and have “validly discernible characteristics,” does acknowledge that dreams have a certain revelatory and transforming power. From a psychoanalytic point of view, it is not difficult to assess that *The Political Landscapes* represent an embodiment of Ringgold’s need to effect change.¹¹⁵

Ringgold writes her “image-words” determinedly upon the surfaces of her landscapes, as if by the act of writing—or an act of will—she can exorcize past events and control future ones. For example, *Political Landscape #48—I Cannot Be Sure* (fig. 42)

expresses Ringgold's "wish" for a world ruled by women:

I cannot be sure
Of what life would be like if women
Had the power of men
But when they do
I know that will be a different world.

When she wrote this particular passage (and several others in the series), Ringgold was thinking about the destructive tactics that men have employed in their endeavors to exert power and control over humankind and the environment. Ringgold hoped that one day women could somehow "stop men from killing everybody." Her concerns about this issue have already been addressed in the political poster, *The United States of Attica* (fig. 39), which the artist's daughter, Michele Wallace, once described as a comment on "the oldest and only story of men, their legacy--WAR" Clearly, the woman's role in preventing war and violence was an earnest family concern which found expression in Ringgold's visual and literary imagery.¹¹⁶

The feminist focus of the *Political Landscapes* was fueled by a visit that Ringgold made to Europe while working on the series. She and Michele traveled together to Paris in the summer of 1972. After some weeks, the artist went on alone to Germany, while Michele traveled to Spain to vacation with friends. In Germany, Ringgold visited the well-known Documenta exhibitions at Kassel, which brought together works by artists from all over the world. While there, she was surprised to find that there were only fourteen women represented, eight of them American and none of them black.¹¹⁷ She realized, much to her dismay, that the under-representation of women and persons of color was as much a reality on the international art scene as it was at home. *The Political*

Landscapes are evidence of the artist's commitment, resulting from her Documenta experience, to feminist content in her art and to the Feminist Art Movement, which by 1970, had become a cohesive campaign.¹¹⁸

The succinct prose of *Political Landscape #40--Why Go to Documenta* (fig. 43), expresses the artist's uncertainty and frustration regarding her findings in Kassel. She considers:

Why go to Documenta?
 Why stay at home?
 Why be an artist?
 Why not?

Three paintings later (fig. 44), Ringgold's ambivalence is replaced by an unaffected, self-reflexive attempt to explain and to understand the lack of black women artists represented at Documenta:

What you think about black art
 Is controlled by what you've been exposed to
 Where you are in art
 If you've never seen any before
 You may not have known it existed
 Much like the organizers of the Documenta
 Who only knew the art of male white friends

Writing as if she is engaged in a conversation with those self-same "male white friends" who are responsible for the limited representation of women and people of color in exhibitions such as Documenta, Ringgold expresses a optimistic and perhaps naïve hope that neither racism nor sexism is the cause of this circumstance. She speculates, instead, that the situation is the result of a lack of awareness on the part of men in the art world that an untapped pool of black and women artists exists.

Ringgold, while aware that the messages written on these paintings were likely never to be read by the men to whom they were addressed, engaged nonetheless in a worthwhile conversation with an imaginary listener, which helped her to preserve a sense of hopefulness and purpose. The act of engaging in this conversation symbolically transformed the artist's wishes and hopes into the tangible reality of the painting.

Finally, the landscapes themselves must be addressed as significant symbolic images which are also tied to the artist's feminist ideals. The landscape paintings, Ringgold states, are dedicated to black women:

I use the beauty of the American landscape to express the realities of people who live on it. In this case, the black woman is my subject. She is me. She is the worker, mother, sufferer to the land. I think her beauty will flower with awareness.¹¹⁹

In this statement, Ringgold uses metaphors for womanhood that remind us of traditional concepts of the Earth Mother or *Venus Naturalis*, which equate women with the corporeality of the natural world.¹²⁰ The association of women with libidinous, non-intellectual nature is detailed by Sigmund Freud in *Civilization and Its Discontents*. In his controversial work, Freud states that

women soon come into opposition to civilization and display their retarding and restraining influence Women represent the interests of family and sexual life. The work of civilization has become increasingly the business of man. It . . . compels them to carry out instinctual sublimation of which women are little capable.¹²¹

In other words, according to Freud, women are uncivilized, over-sexed, and inept at serious intellectual reflection. They have no more cognitive control over their instincts than does nature.

Although such limiting and distorted views of women have been deconstructed convincingly by feminist scholars, evidence of the pervasiveness of Freud's interpretation recurs time and again throughout the history of art.¹²² Ubiquitous images of fecund mother goddesses and nude females in nature can be seen in art as old as the Paleolithic Venus of Willendorf from Central Europe; and comparable representations continue, in one form or another, into the present century.¹²³ In an examination of Courbet's 1868 painting, *La Source*, art historian and critic Joanna Frueh points out that, in the woman/nature equation, the two entities

literally mirror one another. This equation casts woman as body, as opposed to man as mind, which, of course, is analogous to culture; Woman symbolizes fecundity and lack of consciousness.¹²⁴

In describing the association of women in Western art with the "timeless, nurturing" realm of nature, Linda Nochlin states that women are "quite literally encompassed and limited by the boundaries of the earth itself. It is as though the earth imprisons them" Ringgold's statement that her landscapes are self-referential, and that this "self" is a worker and a "sufferer to the land," alludes to another version of this imprisonment. Her use of the woman-as-nature construct refers not to the libidinous or "natural" woman but rather to the proletarian woman who is compelled, due to her lower economic status, to work and suffer "in the fields." The idea of landscape-as-prison relates more specifically, for Ringgold, to African-American women whose economic status has traditionally fallen well below that of black men.¹²⁵

With *The Political Landscapes*, Ringgold takes advantage of the inherently political nature of landscape and its historic ability to symbolize a wide variety of ideas

including freedom, power, class struggle, strength, peace, and sexuality.¹²⁶ Ringgold's inscriptions, functioning as intellectual and transcendental forces, combine with the woman/landscape metaphor effectively to subvert traditional associations of women with anti-intellectual nature.

There is also an element of eco-feminism in the *Political Landscape* narratives. Eco-feminism is a philosophy which "combines the drive for women's liberation with respect for the environment and sees both oppressions--that of women and that of nature --as interconnected."¹²⁷ In the following example from *Political Landscape* #9, Ringgold refers to both the land and to women, simultaneously expressing her concerns for both.

To the black woman
 Keep down
 The brown of the soil
 Is the same brown
 Of my skin
 And you walk on the Earth
 In the same manner that you
 Walk all over me
 America

This statement not only equates women with the soil but it equates the soil's color with the color of black women specifically. In this work, both the land and women are described by the artist in eco-feminist terms, as being trodden upon, abused, and neglected. The *Political Landscapes* are evidence that Ringgold understood and espoused the philosophy of eco-feminism long before it became a part of American social and intellectual discourse.¹²⁸

In this series, the artist combines eco-feminist considerations with a complex of others, including racism, the war in Vietnam, the mistreatment of the Native Americans,

and poverty, to create an intricate tapestry of words, ideas, and images. Often, Ringgold brings together several of these socio-political issues within the context of a single painting. In such works, the landscape is Ringgold's symbol for women who, in turn, become the preservers of life. Ringgold's wish to unite "all the women of the world" so that they might quell the destructive forces that threaten mankind and the environment is expressed in these texts.¹²⁹ Three examples, each from a separate painting, follow:

End Racism

End Racism
 In America
 Freedom for all women now
 . . . End poverty
 Free all political
 Prisoners

Once Indians Owned America

Once
 Indians
 Owned
 America
 Then the
 White man
 Killed
 The Indians
 And stole
 The land
 And built
 The American
 Nation
 With Black
 Slavery . . .
 Save
 America
 End
 Poverty

And War

This American Landscape

Faith Ringgold painted
 This American
 Landscape in
 Tribute to
 All the
 Dead in Vietnam
 End
 The
 War
 In 1972
 Now
 Please
 Save this beautiful
 Country from destroying itself
 There is still time
 To turn around

Each painting documents the disquieting social problems that most concerned the artist and her ingenuous prose indicates a commitment to the preservation of life in all its many forms.

The series, *Political Landscapes*, thus represents Ringgold's reformulation of the idea of Mother Nature into its more recent transmogrification, the Great Goddess, which feminist historian, Gloria Orenstein, describes as follows:

Evoking the memory of an earlier psychic state, one in which divinity was seen to reside in matter, and the energies of the earth were revered as sacred, the Goddess has become that symbol of transformation which activates those forces within women identified with holiness and creative power.¹³⁰

It is creative power indeed--intellectual, emotional, and aesthetic--that the artist/shaman, Ringgold, employs in the execution of the *Political Landscapes*, as well as in her next

series--the *thangka* paintings--which adroitly combine Tibetan transcendentalism with the African tradition of fabric art.

NOTES

1. Faith Ringgold, "Faith Ringgold: Archives of American Art Oral History," interview by Cynthia Nadelman, transcript, 6 September to 18 October, 1989, Archives of American Art, Washington, D.C. and New York, N.Y., 120.
2. Ralph Pomeroy, "Faith Ringgold," *Artnews* (January 1968): 54; John Fischer, "Faith Ringgold," *Arts* (February 1968): 62.
3. Celia Conason, "Faith Ringgold--Artist with Purpose," *The United Teacher*, 7 February 1968.
4. Lowery Sims, "Race Riots, Cocktail Parties, Black Panthers, Moon Shots and Feminists: Faith Ringgold's Observations of the 1960s in America," in *Faith Ringgold: A 25 Year Survey*, ed. Eleanor Flomenhaft (Hempstead, N.Y.: Fine Arts Museum of Long Island, 1990), 17.
5. Fischer, "Faith Ringgold," *Arts* (February 1968): 62.
6. Lil Picard, "Women in Art," *The East Village Other*, 25 February 1970; George Perrett, "Faith Ringgold at Spectrum," *Arts* (February 1970): 61; *The Amsterdam News*, 17 January 1970, 8.
7. William Johnson, "Faith Ringgold," *Artnews* (April 1970): 72.
8. Tom Cowan and Jack Maguire, *Timelines of African-American History: 500 Years of Black Achievement* (New York: Roundtable Press, Inc., 1994), 262.
9. Elsa Honig Fine, *The Afro-American Artist: A Search for Identity*, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1973, pp 198-201.
10. Sims, "Race Riots, Cocktail Parties, Black Panthers, Moon Shoots, and Feminists," 17.
11. David Rockefeller to Ringgold, 6 November 1969, artist's archive; Mr. Rockefeller, then Chairman of the Board at Chase Manhattan Bank, told Ringgold that a member of the bank's Art Committee had suggested that, as an artist, Ringgold might be interested in collaborating on a project which was being sponsored by the bank. He continued, "This is a benefit exhibit and sale for the Studio Museum in Harlem." The letter goes on to describe the details of the exhibition and the willingness of the bank to purchase all unsold works, concluding as follows: "We would like very much to have you contribute a work to this benefit. We are planning to exhibit a total of 60 works by 60 different artists with a price range between \$250 and \$8000 and would welcome a work

in any medium in this price range.” Because the Chase Art Committee consisted of such art world luminaries as Alfred Barr, Dorothy Miller, James Sweeney, Robert Hale, and Perry Rathbone, Ringgold’s art work became known to a number of museum curators, art historians, and collectors at this time; Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge: The Memoirs of Faith Ringgold* (Boston: Little Brown & Co., 1995), 174.

12. Ringgold was successful in obtaining representation in group exhibitions in New York, but these did not result in significant sales, nor did they bring the artist much critical attention. Some of the group exhibition in which she participated are: “The Art of the American Negro,” Harlem Cultural Council, 1966; “Six Painters,” Metropolitan Applied Research Corporation, 1968; “Couterpoints 23,” Leven House, 1969; “National Association of Women Artists,” National Academy of Design, 1969; “Chase Manhattan Bank Collection,” Martha Jackson Gallery, 1970; “Mod Donna Art,” Shakespeare Festival Theater, 1970; “New York Liberated Venice Biennial,” Museum, 1970; “Collages of Indignation,” The New York Cultural Council, 1971; “Documenta IV,” Kassel, Germany, 1972; “Women Choose Women” and “Against the Wall;” both sponsored by the Harlem Cultural Council in 1973. Exhibitions of her work over the six year period from 1966 (the year of her first major exhibition) and 1973 (when she received her first retrospective at the Voorhees Gallery of Rutgers University) amounted to approximately 20 shows or 3 per year.

13. Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 186; see also Charles Alston’s comments in Grace Glueck, “The Best Painter I Can Possibly Be,” *New York Times*, 8 December 1968, Sec. 2, 4; cited in Fine, *The Afro-American Artist*, 184, which states that “Blacks miss out on the social situations, on the parties and gatherings where they might meet collectors and people important in the Establishment structure.”

14. Fine, *The Afro-American Artist*, chap. 9 passim; Spiral was the name given to a group of black artists who began meeting at Romare Bearden’s New York studio on 5 July 1963. According to Bearden, the purpose of the group was to examine the commitment of African-American artists to the struggle for civil rights. Other members of Spiral included Hale Woodruff, Charles Alston, Norman Lewis, Richard Mayhew, Merton Simpson, Emma Amos, and Al Hollingsworth, among others. The group also attempted to define aesthetic and ideological problems unique to African-American artists. Spiral remained divided on many pertinent philosophical issues throughout its existence and finally stopped meeting in the fall of 1965; see Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists, from 1792 to the Present* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 400-403; AfriCOBRA began as COBRA (the Coalition of Black Revolutionary Artists) in 1967, and later changed its name to AfriCOBRA (African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists), organizing shows of black art in New York, Boston, Syracuse, Rochester, and Washington, D.C. from 1968 to 1973; see Mary Schmidt Campbell, *Tradition and Conflict: Images of a Turbulent Decade, 1963-1973* (New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem), 57-59; the artists Eugene Wade, Bill Walker, and

Jeff Donaldson (the latter a founding member of AfriCOBRA) completed *The Wall of Respect* mural on the wall of a tenement building on Chicago's South side in 1967 as a way to bring art to the black community. A similar project, *The Wall of Dignity* was completed the following year in Detroit. For additional examples of the "Black Power" murals and a detailed description of the activities of this group, see Fine, *The Afro-American Artist*, 199, 201-203, and Campbell, *Tradition and Conflict*, 57-59.

15. Fine, *The Afro-American Artist*, 203.

16. Early examples of large-scale painting and relief sculpture designed to educate the public about the achievements and culture of African-Americans can be found in the works of Aaron Douglas (*Aspects of Negro Life*, 1934, four panels, the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York, and *The Evolution of Negro Dance*, 1935, the 135th Street YMCA, New York), Richmond Barthé (*Dance*, 1935, monumental marble relief, Harlem River House, New York, 1938), and Hale Woodruff (the *Amistad Mutiny Trial* murals, 1938-39, Talladega College, Alabama), among others; Fine, *The Afro-American Artist*, 203.

17. Ringgold, "Faith Ringgold, Archives of American Art Oral History," 127.

18. In Ringgold's published memoirs the opening date of the Whitney exhibition is indicated as November 15th; see Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 165. However, museum records and news articles confirm the starting date as October 15th; see Grace Glueck, "30s Show at Whitney Picketed by Negro Artists Who Call It Incomplete," *The New York Times*, 18 November 1968, 31, and The Whitney Museum of American Art, registrar's listing of exhibitions; William Agee, the exhibit's curator, quoted in the same article.

19. Examples of artists working in an abstract style can be found in the art of Beauford Delaney, Wilmer Angier Jennings, William H. Johnson's European paintings of the 1930s, James Lesesne Wells, Samuel Joseph Brown, Jr., Hale Woodruff, and Sargent Johnson's lithographs of the 1930s. See David C. Driskell, et al. *Harlem Renaissance Art of Black America* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1987); and Gary Reynolds, and Beryl J. Wright, *Against the Odds: African-American Artists and the Harmon Foundation* (Newark, N.J.: The Newark Museum, 1989). For works that did not address issues of social realism see the publications just cited, including the landscapes and seascapes of William McKnight Farrow, Allan Randall Freelon, John Wesley Hardrick, and Palmer Hayden, the Paris street scenes of Lois Mailou Jones, and the still life pictures of Ellis Wilson, Frank Joseph Dillon, Malvin Gray Johnson (who also painted street scenes before his untimely death in 1934). Despite pressure from the Harmon Foundation and wealthy white patrons to paint "black" subjects, a great many Harlem Renaissance artists preferred, and depicted, apolitical subject matter.

20. Glueck, "1930s Show at Whitney Picketed by Negro Artists Who Call It Incomplete," 31.

21. By 1935 the Whitney Museum had purchased three works by the African-American sculptor, Richmond Barthé: *African Dancer* (1933), *The Comedian* (c.1933), and *Blackberry Woman* (1932). Though these works are realistic in configuration, it is questionable as to why they were perceived as examples of social realism, since they resemble the attenuated bronze sculptures of Rodin and do not address specific social issues.

22. Glueck, "1930s Show at Whitney Picketed by Negro Artists Who Call It Incomplete," 31.

23. Ringgold, "Faith Ringgold, Archives of American Art Oral History," 124.

24. Ibid.; Glueck, "1930s Show at Whitney Picketed by Negro Artists Who Call It Incomplete," 31; Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 166-167.

25. Glueck, "1930s Show at Whitney Picketed by Negro Artists Who Call It Incomplete," 31.

26. Ringgold, "Faith Ringgold, Archives of American Art Oral History," 125.

27. Ibid., 126; Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 167-168.

28. Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 167-168; though Ringgold indicates that the Art Workers Coalition was founded in 1968, it was, in fact, founded on January 3rd, 1969; see Yolanda Y. Lopez and Moira Roth, "Social Protest: Racism and Sexism," in *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), 141; and Campbell, *Tradition and Conflict*, 86; to museum visitors from Bates Lowery, April 1969, open letter, artist's archive; Bates Lowery was Director of the Museum of Modern Art; expansion of the museum's free and reduced admissions policy was announced, as well as children's educational programs and outreach facilities in Harlem. The museum's free admission policy was also announced in the *East Village Other* on 17 April 1969.

29. To the Museum of Modern Art from the Art Workers Coalition (AWC), June 1969, memorandum entitled "The Demands of the Art Workers Coalition," artist's archive; to Bates Lowry from the AWC, 1969, letter headed, "An Open Letter to Today's Visitors to the Museum of Modern Art," artist's archive; to Dr. Mamie Clark from Carroll Greene, Jr., November 16th, 1970, artist's archive; Dr. Clark was then a Museum of Modern Art Trustee; regarding the Musée du Luxembourg, although in existence since

1750, it was inaugurated by Le Comte de Forbin, director of the Royal Museums, on 24 April 1818 as France's primary museum of modern art, open to the exclusive exhibition of works by living artists from 1818 to 1937, during which time the more historical works were transferred to the Louvre Museum collection; see Genviève Lacambre, *Le Musée du Luxembourg en 1874: Peintures*, (Paris: Éditions des Musées Nationaux, 1974), 7-11. Further, the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art entered into an inter-museum agreement on September 15, 1947 which provided that works of art which had passed from the category of modern to that of "classic" would be sold to the Metropolitan Museum. This agreement was terminated, however, in February of 1953. See Alfred H. Barr, Jr., *Painting and Sculpture in the Museum of Modern Art, 1929-1967* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1967), 635, 654. The original document is located in the New York archives of the Museum of Modern Art and the Metropolitan Museum.

30. To the Museum of Modern from the United Black Artists' Committee, memorandum entitled "Program for Change: Black Culture," artist's archive; members of the Committee included, in addition to Ringgold and Tom Lloyd, and among others, Ozzie Davis, Carroll Greene, Jr., and Romare Bearden.

31. To Faith Ringgold from John B. Hightower, 4 November 1970, artist's archive; Hightower was then Director of the Museum of Modern Art. Richard Hunt (b. 1935) was at that time a respected metal sculptor whose works can be found in numerous museum collections such as the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art (both in New York City), and the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo, New York. Romare Bearden (1911-1988) is an internationally renowned artist whose works can be found in dozens of museum collections including the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C., the Art Institute of Chicago, the Princeton University Art Museum, the Brooklyn Museum, the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, the Wadsworth Athenaeum, Hartford, Conn., the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture of the New York Public Library, the Newark Museum, and the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.

32. To Dr. Mamie Clark from Carol Greene, Jr., 16 November 1970, artist's archive; to John Hightower from Mrs. Martin Luther King, Jr., 23 July 1970, artist's archive; The Museum of Modern Art mounted a retrospective exhibition of 40 of the works of Richard Hunt from March 23 to June 7, 1971; a one-man show of the works of Romare Bearden, including his 1964 *Projections Series* was also exhibited in April of that year; see Fine, *The Afro-American Artist*, 158, 231.

33. Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 172; to John Hightower from Mrs. Martin Luther King, Jr., 23 July 1970, artist's archive.

34. Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 172.
35. *Ibid.*, 171.
36. Sims, "Race Riots, Cocktail Parties, Black Panthers, Moon Shots and Feminists," 20; Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 161.
37. Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 162.
38. *Ibid.*, 162-163.
39. *Ibid.*, 163.
40. Ringgold, quoted in Flomenhaft, "Interviewing Faith Ringgold/A Contemporary Heroine," in *Faith Ringgold: A 25 Year Survey*, 12; and Sims, "Race Riots, Cocktail Parties, Black Panthers, Moon Shots and Feminists," 20.
41. *Victory Over the Sun* is a futurist opera that was first produced in the Luna Parc Theater in Petersburg, Russia in December 1913, with a libretto by Alexei Kruchenikh and music by Mikhail Matiushin; Charlotte Douglas, "'Birth of a Royal Infant': Malevich and 'Victory Over the Sun,'" *Art In America* (March-April, 1974): 45-50.
42. Ringgold, quoted in Flomenhaft, "Interviewing Faith Ringgold/A Contemporary Heroine," in *Faith Ringgold: A 25 Year Survey*, 12.
43. *Ibid.*
44. Lucy R. Lippard, "Beyond the Pale: Ringgold's *Black Light* Series," in *Faith Ringgold: 20 Years of Painting, Sculpture, and Performance (1963-1983)*, ed. Michele Wallace (New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 1984), 22.
45. *Ibid.*
46. *Ibid.*, 20.
47. *Ibid.*
48. Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 164; beginning in 1967, Ringgold incorporated into her paintings camouflaged letters or words, or diminutive hand-written texts to draw the viewer into the image. Examples of these techniques can be found in series such as *The American People*, *Black Light*, *The Political Landscapes* (see chapters 2-3), *The Feminist Series* (see chapters 4-5), and *The Slave Rape Series* (see chapter 7), as well as in the artist's "story quilts" of the 1980s.

49. Madeline H. Engel, *The Drug Scene: A Sociological Perspective* (Rochelle Park, N.J.: Hayden Book Company, 1974), 43, 49.

50. *Ibid.*, 42.

51. *Ibid.*, 49.

52. For more information on the psychedelic drug scene of the 1960s and 1970s, see Lewis Yablonsky, *The Hippie Trip* (New York: Pegasus, 1968), chapters 13 and 14; and Timothy Miller, *The Hippies and American Values* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991), 34-50.

53. Alain Locke, "The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts," in *The New Negro*, ed. Locke (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, Inc., 1925), 254, 261-262.

54. Ringgold, "Interview with Faith Ringgold," interview by Dolores Holmes, transcript, 1972, Archives of American Art, Washington, D.C. and New York, N.Y., 1972, unpaginated. Access to this document is obtainable only with the written permission of the artist.

55. *Ibid.*

56. *Ibid.*

57. *Ibid.*

58. *Ibid.*

59. Susan Vogel, "Out of African and into the (Western) Living Room," in Jack Flam and Daniel Schapiro, *Western Artists/African Art* (New York: Museum for African Art, 1994), 9.

60. *Ibid.*

61. Mel Edwards, quoted in Flam and Schapiro *Western Artists/African Art*; Ringgold, "Interview with Faith Ringgold," unpaginated.

62. An Octoroon is defined as the offspring of a Quadroon and a white—identified as $\frac{7}{8}$ ths white and one-eighth black. The Octoroon, although legally black and subject to enslavement during the 17th to 19th centuries, was usually physically indistinguishable from a white citizen. Octoroon women inspired colonial poets (see Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "Hiram Powers' *Greek Slave*" from *76 Poetic Works* [London: Henry Frowde, 1906], 337) and abolitionists who found the sale and purchase of Octoroon

(Mulatto and Quadroon, as well) slaves abhorrent, due to their similarity to whites. See Patricia Morton's discussion of the "one drop" doctrine in *Disfigured Images: The Historical Assault on Afro-American Women* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1991), 20-21.

63. Mme C. J. Walker (a.k.a. Sarah Breed-love) opened her corporation headquarters in New York City in 1910. She had been a laundress before inventing the hair-straightening process known as the "Walker System," which brought her such great fortune. In 1913, she built a mansion for herself on West 136th Street in Harlem and, four years later, a country estate, Villa Lewaro, in Irvington-on-the-Hudson. Her cosmetics corporation rivaled those of Helena Rubenstein and Elizabeth Arden and employed over 3,000 people. See Mary McFadden, "Madame Walker" and Odette Harper, "Biographical Sketch of Madame C. J. Walker," from the WPA Research Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture; see also *The Baltimore Afro-American*, 5 March 1932, and *The Messenger* vi (August 1924): 255, quoted in Gilbert Osofsky, *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto, Negro New York, 1890-1930* (New York: HarperCollins: 1966; rpt. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1996), 34, 112, 117.

64. Adrian Piper's art addresses complex issues of race with regard to African-Americans, as well as inter-racial issues. "Self Portrait Exaggerating My Negroid Features" (21 June 1981) is a pencil drawing on paper, 8 x 10", which is reproduced in *Adrian Piper: Reflections, 1967-1987*, the exhibition catalog for a show of the same name curated by Jane Farver at the Alternative Museum in New York in 1987. The drawing remains in the artist's collection.

65. Ringgold, autobiographical essay, 6 October 1973, artist's archive; Idem, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 187.

66. Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 164, 187; astronauts, Neil Armstrong and Edwin A. (Buzz) Aldrin, became the first men to walk on the moon on 20 July 1969.

67. Statement from the announcement for "The People's Flag Show" exhibition, artist's archive.

68. Theresa Schwartz, "Stars in Our Eyes, Stripes on Our Backs," *Element 2*, no. 4 (March/April 1971): 2; and Lippard, "Flagged Down: The Judson Three and Friends," *Art in America* (May/June 1972): 49.

69. Section 136 (d) of the New York State General Business Law; cited in the appeal of Jon Hendricks, et al., Plaintiffs v. Frank S. Hogan et al., Defendants, No. 71, Civ. 528, United States District Court, S.D. New York, March 25, 1971.

70. Dietrich Albrecht of Reflection Press in Stuttgart held an auction in March of 1972 to raise funds for the Judson Three Defense Fund which helped to pay legal fees

incurred during their failed appeal, auction announcement, artist's archive; to Florynce Kennedy from "Aktronsraum 1," Munich, 6 January 1976, artist's archive; Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 182-186; Lippard, "Flagged Down," 49.

71. To Robert Newman from the artist, fall 1969, artist's archive.

72. Ringgold, autobiographical essay, 6 October 1973, artist's archive; see also Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 187.

73. Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 187.

74. Amiri Baraka, "Faith," *Black American Literature Forum* 19, no. 1 (Spring 1985): 12.

75. For a discussion of the problematic issues relating to black feminism, see chapter 6. Also see Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), chapters 1, 2, 7-11 passim.

76. Baraka, "Faith," 12; and Margaret Walker, "I Hear a Rumbling," in Walker, *This Is My Century: New and Collected Poems* (Athens, Ga.: The University of Georgia Press, 1989), 170-173.

77. Indeed, the slave revolt that resulted in the founding of the first black republic in the Americas—Haiti—was fueled by *marrons*, which were camps of runaway slaves who had escaped the horrors of their confinement. The *marrons* hid in the fields and mountains, awaiting their opportunity to strike. Strike they did, relentlessly and repeatedly, until the great French commander, Napoleon, was forced to retreat. The Haitian revolution was incited during an outlawed voodoo ceremony on the night of 22 August 1791, lasted thirteen years, and cost the lives of 200,000 blacks and 150,000 French. The slave victory served as a beacon of hope for African slaves throughout the Americas. See, for example, Martin Ros, *Night of Fire: The Black Napoleon and the Battle for Haiti* (New York: Sarpedon Publishers, 1994); and Cyril James, *Black Jacobins* (New York: Dial, 1989).

78. Walker, from "I Hear a Rumbling," in Walker, *This Is My Century*, 170-173.

79. Cowan and Maguire, *Timelines of African-American History*, 269.

80. U.S. violence abroad was highlighted that year by the conviction of army Lieutenant William L. Calley, Jr. for the murder of 22 South Vietnamese civilians.

81. Sims, "Race Riots, Cocktail Parties, Black Panthers, Moon Shots and Feminists," 19.

82. Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (London, New York: Ward, Lock, 1891). Wilde's tale centers on a man whose appearance remains permanently youthful and beautiful after a magically cursed portrait of him is painted. Gray's advancing age and evil deeds, however, show up in the portrait's image, which eventually becomes so monstrous-looking that Gray must hide the painting in order to avoid the horror of looking at it.

83. Ringgold, autobiographical essay, 6 October 1973, artist's archive.

84. AfriCOBRA began as COBRA (the Coalition of Black Revolutionary Artists) in 1967, and later changed its name to AfriCOBRA (African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists), organizing shows of black art in New York, Boston, Syracuse, Rochester, and Washington, DC. From 1968 to 1973. The artists Eugene Wade, Bill Walker, and Jeff Donaldson (the latter a founding member of AfriCOBRA) completed *The Wall of Respect* mural on the wall of a tenement building on Chicago's South side in 1967 as a way to bring art to the black community. A similar project, *The Wall of Dignity* was completed the following year in Detroit. For a description of the activities of this group, see Campbell, *Tradition and Conflict*, 57-59; Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 190-191; see also footnote 14.

85. Ringgold, autobiographical essay, 6 October 1973, artist's archive.

86. Ringgold, quoted in Wallace, "For the Women's House," *Feminist Art Journal* 1, no. 1 (April 1972): 14; reprinted in Wallace, *Invisibility Blues: From Pop to Theory* (New York: Verso, 1990), 34-43.

87. Ibid.

88. Ibid.; Sojourner Truth, born Isabella Bomefree in Hurley, New York in 1797, changed her name in 1843 after escaping from slavery. She dedicated herself to traveling across the country to speak out on behalf of abolition and women's rights.

89. Ringgold, quoted in Wallace, "For the Women's House," 14.

90. Ibid.; regarding Shirley Chisholm, see Cowan and Maguire, *Timelines of African-American History*, 273; and Ringgold, "Faith Ringgold, Archives of American Art Oral History," 175.

91. Cowan and Maguire, *Timelines of African-American History*, 187, 235, 257, 276, 296.

92. Ringgold, quoted in Wallace, "For the Women's House," 15.
93. Ibid.
94. K. Victoria Boone, "Faith Ringgold: An Artist of Political Themes," (M.A. thesis, University of Oklahoma, Norman, 1990), 52.
95. Ringgold, autobiographical essay, 6 October 1973, artist's archive, in which the artist states that "the execution of this mural marked the beginning of my involvement with women through my art"; see also Ringgold, quoted in Moira Roth, "Keeping the Feminist Faith," in *Faith Ringgold: Twenty Years of Painting, Sculpture and Performance (1963-1983)*, 13.
96. Nixon, after opening a dialogue with Communist China, visited Peking on February 21st, for eight days. The trip included a banquet in the Great Hall of the People and a visit to the Great Wall; see Vincent dePaul Lupiano and Ken W. Sayers, *It Was a Very Good Year: A Cultural History of the United States from 1776 to the Present* (Holbrook, Mass.: Bob Adams, 1994), 432.
97. Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 192.
98. James Cahill, *The Painter's Practice: How Artists Lived and Worked in Traditional China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 49-50, 60-61.
99. *The Political Landscape* paintings vary in size from seven by five inches to twenty-four by eighteen inches.
100. Transcribed by curator Lowery Sims from the wall text for the exhibition "Loyalty and Dissent in Traditional Chinese Calligraphy and Painting," shown at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in 1990. (No exhibition catalog accompanied this exhibition.)
101. Symbolic meaning can be attached to everything from crickets to amber within the context of Chinese painting. For further information on the symbolism of images in Chinese art, see C.A.S. Williams, *Outlines of Chinese Symbolism and Art Motives: An Alphabetical Compendium of Antique Legends and Beliefs, as Reflected in the Manners and Customs of the Chinese* (Rutland, Vt. and Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1974).
102. Dr. Leslie King-Hammond, introduction to *Gumbo Ya Ya*, Sylvia Moore and King-Hammond, eds. (New York: Midmarch Books, 1995), iii.

103. Historian Robert Farris Thompson has noted that “the ideographs of the Ejagham people of southwestern Cameroon and southeastern Nigeria explode the myth of Africa as a continent without a writing tradition.” For additional information of the African writing tradition, see Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African & Afro-American Art & Philosophy* (New York: Vintage Books, 1984), chapter 5..

104. For a thorough examination of African oral literature, see Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Literature in Africa* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970) and Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1985); Calvin C. Hernton, introduction to Janheinz Jahn, *Muntu: African Culture and the Western World* (New York: Faber and Faber, 1961, rpt. New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1990), xxvi, xxviii.

105. Ringgold, handwritten notes, artist’s archive.

106. Jahn, *Muntu*, 133, 135.

107. John, 1:1.

108. Ernest Jones, “The Madonna’s Conception through the Ear,” in Jones, *Essays in Applied Psychoanalysis*, vol. 2 (London: Hogarth, 1951; rpt. New York: International Universities Press, 1964), 266-357; cited in Adams, *Art and Psychoanalysis*, 228.

109. Maude Southwell Wahlman, *Signs and Symbols: African Images in African-American Quilts* (New York: Studio Books in association with the Museum of American Folk Art, 1993), 77-78.

110. Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*, 227. For additional information on *nsibidi* writings see David Dalby, “The Indigenous Scripts of West Africa and Surinam: Their Inspiration and Design,” *African Language Studies*, vol. XI (1968): 156-197; and Thompson, “Black Ideographic Writing: Calabar to Cuba,” *Yale Alumni Magazine* (November 1978): 29-33.

111. Wahlman, *Signs and Symbols*, 85.

112. For a discussion of Ringgold’s appreciation of the tradition of story-telling, see *Faith Ringgold: The Last Story Quilt*, a film produced by Linda Freeman (Chappaqua, N.Y.: L & S Video Enterprises, Inc., 1991); Roth, “Keeping Feminist Faith,” in *Faith Ringgold: Twenty Years of Painting, Sculpture, and Performance*, ed. Wallace, 14.

113. Chisholm ultimately received 152 of 2000 votes, losing the Democratic nomination to Senator George McGovern. See Cowan and Maguire, *Timelines of*

African-American History, 273.

114. The word “griot” derives from the Fulani word *gaoulo* which means wandering poet or praiser; and from the Wolof word *gewel* (poet and musician). It is now popularly used to refer to a variety of poets or musicians throughout the French-speaking areas of West Africa. Griots, who function as court poets, have been simultaneously feared and despised for their influential powers. They can praise or insult with impunity due to their membership in a special poetic caste. See Finnegan, *Oral Literature in Africa*, 96-97, 99; Jahn, *Muntu*, 135.

115. Sigmund Freud, *On Dreams* (1952; rpt. New York: W.W. Norton, 1980), 59; Joseph M. Natterson, “Women’s Dreams: A Nocturnal Odyssey,” *The Psychology of Today’s Woman: New Psychoanalytic Visions*, ed. Toni Bernay and Dorothy W. Cantor (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), 319.

116. Ringgold, “The Gedok Show and the Lady Left,” *The Feminist Art Journal* 1, no. 2 (April 1970): 8, 20; Wallace, “Attica,” *Women and Art* (Winter 1971): 16.

117. Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 191; Picard, quoted in Ringgold, “Documenta,” *Feminist Art Journal* 2, no. 1 (Winter 1973): 15-16.

118. See Faith Wilding, “The Feminist Art Programs at Fresno and Cal Arts, 1970-75,” in *The Power of Feminist Art*, 32-47.

119. Ringgold, in “3 Black Women Artists: Kay Brown, Iris Crump, Faith Ringgold,” (New York: The National Urban League and the United Negro College Fund, 1972), brochure for exhibition held 21 June to 21 July 21, 1972, artist’s archive.

120. See Kenneth Clark, *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1956), 71; and Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 19.

121. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (1961; rpt. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1989), 59.

122. See, for example, Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness: From the Middle Ages to 1870* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Elizabeth Cody Stanton and Matilda Joslyn Gage, *The Woman’s Bible*, 1985; Merlin Stone, *When God Was a Woman* (New York: Dial, 1976); Erich Neumann, *The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955); and Gloria Feman Orenstein, “Recovering Her Story: Feminist Artists Reclaim the Great Goddess,” in *The Power of Feminist Art*, 174-189.

123. See Clark, *The Nude*, chapter iv passim.
124. Joanna Frueh, "Towards a Feminist Theory of Art Criticism," in *Feminist Art Criticism: An Anthology*, eds. Arlene Raven, Cassandra Langer, and Joanna Frueh (1988; rpt. New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 157.
125. Linda Nochlin, "Women, Art and Power," in *Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 19, 22; see chapter 7 for a discussion of Ringgold's images of the female nude in nature and its differences from male artist's interpretations of the same theme; Patricia Morton, *Disfigured Images: The Historical Assault on Afro-American Women* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1991), 129.
126. See Martin Warnke, *Political Landscape: The Art History of Nature* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995).
127. Lois W. Banner, "Three Stages of Development," in *Gender Perspectives: Essays on Women in Museums*, ed. Jane R. Glaser and Artemis A. Zenetou (Wash., D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), 45.
128. An early understanding of the philosophy of eco-feminism can also be found in the writings of the African-American author and anthropologist, Zora Neal Hurston. In her 1942 autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, Hurston describes the importance for her of nature and its metaphorical relationship to family, love, and nurturing; see Hurston, *Dust Tracks* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott and New York: HarperCollins, 1970), 11; literary critic, Deborah G. Plant, notes that Hurston, in her 1937 *Their Eyes Are Watching God*, equates women with children and small farm animals who are closer to nature than men; see Plant, *Every Tub Must Sit on Its Own Bottom: The Philosophy and Politics of Zora Neale Hurston* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 163 and Hurston, *Their Eyes* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1937), 110; Hurston also uses Nature as a metaphor for family and "connubial bliss" in *Seraph on the Sumawee* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948 and New York: HarperCollins, 1991); see Plant, *Every Tub*, 167.
129. Ringgold, "The Gedok Show and the Lady Left," *The Feminist Art Journal* 1, no. 2 (April 1972): 8, 20.
130. Orenstein, "The Reemergence of the Archetype of the Great Goddess in Art by Contemporary Women," in *Feminist Art Criticism*, 72.

CHAPTER 4

THE *THANGKA* PAINTINGS: “UNSTRETCHED”

In the summer of 1972, while traveling in Europe, Ringgold met a man whose unusual countenance she found riveting. His face was an exotic mixture of both Japanese and African features. Ringgold had come upon him quite by accident at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, where he worked as a museum guard. She soon learned that he was an ex-New Yorker and that the two had much in common. Their shared sensibilities allowed them to lapse into easy conversation. “I used to live in Harlem on 125th Street,” he told Ringgold. “Me and my boy had a loft there. He was an artist.”¹ When Ringgold explained that she, too, was an artist, she found herself being led through the museum to the Asian art galleries, her guide promising to show her some *real* art.² The tour led her to a modest display of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Tibetan *thangkas*—sacred paintings mounted on fabric (fig. 45).

The Tibetan *thangka* features symbolic images of the Buddha, the bodhisattva, and the sage. The painting of a *thangka* is governed by sacred laws and strictly supervised by Buddhist monks. For the initiated, the *thangka* serves as an icon of the Buddha, with transcendence as its ultimate goal. As such, it is believed to embody enlightenment and to express the “uniqueness of human experience.”³ The *thangka* artists themselves are pious laymen; and each is descended from a long line of skilled painters.⁴

Ringgold was instantly taken with the classic works of art. She explains:

I began to inspect the ancient brocaded cloth frames—so old they were literally in

threads. I thanked the guard for showing me the art--without him, I would have never seen this hidden-away exhibition, which was to have such an impact on my art-making in the near future.⁵

Clearly, the silk fabrics impressed Ringgold, and the Tibetan techniques were a genuine revelation. Utilizing an adaptation of the Tibetan design, the artist began to tack her canvases to the walls of her studio and to paint without the benefit of an easel, for which the unstretched cloth was no longer suitable. In this way, Ringgold created an art form that was uniquely suited to the next phase of her work. The cloth-bordered format of the Tibetan paintings, along with feminist texts taken from two centuries of writings by black women, became the basis for Ringgold's *Feminist Series*.

* * *

Upon the artist's return to New York from Amsterdam in the fall of 1972, she began the new series--a group of twenty acrylic paintings, her first in this medium. These works on canvas--once described by art historian and curator, Lowery Sims, as "political collage/poems"--are lightweight, portable, and hang vertically from braided cords of red, black, and green--the colors of the Black Power Movement (fig. 5).⁶ Ringgold found the portability of the *thangkas* irresistible. Some years earlier she had discovered how problematic working with large, heavy canvases could be. In 1967, while preparing for her first solo exhibition at Spectrum Gallery in New York, Ringgold was invited by gallery director, Robert Newman, to use his 57th Street exhibition space as a studio (the gallery was closed for the summer). She took this opportunity to work on a larger scale

than the space of her Harlem apartment would allow, completing three sizable paintings: *The Flag Is Bleeding*, *U.S. Postage Stamp Commemorating the Advent of Power* (each six by eight feet), and *Die*, (six by twelve feet; figs. 1, 19, 18).

Ringgold had not, however, anticipated the laborious and frustrating process of moving the immense canvases from home to gallery and back again. She recalls:

I had to depend very heavily on the men in my life to get them downstairs. I had to go to my daughters and beg them, plead with them, try to pay them. "Please! walk these pictures downstairs." And we live on the fourteenth floor. So I said, "I don't want my life to be like this. I don't want to have my career dependent on other people." . . . There's no way I could take them down myself. And the elevator--damn it--was too small⁷

Ringgold's fierce desire for independence propelled her into a five year search for a solution to the problem of transporting and storing large-scale works. Ringgold's intense need for autonomy played a vital role in her artistic evolution. "Her independence," observes feminist art critic Mara Witzling, "has been important to the development of both her art and her life."⁸ At the Rijksmuseum in 1972, because of this self-same desire for independence, Ringgold found the answer. "I could do this," she thought. "I could get rid of my frames, the glass, the cumbersome heavy stretchers and frame my paintings in cloth. That way I could roll up my paintings and put them in a trunk and ship them in the same way I used to ship [my children's] clothes to camp."⁹

The *thangka* format solved the physical problem of transporting the larger paintings, and it eased costly shipping expenses. As might be the case with any young artist, in the early stages of Ringgold's career, money was a primary concern. As a struggling artist and mother, raising two daughters (whose father had died of a drug

overdose in June of 1966), Ringgold found the costs of shipping and materials prohibitive. Added to these expenses were those of supporting a family. To the artist, at that time, the two financial burdens seemed almost insurmountable.

Ringgold stated in 1975 that it was suicide for anyone, particularly a black woman, to become an artist without proper financial resources; and that if she had it to do over again, she might not. These sentiments demonstrate her acute awareness of the difficulties she faced as a black woman artist who was seeking a career path in an art world that had little sympathy for women's issues and often greeted Ringgold with both racist and sexist resistance.¹⁰ By framing her paintings in cloth (glueing strips of brocade directly onto the painted canvas) and eliminating the stretcher, Ringgold tapped into her own creative reserves and enabled herself to continue painting. Ironically, because of their unlikely format, Ringgold's paintings were often identified as "banners" or "wall hangings."

In contrast, the unstretched canvases of the African-American artist, Sam Gilliam, have been referred to by historians as "outdoor painting" or "canvas groupings;" and his technique of "working with draped or free-flowing canvas" has been lauded as "a major change in painting, going beyond the concept of the two-dimensional surface."¹¹

Although a contemporary of Ringgold's, Gilliam has not been subjected to having his work described by historians in decorative or craft terms. Indeed, Gilliam himself, in 1976, described Ringgold's work as "banners," seemingly unable to see the similarity between her work and his own.¹² Later, when the artist began stitching into her paintings, they became known as "quilts." However, the central component of

Ringgold's quilts are the paintings, around which the fabric designs evolve. Discarding the stretcher and replacing the standard frame with fabric borders are the only significant differences between Ringgold's "quilts" and her paintings. Indeed, the so-called quilts *are* paintings.

Even though she stitches into them, the integrity of Ringgold's paintings remains intact. She is, first and foremost, a painter, though she hardly seems to mind that others refer to her as a quilt maker (while referring to the stitched canvases of Alan Shields, for example, as paintings¹³). Despite Ringgold's lack of concern for classifications, she also finds it interesting that her soft sculptures are referred to as "dolls" (fig. 46) while the soft sculptures of artists such as Claes Oldenburg are referred to as "sculpture." "It's who's doing it that makes it craft," says Ringgold, alluding to the fact that Oldenburg's art, because it is produced by a man within the patriarchal art milieu, is privileged with "high" art status. (Although, it is interesting to note that in the early years of Oldenburg's career, his "soft" sculptures were often actually sewn by his wife, Pat Muschinski.)¹⁴

Artist-historian Patricia Mainardi defines quilt-making as "a universal female art, transcending race, class and national borders"—an art which has been marginalized by historians primarily because the artists are so often women (although men have recently begun to take a serious interest in this art form¹⁵). Making an analogy between jazz and quilts, Mainardi explains that both art forms suffered from periods of critical neglect because the "wrong" people were making them; and "these people, for sexist and racist reasons, have not been allowed to represent or define American culture."¹⁶ Historically, women artists who worked with fabric were rarely viewed as more than artisans, no

matter how innovative their designs or intricate their techniques. Ringgold has theorized about why her audiences tend to perceive her painting as craft:

People think it's weaving, they think it's appliqué, they think it's a lot of things. They don't think it's painting [Quilts] represent something that they already know about Somebody's mother, somebody's grandmother made one Everybody has slept under one at some time or other in their lives. So they feel comfortable. It's warm. You can [sense the maker's hand]. You know something about the way it was done. Whereas a painting, stretched canvas--ooh! It scares the hell out of them. They don't know what to do with that, and that's why they probably decide that my work is not [painting]--because they don't feel that fear.¹⁷

The viewer's participation in the creative process--what historian Ernst Gombrich terms the "interplay between the artist and the beholder"--is important in understanding the appeal of an artist's work.¹⁸ The psychoanalyst Ernst Kris has suggested that the enlightened viewer (or museum-goer) wishes to identify with the artist in order to participate vicariously in the creation of an art work.¹⁹ The "friendly" quality of a quilt makes this participation easier for the viewer who prefers a more familiar and immediate identification with the art object.

As far as Ringgold is concerned, the fact that so many people view her paintings as quilts and her fabric sculptures and masks as dolls is a positive outcome of her choice of materials and methods, which are flexible and all-encompassing. Ringgold's willingness to experiment with fabric resulted in a new format that appealed to a much broader audience than had her paintings on stretched canvas. Her works in fabric, however, while appealing as "craft," are in fact more effective as painting because of this very misidentification. The seemingly apolitical and decorative format of Ringgold's *thangka*-style paintings belies their content--which is highly political. Historian and

scholar Moira Roth has likened this phenomenon to the Trojan Horse of Greek mythology:

In the ancient story, the Trojans accepted the gift of the apparently harmless wooden horse and brought it within Troy's city walls; only too late did they discover the Greek soldiers hidden in the horse's bowels. Can this analogy help us understand Ringgold's unique, sometimes unsettling, place in the art world today? I think so Ringgold's deliberate and highly sophisticated use of *niaveté*, in . . . her manner of visual representation . . . together with her bright colors and soft textures, have enchanted a wide range of viewers. If these viewers were presented with Ringgold's underlying messages more starkly, they might be less drawn to her work.²⁰

By the time the viewer realizes that there is nothing ingenuous about Ringgold's innocent-looking "wall hangings," it is too late—the impact of the paintings' written messages (often words of anger and ridicule) has already struck the viewer in the face. The format of Ringgold's *thangka* paintings is a highly charged political and feminist statement as well. Perhaps the most valuable aspect of Ringgold's fabric art is its challenge to the hegemony of "fine art," subverting "assumptions regarding the traditionally separate realms of craft and fine art" by conflating their decorative and intellectual aims.²¹

Though Ringgold's decision to adopt the technique of painting without a stretcher was prompted by the Rijksmuseum *thangkas*, the African-American quilting tradition also played an important role in the development of her art. Mainardi notes that, since "fine" art has been historically closed to women, they have used needlework as an outlet for their creativity. Mainardi traces the origins of quilting, in the form of flags and bed coverings, not surprisingly to the Far East where the women of China and India have maintained the tradition for several centuries. Mainardi also acknowledges the valuable

contribution of African slave women to the American quilting tradition during the colonial period, when slaves brought with them to the New World African religious textile techniques (particularly the appliqué and strip forms).²²

Ringgold's great-great grandmother, Susie Shannon, who was a slave in 19th century Florida, and her daughter, Betsy Bingham, were also quilt-makers.²³ They passed their knowledge of quilting on to their descendants—which ultimately found its way into Ringgold's work. When the artist saw the Tibetan fabric paintings in Holland, she realized they had much in common with her own family's tradition of creating with fabric. For Ringgold, the two traditions—Tibetan and African-American—reinforced each other, and changed her art.

Quilts and *thangkas* serve similar functions. They mark important life events, such as birth, coming of age, marriage, and death. Quilts—traditionally given as gifts to commemorate life's moments of passage—echo the use of the sacred *thangkas*, commissioned for funerals or in times of illness and trouble. Both art forms are highly valued by their creators. Quilts, often signed works of art, are commonly itemized in wills as heirlooms.²⁴ *Thangkas* are sacred and symbolic objects inspired by “the universal human desire to avoid suffering, to gain happiness and longevity, and to ensure a happy state of existence following death.”²⁵ *Thangkas* and quilts share functional, spiritual, and emotional dimensions that operate outside an art-for-art's sake tradition.²⁶ Ringgold had always appreciated this aesthetic; but it wasn't until that summer in 1972, that she found a way to incorporate a beloved family occupation into her art.

Ringgold's approach to materials and format is informed not only by an African-

American and Eastern sensibility but, perhaps logically, by an African one as well.

Moira Roth has posed the question, “Craft or fine art? In Ringgold’s African rather than American art tradition, surely such distinctions are meaningless.”²⁷ Though it may be argued that these “distinctions” are not totally meaningless to Ringgold, she nonetheless found the courage to turn her back on the inherent hierarchies of the art world in order to follow her own path; and Roth has correctly identified Ringgold’s tradition as an African one. Not only, as the artist discovered, do *thangkas* and quilts have much in common, but Tibetan art also shares a variety of characteristics with African art.

In traditional African and Tibetan cultures alike, art, life, and religion are perceived as inseparable. For example, the *thangka* is used as a vehicle for uniting the faithful viewer with the Buddha or spiritual world.²⁸ This concept bears comparison to African ontology, in which trees (from which the wood for sacred sculptures is derived) symbolize the vertical road traveled by the spirits (similar to the voodoo *poteau-mitan* of Haiti, the “found altars” of Africa, “bottle trees” of North America, and the tree-altars of Brazilian candomblé)—a road which acts as a conduit, bringing the gods down from the heavens to the earthly realm of man.²⁹ Hence, African sculpture, like the Tibetan *thangka*, becomes a symbolic means for uniting the spiritual and the material worlds.³⁰

Likewise, just as the *thangka* requires a “dedication of merit” ceremony during which a religious assembly gathers to empower the object, so too, African sculpture is subject to an “act of designation” which allows the sculptor/shaman to assign to the object the identity of an *orisha* or god.³¹ Neither the *thangka* nor the African carving is believed to be an *actual* god or spirit, but rather a powerful icon, symbolizing the

spiritual being and designed to enhance human experience and transcendence.

In addition to its use as an aid to meditation, the *thangka* is used as a tool to alleviate illness. In fact, the painter's pigments are derived from actual medicinal minerals.³² Similarly, in African traditional culture, an individual may commission a sculpture as an aid to both physical and psychological healing. A ceremony is usually required to empower such an object.³³ In the case of the Kongo Power figures (*Nkonde*), for example, "Minkisi" or medicines of God (embodied in such items as nails, claws, soil, stones, sticks, seeds, and herbs) are added to the sculpture and then activated by the recitation of verbs of action (fig. 47).³⁴ Despite obvious differences in method and application, both African and Tibetan cultures use their art for purposes of healing and empower their art objects through sacred ceremonial rites.

Thangkas have public uses as well—as do African art objects. For instance, both are carried in funeral processions, and both may serve as devotional icons during communal religious events. Tibetans and Africans perceive art as an integral part of life; and life as a pathway to death—life's continuation in another form, which ultimately leads to rebirth. Both Buddhist and African cultures share a belief that "life and death, secular and sacred, night and day, black and white, ugliness and beauty, are not antagonistic polarities, but rather constant, continuing, interconnected forces."³⁵ The Buddhist term "tantra," which refers to man's ability to experience a harmony of sensuality and spirituality in life, means "woven,"—and incorporates the concept of the "web of life."³⁶ These Non-western constructs, which identify life as a complex network of compatible opposites—yin and yang—find their likeness in Ringgold's life as well as in

her art—both of which adhere to a neo-African, intertextual world view. Curator Eleanor Flomenhaft, perhaps best described Ringgold’s “tantric” approach to life when she said, “Faith’s life and work are inextricably woven together, with no skipped stitches.”³⁷

Ringgold gravitated to the *thangka* and quilt traditions, despite the very real possibility that her fabric paintings might be perceived as craft, and despite her understanding that the very word “craft” often had been used to invalidate a work of art by emphasizing its utilitarian purpose.³⁸ A more important issue for the artist was whether or not she might financially be able to continue painting at all. The practicality and immediacy of this issue overrode any concerns she may have had regarding artistic labeling. Ringgold was not bound by preconceived notions as to what her art should be. She was willing to experiment with a variety of media until she found a method that creatively and practically suited her needs.

The *thangka* paintings prompted Ringgold to connect their fabric borders with her daughters’ clothing, which could be easily folded for shipping.³⁹ Such dynamic thinking has shaped Ringgold’s *oeuvre*. It has allowed her to experiment with the form and content of her work throughout her career, making it possible for her art to evolve from a representational style in the 1950s (fig. 8), to large-scale figural abstraction in the 1960s (fig. 18), to the “unstretched” *thangka* landscapes and soft, doll-like sculptures of the 1970s (figs. 5, 46), and ultimately to the “story quilts” of the 1980s and 90s (fig. 2).

Psychoanalyst Joseph M. Natterson’s study, “Women’s Dreams,” suggests that Ringgold shares this approach to life with the larger community of women. In his essay, “Women’s Dreams,” Natterson explains that the female psyche evolves through “special

experiences of interconnectedness and relatedness throughout life,” and that a sense of the interdependence of life’s variety is a basic component of the female maturation process. “In women, boundaries between self and other, subject and object, inevitably become blurred, engendering new experiential realities.”⁴⁰ The membranes that compartmentalize life (and art) in the larger, male-oriented society, are flexible barriers for women—barriers they are as likely to ignore as honor.

In this light, Ringgold’s ability to move freely between the boundaries that separate her practical life as a mother and her aesthetic life as an artist offers insight into her aptitude for combining so thoroughly the Western tradition of painting, the Eastern tradition of the *thangka*, and the African-American tradition of quilt-making. Identifying the canvas as linen, a commodity that could be folded and shipped like clothing, constituted an assault on the hegemony of the stretched canvas—an assault rooted not in any conscious modernist deconstruction, but rather in the routine experiences of a working-class mother.

Ringgold's own mother, Willi Posey, played an important role in the artist's decision to work with fabric. Posey was a renowned Harlem fashion designer who began her career making army clothing during World War II, and eventually studied pattern making at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York. The artist recalls that sewing had always been an important activity in her household: “We had an old-fashioned, foot-pedal, Singer sewing machine,” she tells us, “that had belonged to Ida Posey, my grandmother. Mother learned to sew on it and so did I.”⁴¹ Patterns, fabric swatches, and other sewing paraphernalia were familiar sights in Ringgold’s childhood

home. Her powerful attraction to the Tibetan *thangkas* can be explained, in part, by the fact that sewing held a special place in her memories of childhood.

Psychoanalytic studies have emphasized the importance of the mother in artists' choices of media; and as Sidney Geist has suggested, "love of material is a psychological, not a sculptural, affair."⁴² Art historian and psychoanalyst Laurie Schneider Adams believes that artists' materials often have significant psychological meaning, and may indeed represent a highly evolved form of the transitional object. The transitional object is the infant's first possession--perhaps a blanket or doll--which allows the child to separate from the mother.⁴³ One of the most important tasks of the mother, according to Adams, is the creation of the illusion that the child controls her breast⁴⁴, and that the child can make its mother appear on command. If the mother adequately senses, and satisfies, the baby's needs "the infant then has the illusion that his wish has produced, or created, the milk [or the mother], allowing him to trust his own capacity to create."

This early creative illusion becomes the basis for "all future creative experience" and is reified in the "making" of art. A work of art is an outgrowth of the child's first "creation" and its "transitional" descendants--in Ringgold's case, the fabric that she chose to play with as a child. "When I was very little," Ringgold remembers, "[my mother] used to give me scraps of cloth and I used to try to make things." An artist's medium then can be understood as a transitional object, several generations removed from its origin. Ringgold's rejection of the conventionally stretched canvas in favor of fabric borders, constituted her first deliberate choice of medium, influenced not by convention, but by personal preference.⁴⁵

Susan Kavalier-Adler, a psychoanalyst who specializes in the study of women artists, also emphasizes the importance of the mother in the artist's choice of materials. She explains that, although traces of the internalized father may surface in the actual imagery or content of an artist's work, it is the mother who is embodied in the material process itself. Since the creative process is an experience of interacting with one's internal world, fabric for Ringgold can be seen as a transitional object directly associated with her childhood, and thus a choice that she was ultimately destined to make.⁴⁶

Ringgold's childhood interaction with her mother lends credence to such theories. Mrs. Posey had an active personal and social life. Her time was well-occupied running a household, raising children, designing clothing, organizing fashion shows, and entertaining friends. In order to keep her young daughter engaged while she attended to her busy life, Mrs. Posey supplied Ringgold with the very instruments that were to become her creative media. Ringgold remembers:

Mother would give me my drawing book and my crayons and then she would give me my fabric, and my needle and thread I would have my reading book I had all those things working at the same time.⁴⁷

By actively engaging in the creative process, Mrs. Posey provided Ringgold with the basic tools--fabric, text, drawing materials--that would later become components of the first *thangka* paintings. In these works, Ringgold reifies, in evolved form, the transitional objects of her childhood, which literally became her media--media with the ability to echo experiences of the past and reinforce the creative process in the present.

Ringgold's experimentation with cloth frames was grounded in her childhood experiences--in the fabric that filled her home, and in sewing, which was her mother's

and grandmother's primary occupation. The artist's daughter, Michele Wallace, once recalled: "There's always been a gift among the women in my family for making things."⁴⁸ As we have seen, this gift can be traced back over a century. Since generations of Ringgold women have worked with fabric, it is not surprising that the use of cloth became an integral part of the artist's creative evolution. The feminist critic Rachel Blau DuPlessis notes, in *Writing Beyond the Ending*, that "professional" women artists sometimes adopt their mothers, who are craftswomen-artists, as models or muses. As a result, "the daughter becomes an artist to extend, reveal, and elaborate her mother's talents."⁴⁹ This is consistent with the fact that Mrs. Posey was soon to become an active collaborator with Ringgold in making the next *thangka* series, *Slave Rape*. Ringgold incorporated her mother's craft into her own art, and enlisted her mother's aid in preparing the fabric borders for the *Slave Rape thangkas* (see chapter 7). This collaboration would constitute the beginning of a decade-long creative partnership, culminating in the story quilts, and ending only with the death of the artist's mother in 1981.

Ringgold is acutely aware of the important role her mother's occupation played in the evolution of her own art. The artist views her unconventional choice of medium as self-revelatory, in that she "decided to . . . stop denying the part of [herself] that loved making things with cloth."⁵⁰ Earlier in the artist's career (during the 1960s), she chose to maintain a distinction between sewing and art-making, because the art world generally considered the work of the seamstress to be incompatible with conventional concepts of fine art. Throughout the 1960s, Ringgold strove to create objects that would be

acceptable to the mainstream of the art world. In the latter part of the decade, when she was painting large-scale works on canvas, Ringgold was told that she painted “just like a man.” She states in a 1975 interview that, in the past, it was considered a great compliment for a woman to be told that her painting was “manly.”⁵¹ Eventually, however, the artist began to question her motives. Why must she paint large, heavy canvases? To prove she could? Because dealers and curators preferred them? To accommodate an art scene that placed painting on canvas at the top of the creative evolutionary chart? In the end, none of these reasons seemed to justify the protracted suppression of her desire to experiment with fabric.

In the spring of 1972, Ringgold was approached by the agent of the renowned lawyer, Florynce Kennedy, to lecture and to exhibit her work at universities around the country.⁵² It was, after all, the early 1970s, when feminism and the Black Power Movement were in full swing. Ringgold was political, black, a feminist, and an artist. “You’re in demand!” the agent told her. “Can your art travel?” Ringgold felt a sense of urgency to make her art lightweight and sturdy so that it could travel anywhere.⁵³ She was also having difficulty showing in New York, particularly since her political years there had garnered her a number of adversaries. The artist saw traveling exhibits as a way to reach a broader audience; and the *thangka* format as the means to make that happen, especially since the ease and convenience of shipping the soft, portable paintings would undoubtedly make her art more attractive to the various university exhibitors, whose shipping budgets were limited.⁵⁴ As Dr. Mary Schmidt Campbell of New York University’s Tisch School of the Arts notes, Ringgold “radically altered” her formal

approach to art specifically to accommodate the lack of exhibition opportunities available to her.⁵⁵

“She does what she wants,” observed the young scholar Hans Mortensen, in 1974, “and she has a place to exhibit her works of art. That ‘showplace’ is not in a museum or in a gallery, but rather in the colleges and universities across the country.” Ringgold felt that college campuses were the only truly avant-garde places to exhibit new works of art. She observed that museums, and even commercial galleries, tended not to be avant-garde, preferring to exhibit works by already established artists. Ringgold saw college students as representative of an audience that was alert, awake, and “ready for something new and different.”⁵⁶ She saw in this “younger generation” an open-minded exuberance that echoed her own; a progressive attitude that must surely be more receptive than the conservative sensibilities of established historians and curators.

Kennedy’s agent offered Ringgold seven hundred and fifty dollars, plus expenses, for each lecture (less, of course, an agent’s commission). For Ringgold at that time, this was a great deal of money. In fact, by 1973—only one year later—Ringgold’s income for the lecture circuit and touring shows had increased to such a degree that she was able to quit her job as an art teacher and devote all of her energies to making art. When Ringgold first saw the *thangka* paintings some months later, the agent’s words, “Can your art travel?” could not have been far from her mind. “It was a survival thing,” admitted Ringgold. “You want to be an artist. This is the way you’re going to have to be one.”⁵⁷

Ringgold pursued the cloth format even though she knew that this choice might

jeopardize her chances of someday being honored with museum wall space. The artist ignored or, more correctly, accepted the fact that her art might be labeled “folk” or “decorative,” preferring to see these distinctions as ones that, in the words of Patricia Mainardi, “reveal more about the prejudices of the art historians than the art itself.”⁵⁸ Historically, if an object was functional, made of fabric, and by a woman, it was not viewed as fine art, but rather as craft.⁵⁹ Ringgold’s interest in fabric came at the beginning of what was to become known as the “Pattern and Decoration Movement,” or the “Pattern Painting” movement, as it was first termed. Between the years of 1972 and 1978, a number of women artists embraced the use of fabric in their *oeuvre*, creating a “flourishing mainstream art movement” (see discussion below);⁶⁰ and, despite the pitfalls, Ringgold and her contemporaries, to their credit, persevered in this new found creative direction.

The art historian Freida High-Wasikhongo has remarked that by turning to a method traditionally associated with “woman’s work” Ringgold was able, creatively, to affirm her womanhood, assuming a “so what if it is woman’s work” attitude.⁶¹ Indeed, Ringgold heartily embraced the new method as an edifying experience and a superior means of self-expression, as she explained in 1989:

I was trying to find out: What is women’s art? What would you do as a woman in your art, if you could do anything you wanted to do, and you weren’t looking at the male, white mainstream? You were just looking within yourself . . . look at what women did when they could be artists without calling themselves artists. When they were just working, and doing something creative, and not having the posture of, “Hey, I’m an artist, and I belong to a gallery, and I have shows,” . . . the women who made quilts were the original artists.⁶²

Ringgold bristles against label-conscious swaggering and the valuation of artists based on

their dealer alliances, or their ability to show in museums and galleries--settings which often exclude or marginalize decorative art.

Ringgold had very specific ideas about painting on stretched canvas, which she saw as part of an overrated tradition that was, for her, both sexist and limiting:

Who said that art is oil paint stretched on canvas with art frames? I didn't say that. Nobody who ever looked like me said that, so why the hell am I doing that? So I just stopped; and now I do sewing and all kinds of things. Sewing has been traditionally what all women in all cultures have done. What's wrong with that? Politically speaking, I think some women would probably say, "I don't want to be placed in the bag [of] women's art . . . sewing." Okay, that's your choice. Do whatever you want to do. I don't want to be placed in the bag where I think that all . . . art is about making something that nobody can move. Making some big, monumental, monolithic thing which I can't even afford to do . . . Feminist art is soft art, light weight art, sewing art. This is the contribution that women have made that is uniquely theirs . . . Women's art is less rigid, and it's open to all kinds of new innovations.⁶³

Like many women artists of the 1970s, Ringgold embarked on a pilgrimage to extricate herself from the biased standards of the art world. Feminist art critic and historian, Cassandra L. Langer, explains that the patriarchal system of the art world validates male experiences as universal, and presents those experiences as the accepted social norm. Traditionally, those who adhered to the patriarchal value system were rewarded "with dealers, exhibitions and art historical attention," while those, like Ringgold, who did not, were punished with obscurity or marginalization.⁶⁴ Modernism, in general, with its horological arrangement of art history, and its art-for-art's sake ideology, has essentially excluded both women and minorities from its hermetic construct.⁶⁵ As art historians Norma Broude and Mary Garrard explain in *The Power of Feminist Art*, "In the pre-feminist 1950s and 1960s, it was rare indeed for a woman artist to find any place at all in

the narrative of modernism.”⁶⁶ Ringgold bore the burden of having two strikes against her—she was black and a woman—which placed her in a category doubly ignored by modernist art history.

It was no coincidence that 1972 was the year of Ringgold’s “coming out,” since the Black Power and Feminist Movements were gaining momentum. Advocates of each were, at that moment, “questioning the litany”⁶⁷ which had for centuries given precedence to white, male, Eurocentric art. Bolstered by the era’s revolutionary milieu, Ringgold boldly tapped into her African-American and female experiences. Her decision to embrace a new and more personalized aesthetic coincided with the decisions of both black and feminist artists to challenge the sexist and racist biases of the art world.

Feminist artists demanded to know why women’s art, because of its functional and unaffected nature, was defined as decorative, while so-called “fine” art earned its status primarily because it was created outside the domestic realm, and because it was non-utilitarian? Art historian and author Whitney Chadwick notes that women artists of the 1970s were re-examining their roles as artists amidst debates about the relationships between gender, culture, and creativity. Asks Chadwick:

Why had art history chosen to ignore the work of almost all women artists? Were successful women artists exceptional or merely the tip of a hidden iceberg, submerged by patriarchal culture’s demand that women produce children, not art Could, and should, women artists lay claim to “essential” gender differences . . . ? Could the creative process . . . be viewed as androgynous or genderless?⁶⁸

Analyses of the roles of women artists and the ways in which they had been ignored throughout the history of art proliferated in the 1970s. One of the most important of

these was Linda Nochlin's essay "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?"⁶⁹ which traces the history of women artists, and examines the social and cultural constraints that made their successes both difficult and heroic. Ringgold's individual concerns echoed those of the larger feminist community, as she asked herself the very same questions. She, too, had specific ideas about issues of gender, and she developed cogent and particularized responses to the feminist questions being posed at the time.

In New York in March of 1972, while participating in a panel discussion entitled "Does Art Have a Gender?," Ringgold expressed her belief that gender did indeed influence a woman's artistic development, "To say that art does not have a gender, is to say that art does not have a culture," the artist stated.⁷⁰ By equating gender with culture, Ringgold asserted that all art, by its very nature, was affected by some form of cultural bias, and that gender, as a form of culture, must affect art as well. By way of example, Ringgold explained that African art had a distinct quality different from European art. When Africans were brought as slaves to America, the loss of their culture through colonial reprogramming (such as bans on African religious practices, on speaking African languages, and on traditional African social customs) resulted in a substantial change in their art. By and large, African art, in the purest sense, was no longer produced in the United States after the colonial period. As a result of this loss of culture and the assimilation by African-Americans of the predominant culture, their art took on European attributes. The great African-American artists of the 19th century were renowned not for African art, but for Romantic landscapes, Neo-classical sculptures, and portraits in the English Baroque tradition.⁷¹

Ringgold argued that, just as the westernizing of Africans had affected the look of their art, causing it to take on an entirely new form compatible with the artists' new identities as Americans, likewise, art produced by women must reflect their gender identity, at least to some degree, since gender is a component of culture. Ringgold further reasoned that just as African culture had been buried beneath the weight of the dominant culture, so too, women's art had been repressed, lying dormant under that same yoke. Women artists, said Ringgold, had been "oppressed, repressed, and conditioned" into viewing white male art as supreme. The goal was for women to recognize their own special modes of art-making and to find a way to express themselves creatively.⁷²

Ringgold chose to reject the time-honored tradition of painting on stretched canvas in favor of unstretched canvas as an art form that would accommodate her needs. As she pointed out in a 1990 interview, "I am not a man, and I am not white, so I can do what I want and that has been my greatest gift. It's kind of a backhanded gift, but it sets me free."⁷³ Ringgold refused to apologize for her womanhood or her uniquely female experiences and sensibilities. Instead, she capitalized on them, utilizing them as vital forces in her creative life. Patricia Mainardi advocates an understanding of women's art that reifies Ringgold's own convictions:

The only feminine aesthetic worthy of name is that women artists must be free to explore the entire range of art possibilities. We who have been labeled, stereotyped, and gerrymandered out of the very definition of art must be free to *define* art, not pick up the crumbs from The Man's Table We must begin to define women's art as *what women do*, not try and squeeze ourselves through the loophole of the male art world.⁷⁴

Ringgold has adhered to precisely this philosophy throughout her career. She has

explored the entire range of art possibilities, male and female, old and new, Western and Non-western. This integrated approach has always informed her art, even in the 1960s when she first began to incorporate triangular Kuba textile patterns into her painting.⁷⁵ Ringgold's art, within the context of feminism, is "neither a style nor a movement," as Lucy Lippard has remarked; it is, instead, "a value system, a revolutionary strategy, a way of life."⁷⁶

A number of prominent women artists were experimenting with fabric at the same moment as Ringgold. One important example of this occurs in Miriam Schapiro and Sherry Brody's "Seraglio" room of 1972 (fig. 48). (The word "seraglio" refers to the harem of a Turkish sultan or, more specifically, to an enclosed or confined place of licentious pleasure in which the wives of a sultan were housed.) *The Seraglio* was part of *Womanhouse*, an installation realized in a house in Hollywood and designed by students and faculty of the Feminist Art Program at the California Institute of the Arts. *The Seraglio*, a component of the multi-media construction, *Dollhouse* (fig. 49), comprised a miniature room decorated with richly patterned fabric curtains, wall coverings, and brocaded bedding and pillows. In the early 1970s, artists such as Schapiro, Judy Chicago, Joyce Kozloff, and others actively engaged in deconstructing the modernist, minimalist tradition which served to marginalize decorative art, by working within a form-as-content idiom that granted so-called "women's art" long overdue precedence.⁷⁷

Recently, however, some feminist art critics have argued that the premises upon which the female aesthetic of the early 1970s was based were faulty; that it was wrong to assume that gender greatly, if not completely, determined one's experience or one's art.

Feminist theorist, Lise Vogel, in her essay “Fine Arts and Feminism,” examines the recent rejection by factions of the women's movement of the idea that creative expression on the part of women must be in conscious and deliberate opposition to a male aesthetic.⁷⁸ It has also been argued that the valorization of crafts and domestic activities was used as a feminist strategy to abrogate the distinction between craft and fine art—a distinction that has served to undermine the creative work of women.⁷⁹ (It is interesting to note, however, that in Africa the practice of weaving has not been historically perceived as “women’s work.” Textile design has for centuries been the realm of the male as well as the female. Not until Africans arrived in the U.S., and were compelled to assimilate the European system of labor division, did this work pass solely to the hands of women.⁸⁰)

For Ringgold, issues of gender were mitigated by realities such as paying the children’s tuition and earning enough money to support a family—issues that were less high-minded than those being discussed in feminist art circles; and issues that were not specifically “female.” In this light, Ringgold's art is best viewed as more than an expression of a “female aesthetic.” Her *thangka* paintings grow out of an intertextual totality of experiences, which include being black, American, and a woman. The influence of gender, or any deliberate opposition to a male aesthetic in Ringgold's *Feminist Series*, was neither the sole nor even the major impetus for her new style.

Ringgold, nonetheless, is convinced that gender is integral, if not exclusive, in determining artistic output. Literary historian, Linda Dittmar, agrees in her essay, “When Privilege Is No Protection”:

In practice, women's emergence as artists is by no means gender-free. Within patriarchy, women artists must transgress gender role expectations on top of everything else Their struggles to emerge as artists, come up against an ideology of gender that defines them as congenitally--naturally and permanently--incapable of artistic creation.⁸¹

Ringgold, acutely aware of these rather formidable stumbling blocks, chooses not to deny or excuse the inherent, as well as deliberate, "female aesthetic" embodied in her work. Indeed, she readily admits that the *Feminist* paintings are far more than the abstract landscapes they appear to be. For Ringgold, they are consciously political in both form and content, due to their incorporation of often militant feminist inscriptions (discussed in detail in chapter 5) and due to their unconventional format. "Feminist art is . . . political," Ringgold says, "because it seeks to change the way we see things--to use different materials to create a new identity for women."⁸² This statement echoes the seventies feminist slogan: "the personal is political," which signifies that a woman's personal voice is at once individual and universal, as well as self-consciously political.⁸³

Ringgold's art of the 1970s, and feminist art in general, as Broude and Garrard note, posed not the egocentric question, "Who am I?" but rather the collective question, "Who are we?" The latter inquiry demonstrates a conviction that through examination of the collective experience a more integrated and empirical understanding of the individual might be unearthed. As Garrard and Broude conclude in their introduction to *The Power of Feminist Art*:

In the 1970s, feminism's exploration of "who *we* are" was powered by a complex dynamic interchange between the political goal of fulfilling a shared agenda for all women and the necessary path to that goal through the diversity of individual experience. Feminist art kept those potentially contradictory goals in a state of tension, holding in balance a pull in opposite directions [of] public-political and

private-aesthetic values.⁸⁴

Ringgold makes personal choices that, by their very nature, have a political component and broader, if not universal, significance. However logistically appropriate, using canvas without stretchers was a deliberate, and thus political rejection, on Ringgold's part, of accepted formal norms.

Michele Wallace, who credits her mother with instilling in her a commitment to feminism, agrees that feminist art is intrinsically political, and that black feminist art has an especially valuable critical component. She states the following in her cultural critique, *Invisibility Blues*:

I assume that all black feminist creativity, to the extent that it is formal . . . , is inherently critical of current oppressive and repressive political, economic, and social arrangements affecting not just black women, but black people as a group From . . . the recordings of black female rappers, to Sue Simmons interviewing "wicked" Wilson Pickett on NBC's, *Live at Five*, all black feminist creativity wants to make the world into a place that will be safe for women of color, their men, and their children.⁸⁵

There is, according to Wallace, something built into the choices women artists make that is both feminist and political, particularly when those choices operate independently of mainstream influences.

Ringgold's art, however, does not serve to negate or undermine a male aesthetic; rather it bridges the gap between traditional gender roles with its inclusive approach to materials and methods. The artist uses conventional materials: unprimed canvas, acrylic, oil, and watercolor paints; her images incorporate traditional subjects such as landscapes and figures. Yet, she stitches into the paintings, attaching quilted or appliquéd frames. Ringgold, as both painter and seamstress, defies gender roles. Indeed, the over-emphasis

of gender distinctions has come to be viewed by some feminists as separatist and detrimental to the future of the Women's Movement. For example, Marcia Tucker, Director of The New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York, believes that "emphasizing men's oppression of women, which is a real factor in women's lives, also mitigates coalitions between men and women, which provide the only means for social change in our time"—a time in which men have felt the need to "assert their [own] rights to be more like women."⁸⁶ Feminist author, bell hooks, believes that men *must* be a part of the Feminist Movement. In a recent interview she observed that "as long as feminism gets identified as 'It's about women,' people think: 'I don't have to listen. I don't have to read. I don't have to engage.'" She points out that women who perceive feminism as anti-male often see it as anti-family as well. Many women who are dedicated to their families and the traditions which families embody continue to be alienated from the Feminist Movement because it is so often identified solely with women.⁸⁷

Many feminist critics agree that a divisive component of the Women's Movement has strained relationships between the sexes; yet hooks and others are optimistic. hooks hopes that men and women who are dismayed by gender antagonism will find that their mutual concerns are a "place of intervention," where the sexes can come together to a position of accord and mutual understanding.⁸⁸ Likewise, black feminist author and poet Audre Lorde encouraged a "radical rethinking of the premises on which our relationships are built, [which] can create new bridges between people who are otherwise threatened by their differences from each other;" and historians such as Lois K. Banner have identified a recent stage of feminist art scholarship that is more inclusive, viewing men

as well as women as worthy subjects of study under the rubric of gender.⁸⁹

Ringgold's *Feminist Series*, created during the early years of feminism, challenges sectarian thinking in ways that scholars and intellectuals have only recently come to appreciate. *The Feminist thangkas* combine fabric and painting, craft and fine art, language and gender, as indivisible parts of a larger whole. Having found a format that suited her temperament and the logistics of her particular situation as an artist, over the next few years Ringgold used the style of the *thangka* to articulate two important painting groups: *The Feminist Series* and the subsequent *Slave Rape Series*, which will be discussed in the next three chapters.

Through the use of language, image, and pictorial form, Ringgold, in these two painting sequences, writes her own story and elucidates the lives of other women like herself; she reaffirms her capacity to speak in a specifically black and female voice; and she experiments with new conventions. While the degree of Ringgold's success in this regard (and during such an early stage in her career) will be judged differently by each beholder, her ability to reconstitute the vernacular of a white, male-dominated language into one that was responsive to her own needs and experiences, must be lauded, as must her ability to effect, through her painting, a greater understanding of black women's lives and their relationship to the surrounding culture.⁹⁰

NOTES

1. Faith Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge: The Memoirs of Faith Ringgold* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1995), 194.
2. Ibid.
3. Joshua Goldberg, *Tibetan Tankas* (Tucson: University of Arizona Museum of Art, 1980), 4-16.
4. David P. Jackson and Janice A. Jackson, *Tibetan Thangka Painting: Methods and Materials* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Snow Lion Publications, 1984), 12.
5. Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 194.
6. Lowery Stokes Sims, "Aspects of Performance in the Work of Black American Women Artists," in *Feminist Art Criticism: An Anthology*, ed. Arlene Raven, Cassandra L. Langer, and Joanna Frueh (Ann Arbor, Mich.: U.M.I. Research Press, 1988), 210; The Black Power Movement embodied ideas of black nationalism (African-American self-government) and militant civil rights action during the 1960s and 1970s. Stokely Carmichael, after assuming leadership of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in 1966, was one of the movement's leading incendiaries. The Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), founded by James Farmer and a group of fellow students from the University of Chicago in 1942, received national attention in 1961 when it organized the "Freedom Rides." However, under the more radical leadership of Floyd B. McKissick, who replaced Farmer as head of the group in 1966, CORE joined SNCC in endorsing a more militant concept of Black Power. Furthermore, red, black, and green were the original colors chosen in 1920 for Marcus Garvey's Back to Africa Movement, to decorate the flag of his Universal Negro Improvement Association (U.N.I.A.). These colors, symbolizing the "blood of the race, pride in its blackness, and the promise of a new day in Africa," were revived, along with Garvey's slogan, "black is beautiful," by the leaders of the Black Power Movement in the 1960s. See Elton C. Fax, *Garvey: The Story of a Pioneer Black Nationalist* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1971), xx, 2, 124. The phrase "The red, black, and green forever," also appeared in the 1920s anthem of the Black Muslims (Nation of Islam) of the U.N.I.A. See Amy Jacques Garvey, *Garvey and Garveyism* (Kingston, Jamaica: A. Jacques Garvey and United Printers, Ltd., 1963), 176-177.
7. Ringgold, "Faith Ringgold: Archives of American Art Oral History," interview by Cynthia Nadelman, transcript, 6 September to 18 October, 1989, Archives of American Art, Washington, D.C. and New York, New York.

8. Mara W. Witzling, ed., *Voicing Our Visions: Writings by Women Artists* (New York: Universe, 1991), 251.

9. Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 194.

10. Ringgold, "A Conversation with Faith Ringgold on the Politics Behind Black Feminist Art," interview by Sandra Kaufman, transcript, 10 May 1975, artist's archive; Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 143-164, 173-216.

11. A.A. Monroe, "Sam Gilliam," *Black Art: An International Quarterly*, vol. 4, no. 4 (1981): 16.

12. Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 198.

13. Ringgold's paintings are similar to the paintings and prints of the Kansas-born artist Alan Shields who was "discovered" by Paula Cooper (of Paula Cooper Gallery in New York) in 1968. While attending Kansas State University in the early 1960s, Shields had begun stitching and sewing into his paintings. In the late 1960s, while working as an artist in New York, Shields elaborated on his early stitching technique, creating stitched paper dolls and prints which incorporated needle perforations as an integral part of their designs. In 1970, Shields created large-scale "paintings" comprised of grids of cotton webbing, hung from the ceiling using dowels— similar to the Tibetan dowel hanging technique used by Ringgold in her *thangka* paintings. However, Ringgold's inspiration was clearly the Tibetan paintings. There is no indication that Ringgold was aware of the works of Shields at the time she began her first fabric works. Further, the decision to stitch into the canvas resulted from a suggestion made to the artist by her mother, Willi Posey, who was inspired by her own background as a seamstress and quiltmaker. For additional information on Shields, see Ronny Cohen, *Alan Shields: Print Retrospective* (Cleveland: Cleveland Center for Contemporary Art, 1986), 5, 8, 9, 11.

14. Ringgold, "Interviewing Faith Ringgold/A Contemporary Heroine," in *Faith Ringgold: A 25 Year Survey*, ed. Eleanor Flomenhaft (Hempstead, NY: Fine Arts Museum of Long Island, 1990), 12; Barbara Rose, *Claes Oldenburg* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1969), 33.

15. Patricia Mainardi, "Quilts: The Great American Art," *Feminist Art Journal* 2, no. 1 (Winter 1973): 1, 18-23; reprinted in *Feminism and Art History: Questioning the Litany*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), 331-346; *Made by Men: African American Traditional Quilts* (College Park, Md.: Maryland University Art Gallery, 1996).

16. Mainardi, "Quilts," 344. However, an examination of the history of jazz criticism indicates that from its very beginnings as ragtime in the late 1890s, jazz

received a great deal of criticism, particularly from academic musicians and scholars. What Mainardi probably intends is not so much that jazz suffered from critical neglect, but rather that it suffered from an abundance of negative criticism during the first two decades of the twentieth century. However, despite such criticism from conservatives and puritans, a “ragtime dancing rage began to sweep the country” as early as 1911; and the popular appeal of jazz since that time has been tremendous. See Neil Leonard, *Jazz and the White Americans: The Acceptance of a New Art Form* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962; Rupert Hughes, “A Eulogy of Ragtime,” *Musical Record* CDXLV!! (1899): 157; Rudi Blesh and Harriet Janis, *They All Played Ragtime* (New York: Grove, 1950); Morroe Berger, “Jazz: Resistance to the Diffusion of a Culture-Pattern,” *Journal of Negro History* 32 (January 1947): 461-62; John R. McMahon, “Unspeakable Jazz Must Go!” *Ladies’ Home Journal* 38 (December 1921): 34; Marshall W. Stearns, *The Story of Jazz* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956).

17. Ringgold, “Faith Ringgold: Archives of American Art Oral History,” 59.

18. E. H. Gombrich, “Psycho-Analysis and the History of Art,” in *Meditations on a Hobby Horse and Other Essays on the Theory of Art* (London: Phaidon Press, 1963; rpt. 1994), 35.

19. Ernst Kris, *Psychoanalytic Explorations in Art* (New York: International Universities Press, 1952), 56; and “Psychoanalysis and the Study of Creative Imagination,” *Bulletin of the New York Academy of Medicine* 29, no. 4 (April 1953): 348; quoted in E.H. Gombrich, “Psycho-Analysis and the History of Art,” 35.

20. Moira Roth, “A Trojan Horse,” in *Faith Ringgold: A 25 Year Survey*, 49.

21. Witzling, *Voicing Our Visions*, 254. At this juncture it might be beneficial to mention the relationship between Ringgold’s fabric art and the conceptual fabric works of Christo, who had completed his *Valley Curtain* in Colorado the same year that Ringgold began the *thangka* paintings. Both artists worked with fabric; however, even when Christo was working with fabric on a small scale (wrapping objects such as bottles, furniture, motorcycles, and road signs) his works were not perceived as craft. This was due in part to the unusually way in which Christo incorporated fabric into his art—by wrapping objects, rather than sewing them, and securing the cloth loosely with wire or rope. Later, when Christo began to wrap large-scale objects such as buildings, walkways, and bridges, the size and the post-industrial and ecological nature of these grand “projects” tended to preclude notions that his use of fabric might be related to craft work. Herein lies an important distinction between the work of Christo, which evolved from small- to large-scale, and the work of Ringgold, which evolved from large- to small-scale works due Ringgold’s conscious (and feminist) insistence on creating intimate as opposed to “monolithic” objects that did not suite her needs. See Marina Vaizey, *Christo* (New York: Rizzoli, 1990) and Sally Yard, *Christo: Oceanfront*, intro. Sam Hunter

(Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Art Museum, 1975)

22. Mainardi, "Quilts," 331-346; Maude Southwell Wahlman, *Signs and Symbols: African Images in African-American Quilts* (New York: Studio Books, 1993), 21.

23. Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 69, 76, 80.

24. Mainardi, "Quilts," 332.

25. D. P. And J. A. Jackson, *Tibetan Thangka Painting*, 10.

26. Mainardi, "Quilts," 340.

27. Moira Roth, "Keeping the Feminist Faith," in *Faith Ringgold: Twenty Years of Painting, Sculpture and Performance (1963-1983)*, ed. Michele Wallace (New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 1984), 13-14. Roth indicates that any reading of Ringgold's work must take into account an African tradition as well as an American one. The works of 1972 and 1973, though directly inspired by a Tibetan tradition, are, in Roth's estimation, an exploration of Ringgold's African-American history and craft heritage.

28. Paradoxically, this metaphysical contiguity is often expressed in strictly material terms—as explicit sexual union or *yab-yum*. See Goldberg, *Tibetan Tankas*, 36.

29. Lance Hurbon, *Voodoo: Search for the Spirit* (New York: Abrams, 1995), 14. The *poteau-mitan* is the central post found in a voodoo temple or *homfour*, around which the voodoo ceremony takes place. A tree is often used, in lieu of the *poteau-mitan* when ceremonies take place out of doors. Both the tree and the *poteau-mitan* are considered access roads for the voodoo *loas* (spirits), which carry them to the material world from their spiritual home. Voodoo, not surprisingly, derives from West African (Dahomey) and Central African (Kongo) religions; Janheinz Jahn, *Muntu: African Culture and the Western World* (London: Faber and Faber, 1961; rpt. New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1990), 156; for additional information on trees as "found altars" in African cultures, as well as "bottle trees" and other tree altars in North and South American cultures, see Robert Farris Thompson, *Face of the Gods: Art and Altars of Africa and the African Americans* (New York: Museum for African Art, 1993), *passim*.

30. It is important to note that the relationships between art and religion that are found in both Tibetan and African art are, in various manifestations, found in the iconography of a wide range of both Western and non-Western religions, including Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, among many others.

31. D. P. and J. A. Jackson, *Tibetan Thangka Painting*, 12; Jahn, *Muntu*, 157.

32. Idem, *Tibetan Tanka Painting*, 9, 75-89.
33. Often the ceremony includes a sacrifice, which may be as simple as a sprinkling of flour for minor ills or a blood sacrifice—often a cock—when the ailment is more serious. See Jahn, *Muntu*, 158-159.
34. Wahlman, *Signs and Symbols*, 102; and Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York: Vintage Books, 1984), 117-118.
35. Calvin C. Hernton, "Introduction," in Jahn, *Muntu*, xxi.
36. Goldberg, *Tibetan Tankas*, 5-6.
37. Flomenhaft, "Interviewing Faith Ringgold/A Contemporary Heroine," in *Faith Ringgold: A 25 Year Survey*, 7.
38. In Ringgold's autobiographical essay, 6 October 1973, artist's archive, the artist expresses the belief that "craft" when applied to a work of art, particularly to women's art, was intended to diminish the aesthetic value of the art object.
39. Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 194.
40. Joseph M. Natterson, "Women's Dreams: A Nocturnal Odyssey," in *The Psychology of Today's Women: New Psychoanalytic Visions*, ed. Toni Bernay and Dorothy W. Cantor (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), 321.
41. Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 71.
42. Sidney Geist, *Brancusi: A Study of the Sculpture* (New York: Grossman, 1968): 158.
43. Laurie Schneider Adams, *Art and Psychoanalysis* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 180; D.W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (New York: Basic Books, 1971) ch. 1 passim.
44. According to Adams, the illusion can be maintained whether the child is breast- or bottle-fed. Adams, interview by Lisa Farrington, 16 May 1996.
45. Adams, *Art and Psychoanalysis*, 180, 187; Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, ch. 1 passim; Ringgold, "Faith Ringgold: Archives of American Art Oral History," 34. Adams has also suggested that Ringgold's rejection of the structured format of stretched canvas may have significant psychological meaning vis-a-vis Ringgold's refusal to be

confined within a pre-determined artistic framework. Adams, handwritten note to Farrington, June 1996.

46. Susan Kavalier-Adler, *The Compulsion to Create: A Psychoanalytic Study of Women Artists* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 35.

47. Ringgold, "Faith Ringgold: Archives of American Art Oral History," 36.

48. Michele Wallace, *Invisibility Blues: From Pop to Theory* (New York: Verso, 1990), 26.

49. Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth Century Women Writers* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 93-94, 103; quoted in Josephine Donovan, "The Pattern of Birds and Beasts: Willa Cather and Women's Art," in *Writing the Woman Artist*, ed. Suzanne W. Jones (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), 83-84.

50. Ringgold, quoted in Marcia Tanner, "Mother Laughed: The Bad Girls Avant-Garde," in *Bad Girls* (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1994), 69.

51. Ringgold, "A Conversation with Faith Ringgold."

52. Ringgold, "Faith Ringgold: Archives of American Art Oral History," 160; Florynce (Flo) Kennedy is a lawyer, feminist, and political rights activist who was especially active in the 1970s. She has been described by Gloria Steinem as "a political touchstone, a catalyst" and by Patricia Burstein as "the biggest and, indisputably, the rudest mouth on the battleground where feminist activities and radical politics join." Kennedy received her law degree from Columbia University in 1951. Her clients have included the jazz greats Billie Holiday and Charlie Parker, and activist H. Rap Brown. She was an original member of the National Organization for Women (NOW). See Jessie Carney Smith, ed. *Epic Lives: One Hundred Women Who Have Made a Difference* (Detroit: Visible Ink Press, 1993), 331-335.

53. Ringgold, "A Conversation with Faith Ringgold."

54. Ringgold, "Faith Ringgold: Archives of American Art Oral History," 113-114, 140-152, 160-162; see also Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, chaps. 7-9 passim.

55. Mary Schmidt Campbell, "A Turbulent Decade," in *Tradition and Conflict: Images of a Turbulent Decade, 1963-1973* (New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 1985), 55.

56. Hans Junker Mortensen, "An Interview of an Artist: Faith Ringgold," transcript, 1974, pp. 4, 34, artist's archive.

57. Ringgold, "Faith Ringgold: Archives of American Art Oral History," 161-162.

58. Mainardi, "Quilts," 344. One notable instance in which so-called decorative art is examined as, and in conjunction with, "high" art occurs in Alois Riegl's *Late Roman Art Industry* (written in 1894), trans. Rolf Winkes (Rome: Giorgio Bretschneider Editore, 1985), which examines late Roman art industry at length, from both an historical and sociological point of view, and places decorative arts such as metal work and jewelry on equal footing with architecture, sculpture, and painting.

59. This classification, of course, has applied to objects created by craftsmen as well as women. Opinions as to whether the fine arts are or are not superior to the applied arts have varied greatly in different periods and in different countries. Indeed, the independent work of art, created for its own sake, is a fairly recent development in Western culture; and, in fact, most of the world's art might well be considered craft or applied art, if we consider craft to be art that is utilitarian as opposed to purely cerebral. "The artist as a personality and his work as an individual achievement are the fruits of classical Greek culture," explains historian H. Ruhemann. In medieval Europe, the generally anonymous and collaborative workshop practice prevailed. It was not until the Renaissance that classical individualism was revived; and not until the 19th century that art historians, most notably Alois Riegl in 1894, began to take a serious interest in the subject of craft or applied art. If applied art is art applied to a practical end, as the term signifies, and fine art is art whose first function is to express an idea or emotion, then even during the Renaissance and afterward, the work of many "fine" artists might well be construed as craft if, for example, the function of an art work was to decorate a cathedral, illuminate a manuscript, document an historical event, or beautify a tomb or altar. As Ruhemann points out, there is no frontier between the realms of fine and applied art, rather changing perceptions of each. See H. Ruhemann, *Artist and Craftsman: Contrast, Similarity, Influence* (New York: Chanticleer Press, Inc., 1948; Helmuth Theodore Bossert, *Folk Art of Europe* (New York: Rizzoli and Tübingen: Ernst Wasmuth Verlag, 1990); and Riegl, *Late Roman Art Industry*.

60. Norma Broude, "The Pattern and Decoration Movement," in Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, eds., *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact* (New York: Abrams, 1994), 208; see also Amy Goldin, "Pattern, Grids, and Painting," *Artforum* (September 1975): 50-54.

61. Freida High-Wasikhongo, "Afrofemcentric: Twenty Years of Faith Ringgold," in *Faith Ringgold: Twenty Years of Painting, Sculpture and Performance (1963-1983)*, 17.

62. Ringgold, "Faith Ringgold: Archives of American Art Oral History," 225-226.
63. Ringgold, "A Conversation with Faith Ringgold."
64. Cassandra L. Langer, "A Working Gynergenic Art Criticism," in *Feminist Art Criticism*, 113.
65. Shifra Goldman, "'Portraying Ourselves': Contemporary Chicana Artists," in *Feminist Art Criticism*, 188.
66. Broude and Garrard, eds., *The Power of Feminist Art*, 18.
67. The phrase "questioning the litany," has been borrowed from the title of Broude and Garrard's anthology, *Feminism and Art History: Questioning the Litany* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982).
68. Whitney Chadwick, "Women Artists and the Politics of Representation," in *Feminist Art Criticism*, 169.
69. Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists," *Artnews*, 69 (January 1971): 22-39, 67-71; reprinted in Nochlin, *Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 145-178.
70. Ringgold, "Does Art Have A Gender?" lecture presented at the New York City YMCA, Fourteenth Street, transcript, 3 March 1972; paraphrased in Doris E. Brown "Artist Molds Proud Heritage into Soft Sculpture," *New Brunswick, N.J., The Home News*, Sunday, 2 April 1978, C9.
71. See the works of Edward Mitchell Bannister, Edmonia Lewis, Robert S. Duncanson, and Joshua Johnston, for example, in David C. Driskell, *Two Centuries of Black American Art* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf and Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1976); Samella Lewis, *African American Art and Artists* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990); and Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists from 1792 to the Present* (New York: Pantheon, 1993).
72. Ringgold, "Does Art Have a Gender?"
73. Ringgold, "Interview with Faith Ringgold/A Contemporary Heroine," in *Faith Ringgold: A 25 Year Survey*, 15.
74. Mainardi, "A Feminine Sensibility?" *Feminist Art Journal*, 1, no. 1 (April 1972): 4.

75. For a discussion of Ringgold's *Black Light* paintings, see *Faith Ringgold: A 25 Year Survey*, 13; and Lucy R. Lippard, "Beyond the Pale: Ringgold's *Black Light Series*," in *Faith Ringgold: Twenty Years of Painting, Sculpture and Performance*, 22-24.

76. Lippard, "Sweeping Exchanges: The Contribution of Feminism to the Art of the 1970s," *Art Journal*, 39 (Fall/Winter, 1980): 362-65; quoted in *The Power of Feminist Art*, 10.

77. Broude, "The Pattern and Decoration Movement," in *The Power of Feminist Art*, 208-225.

78. Lise Vogel, "Fine Arts and Feminism: The Awakening Consciousness," in *Feminist Art Criticism*, 42.

79. Judith Barry and Sandy Fitterman-Lewis, "Textual Strategies: The Politics of Art-Making," in *Feminist Art Criticism*, 91; see also Susan Gubar, "The Birth of the Artist Heroine: (Re)Production, the Kunstlerroman Tradition, and the Fiction of Katherine Mansfield," in *The Representation of Women in Fiction*, ed. Carolyn G. Heilburn and Margaret Higonnet (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), 50.

80. Wahlman, *Signs and Symbols*, 4, 35.

81. Linda Dittmar, "When Privilege Is No Protection: The Woman Artist in *Quicksand* and the *House of Mirth*," in *Writing the Woman Artist*, 133-134.

82. Ringgold, handwritten notes, artist's archive; Ringgold, "A Conversation with Faith Ringgold."

83. Broude and Garrard, *The Power of Feminist Art*, 12.

84. *Ibid.*, 22, 29.

85. Wallace, *Invisibility Blues*, 27, 215-216; an African-American anchor for NBC news, Sue Simmons hosts the news/talk show, *Live at Five*.

86. Marcia Tucker, "From Theory to Practice: Correcting Inequalities," in *Gender Perspectives: Essays on Women in Museums*, ed. Judith R. Glaser and Artemis A. Zenetou (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), 53; see also Suzanne W. Jones, "Reconceiving Feminist Aesthetics," in *Writing the Woman Artist*, 13; Judith Balfe, "Medieval Madonnas and Modern Motherhood," in *Women's Power and Roles as Portrayed in Visual Images in the Arts and Mass Media*, ed. Valerie M. Bentz and Philip E. F. Mayes (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 1993), 161.

87. bell hooks, "'Let's Get Real About Feminism,' A Conversation with bell hooks, Urvashi Vaid, Naomi Wolf, and Gloria Steinem," *Ms. Magazine* (Sept./Oct. 1993): 37.

88. *Ibid.*, 42.

89. Audre Lorde, "Poetry Is Not A Luxury," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde* (Trumansburg, N.Y.: Crossing Press, 1984), 36-37, quoted in *Writing the Woman Artist*, 17; Lois K. Banner, "Three Stages of Development," in *Gender Perspectives*, 40.

90. Joanne S. Frye, *Living Stories Telling Lives: Women and the Novel in Contemporary Experience* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1986), 13-47, especially 16-17.

CHAPTER 5

THE FEMINIST SERIES

I wanted to tell you a mite about Women's Rights, and so I came out and said so. I am sitting among you to watch; and every once in awhile I will tell you what time of night it is.¹

*Sojourner Truth
New York City, 1853*

Feminism and its essentiality for black women became the subject of *The Feminist Series*. Ringgold believes that while black women in America acknowledge their racial oppression, most have not come to grips with their oppression as women. Ringgold saw this phenomenon as a debilitating circumstance. "It's like being sick," she tells us, "and not knowing where the pain is coming from. To deal [solely] with blackness is suicide for us."² Ringgold used *The Feminist Series* as a forum for her viewpoints, which mirrored those of some of the most outstanding black women in American history. By incorporating into her paintings passages from the diaries, slave narratives, speeches, and letters of women such as Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, and Shirley Chisholm, Ringgold was able to express her frustration with being a displaced woman of color in America. On her canvases she expresses her rage and determination, her hopes and her fears.

The Jungian analyst Erich Neuman once said that the power of modern art lay not in its visual beauty but in its ability to insist on the mental participation of the viewer, or the "participation mystique."³ *The Feminist Series* evokes this mystique by engaging the intellect as insistently as the eye. Ringgold conceived of her paintings as vehicles for

spiritual and intellectual inspiration as well as aesthetic expression. She incorporated the words of previous black feminists into her paintings so that others might share in their wisdom;⁴ and she used *The Feminist Series* both as a visual and verbal tool of communication.

Like the Tibetan *thangka*, the *Feminist* paintings are vertical in format and intimate in size (each approximately three by two feet). They comprise abstract forest landscapes configured with brush strokes that pulsate with color. Vivid cerulean and warm sienna hues fill the upper quadrants of each composition and serve as mood-invoking backdrops for the visionary wooded settings. Ringgold's palette fluctuates from cool, wintery tones to warm, golden yellows and fiery reds. At times, the terrains rush vertically upward; at others, the tree tops form undulating contours that ripple horizontally across the canvas. Within this formal context Ringgold surprises the viewer with an unexpected interpolation of language (fig. 50). In keeping with the Asian origin of the *thangkas*, the artist painted messages vertically onto the canvas in the manner of Eastern calligraphy. She feels that these writings draw people into the art, and that the words are more evocative because of the effort required to read them vertically, rather than in the usual Western fashion.⁵

Ringgold first began to use texts in her art in 1967 with *U.S. Postage Stamp Commemorating the Advent of Black Power* (fig. 19).⁶ The concise, poster-style use of language in this painting evolved into the more comprehensive texts later seen in the *Political Landscape Series* of spring and summer 1972 (figs. 41-44)—the paintings that immediately preceded *The Feminist Series*. Though the artist's daughter Michele had

written inscriptions for the first three segments of the *Political Landscapes*, she was unable to finish the task because it conflicted with her own writing projects. Ringgold completed the inscriptions herself and quickly realized how difficult and frustrating the writing process could be. In retrospect, she considers her early prose to be heavy-handed and lacking in originality, though this evaluation hardly seems valid when one examines the artist's writing.⁷ For example, *Political Landscape #56* reads as follows:

War is not for us
 We have no purple hearts
 Or medals of honor for bravery
 We display no battle wounds . . .

We are the millions of innocent
 Women and children
 Mercilessly raped
 And murdered
 For something we know nothing about

That is our mistake
 Not knowing . . .
 That is our crime

Faith Ringgold
 August, 1972

Her words are accusatory and concise; they blame both the perpetrators of war and the passive onlookers for its horrors. The brevity and simplicity of the passage suits the format of the *Political Landscapes*, the visual language of which is also terse (see chapter 3). Though the style of Ringgold's prose is not especially "heavy-handed," the artist, nonetheless, felt uncomfortable composing the verses herself.

For subsequent paintings in *The Feminist Series*, Ringgold turned to a recent anthology of writings by African-American women. This collection of essays, *Black*

Women in White America, was edited by Gerda Lerner and includes many rare and previously unpublished documents that spanned the history of black women from slavery to the Civil Rights Movement.⁸ Lerner's anthology brings together poignant narratives of the struggles of many renowned African-Americans, and reveals a tradition of intellectual discourse that Ringgold found moving and enlightening. In *Black Women in White America*, Ringgold discovered diverse and detailed accounts of the American experience as seen through the eyes of black women. There were descriptions of women's ordeals during slavery, their fight against prejudice and stereotypes, their struggles in the work force, and their feminist activities.

The narratives in Lerner's anthology inspired Ringgold, who acknowledges that the book came at a time when she felt an urgent need to know about past feminist history. The contents of the anthology, Ringgold tells us, "renewed" her. She was searching for a voice—one that acknowledged both her blackness and her womanhood. She found it in Lerner's book and it helped her to face the difficult career path that lay ahead. Virginia Woolf said in *A Room of One's Own*, "For we think back through our mothers if we are women." Margaret Stetz, founding editor of *Turn-of-the-Century Woman*, believes that Woolf had more in mind than just biological mothers—she meant literary forebears, "the women writers who have preceded us." In this context, Ringgold, too, thinks back through her "mothers"—the black feminists who preceded her—using their words to express her feelings, and incorporating those words into a visual language that was essentially different from the Western language she had been taught to revere and emulate.⁹

By conflating words with painting, the artist strove to express herself on her own terms as Truth and Tubman had done so many years before. Patricia Hill Collins believes that black feminists of the past “have consistently struggled to make themselves heard and have used their voices to raise essential issues affecting black women.” More than anything else, Ringgold, too, was struggling to be heard and she began to use her paintings like billboards to advertise a way of thinking that was unique to black women. As Audre Lorde so aptly puts it, “the transformation of silence into language . . . is an act of self-revelation.” By co-opting the language of these women, Ringgold reaffirmed her quest for self-awareness and definition, and placed her own feet firmly in their shoes. “I felt renewed,” Ringgold states insistently, “when I discovered that, along with Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth, there were many other black women in the vanguard of the feminist movement.”¹⁰

Ringgold wanted to document in her paintings what these women had to say about their lives, because she believed that her art must convey more than beauty and form--she believed it must share insights as well.¹¹ Her *Feminist Series* was motivated by a sense of community and a desire to share her wisdom and life experiences, in the hope that this shared knowledge might help others. Ringgold, indeed, had a great deal to share, having triumphed as she had over personal and professional difficulties.

Ringgold became a committed feminist in 1970 when she founded Women Students and Artists for Black Art Liberation (WSABAL) to demand better representation for women and people of color in museums and art galleries. Also that year, as a member of the Ad Hoc Women’s Art Group, she protested the fact that the

Whitney Museum excluded women of color. Her protests and recommendations resulted in the inclusion of Betye Saar and Barbara Chase Ribaud in the museum's Biennial exhibition. In 1971 Ringgold founded, with Kay Brown and Dinga McCannon, Where We At Black Women, an artists' group that sought exhibition opportunities for African-American women, and Ringgold curated the group's first show at Acts of Art Gallery in New York. Her efforts, within the context of these groups, were sometimes highly successful, though not always personally beneficial. Often her political victories assisted artists other than herself (like Saar and Ribaud). The *Feminist Series* serves as a kind of journal, documenting her feelings of this period; and she chose for each painting bittersweet narrative voices.¹²

The text of *Feminist Series* #2 (fig. 51) was culled from a lecture on racial pride given in Boston in 1833 by the nineteenth-century writer and educator, Maria Stewart. In the inscription Stewart speaks out against those who would censure her public lectures because, at that time, it was considered inappropriate for a woman to make a career of public speaking. "What if I am a woman?," asks Stewart. "Did not Queen Esther save the lives of the Jews? I find it is no use for me as an individual to try to make myself useful among my color in this city."¹³ Stewart's difficulties were due, in part, to the fact that she was one of the first American-born woman of any race to lecture publicly.¹⁴ She met with such severe criticism for defying socially-accepted behavior by refusing to confine herself to the domestic realm that she was forced to leave her home in Boston and move to New York.¹⁵ Stewart was censured not because she was black but because she was a woman--and an outspoken one at that.

In the full citation from her speech, Stewart cleverly refers to women in the Bible to make the point that gender has not historically restricted women from public speaking:

Is not the God of ancient times the God of these modern days? Did he not raise up Deborah to be a mother and judge in Israel? Did not Queen Esther save the lives of the Jews? And Mary Magdalene first declare the resurrection of Christ from the dead? "Come," said the woman of Samaria, "and see a man that hath told me all things that ever I did." St. Paul declared that it was a shame for a woman to speak in public; yet our great High Priest and Advocate did not condemn the woman for a more notorious offense than this.¹⁶

Stewart strategically points out that if God placed women in positions of power and did not even condemn the prostitute, Mary Magdalene, for her misdeeds, what right had Christian men to contradict Him? She continues to justify a woman's right to publicly express herself by noting that in ancient Greece women delivered the oracles. Moreover, in both Hebrew and Egyptian cultures the statements of female prophets and mystics were greatly revered.¹⁷

Understandably, Ringgold was drawn to Stewart's words. Like Stewart, Ringgold had a compelling desire to be heard. She, too, had her detractors who thought she was unnecessarily outspoken. Ringgold described herself in the late 1960s as a radically assertive person whom older black artists accused of "rocking the boat" because she threatened their tenuous positions in the art community by readily and candidly expressing her views. Also like Stewart, Ringgold was compelled to leave her home in search of an audience for her art. In the fall of 1972, she made a fresh start by promoting her work outside New York. She delivered out-of-state lectures and presented exhibitions as far afield as Louisiana.¹⁸

As discussed in chapter 3, the late 1960s was a period of intense political activism

for Ringgold, which culminated in 1970 with her arrest for desecration of the flag.¹⁹ In a 1975 interview, Ringgold commented on her activism and her outspoken nature.

If I had not embraced feminism . . . and just been very quiet, like a lot of black women who kn[e]w better and just d[id]n't say anything, then I'd probably have done a lot better. Then I say, "No" I think in the final analysis, it's better to go ahead and do what you want to do.²⁰

Ringgold's insistent activism alienated not only fellow artists but also museum curators.²¹ In her *Archives of American Art* oral history, Ringgold recounts several confrontations with curators at the Whitney Museum, The Museum of Modern Art, and The Studio Museum in Harlem. Such encounters adversely affected her chances of being shown at these institutions for years to come. In 1972 Ringgold strategically redirected her energies. Instead of declamatory political activism, she shifted her emphasis to the written word. She decided to voice her politics in her paintings for viewers to take or leave as they wished. In this way, she circumvented the head-on confrontations for which she had developed a reputation.

This redirected anger—an anger fed by racism, sexism, and struggle—is best expressed in the inscription from *Feminist Series* #6 (fig. 52). The text in this painting was taken from the writings of Harriet Tubman who said, "There was one of two things I had a right to—liberty or death; if I could not have one, I would have the other; for no man should take me alive."²² Liberty for Ringgold meant freedom of expression and the right to choose her own forum, format, and even audience. The struggle for that liberty empowered her and rewarded her with much creative success. Courageous and determined, the voices of Tubman and Ringgold would not be denied—both resonate in

the painting.

Not all of Ringgold's feminist verses are as defiant as the one cited above. Some have a gentler, more comforting tone. For example, Sojourner Truth's words, inscribed on *Feminist Series #9* (fig. 50), are encouraging: ". . . we have been long enough trodden now," she says. "We will come up again, and now I am here."²³ Sojourner had a way of making herself seem omnipotent, single-handedly able to right centuries of wrongs. Ringgold utilizes her statements for this quality and for their ability to impart strength and courage to others. Sojourner says, "And, now I am here," and Ringgold echoes her words. The two voices become one, quietly protective and reassuring.

Anna Cooper's statement from *Feminist Series #15* (fig. 53) is another example of Ringgold's preference for inspirational and instructive narratives. Cooper wrote, "It is incumbent on [a woman] to keep intelligently and sympathetically in rapport with all the great movements of her time, that she may know on which side to throw the weight of her influence."²⁴ Ringgold took Cooper's advice--that it is a woman's obligation to be educated about the politics of her time--to heart. After carefully exploring the Black Power and Feminist Movements, Ringgold made the unpopular decision to give stronger support to the latter. She recalls:

[In] 1970 I got involved in the Women's Movement I became a feminist because I wanted to help my daughters, other women, and myself to aspire to something more than a place behind a good man.²⁵

The artist's mission to help other women and herself through the Women's Movement was strengthened by the fact that her daughters, Michele and Barbara, were now of college age. Ringgold's decision to embrace feminism grew partly out of a desire

to teach her children self-reliance. Her own life experiences-- including her separation from her first husband, Earl Wallace, whose drug addition ended their marriage and compelled her to raise her daughters, for a time, alone--had impressed upon Ringgold the importance of autonomy for women.²⁶

Patricia Hill Collins' study, *Black Feminist Thought*, suggests that Ringgold's desire to teach valuable lessons of autonomy to her daughters falls within a broader context:

Black women [have] a unique angle of vision, a particular perspective on the world to be passed on to black daughters. African and African-American women have long integrated . . . self-reliance with mothering.²⁷

The content of the *Feminist* inscriptions, addressing as they do women's issues, helped Ringgold to impart to her daughter's the importance of self-determination and independent will. Cooper's charge to women of color became Ringgold's own advice to her children.

* * *

In addition to the political content of the narratives there exists a metaphorical component--one especially compatible with the paintings' Buddhist inspiration. Though not as arresting as the frank feminist texts, this symbolism in *The Feminist Series* is no less compelling. One of the Tibetan *thangka*'s functions is to express the "uniqueness of human experience."²⁸ In Ringgold's *Feminist* paintings this Eastern philosophical purpose reverberates in the texts, when those texts are examined in conjunction with

their formal configuration. The following investigation of the ways in which Ringgold meaningfully brings together language and landscape will reveal how, in this series, form and content enhance each other.

The location of the inscriptions within Ringgold's *Feminist* paintings signifies a relationship between their formal and cognitive functions. The words hang motionless, suspended above the lush tropical landscapes Ringgold has created. They are written against incandescent areas of subtly modulated color which are ideal backdrops for the inscriptions; and they are calligraphically rendered in metallic gold so that they resemble stars in an evening sky.²⁹ Light from the inscriptions shines literally and metaphorically onto the scene below, illuminating the composition aesthetically and the content metaphysically. The formal placement of the words plays a role, as we will see, in imparting their symbolism to the viewer.

In the first painting of the series the words of Anna Cooper eloquently express the enormity of the black woman's burden in America:

What a responsibility then to have the sole management of the primal lights and shadows. Such is the colored woman's office. She must stamp, weal or woe, on the coming history of her people. May she see her opportunity and vindicate her high purpose.³⁰

Cooper's words express the singular position of the antebellum African-American woman who sees herself as a spiritual gate-keeper of sorts, like the mystical Legba of African religions of the diaspora.³¹ Cooper charges African-American women with preserving the "primal lights and shadows"--the lost, but not forgotten, greatness of an African past. The "high purpose" Cooper refers to is the responsibility that black women

have to “stamp” this historic pride onto the minds and souls of their children; and to preserve, with that heritage, a spiritual connection with Africa.

In the same 1892 essay from which Ringgold has taken the text for her painting, Cooper states that women stand at the gateway of a new era of American civilization. “To be alive at such an epoch,” she declares, “is a privilege; to be a woman, then, is sublime But to be a woman of the Negro race in America . . . is to have a heritage . . . unique in the ages.”³² Cooper firmly believes that African-American women occupy a special place in United States—one that comes with great social responsibility.

Cooper also saw the black race as filled with elasticity and the hopefulness of youth, unlike the

world-weary . . . worn out races which have, so to speak, seen their best days . . . everything to this race is new and strange and inspiring. There is a quickening of its pulse This, it strikes me, is the enthusiasm of a young African in America.³³

Cooper saw in her people not only a potential for greatness but a danger inherent in their youthful susceptibility. The wrong influences-- those of racial oppression--could detrimentally affect their development. It was, Cooper felt, the woman’s job to see that this did not happen. “A race in such a stage of growth is peculiarly sensitive to impressions What a responsibility then to have the sole management of the primal lights.”³⁴ It is a responsibility that Cooper urges black women to take, and to take seriously--to impress upon themselves and their own a sense of self worth.

It is highly appropriate that Ringgold should have chosen Cooper’s message for the

inaugural painting of *The Feminist Series* since the two women lived at moments of great change for African-Americans, and both took their responsibilities as black women to heart. Each understood the unusual role women of color have played, and continue to play, in American history. Both Cooper and Ringgold understood the importance of defining their own roles. In 1872 Cooper said that a black woman “is confronted by both a woman question and a race problem, and is as yet an unknown and unacknowledged factor in both.”³⁵ One hundred years later, these same sentiments still held true for Ringgold who was very much aware that women of color were still overlooked as citizens worthy of social and historical attention.

As a life-long educator who earned her Ph.D. at the Sorbonne in Paris, Cooper reached out to her audience through lectures and essays, which she published in 1892 in a book entitled, *A Voice from the South*.³⁶ Cooper had important ideas to share with people of color. She published her ideas in order to reach more of those people, and to give greater value and purpose to her own life. How much like Cooper Ringgold seems. The artist, similarly motivated, also traveled the country lecturing on black and feminist issues as they pertained to art and artists. Yet, as an artist, publishing was not readily available to her as a way to share her ideas with others. Ringgold resolved this problem by writing directly onto her paintings. In this way, she explains, “when the work is published as a photograph, the words are, too.”³⁷ Since then, Ringgold’s paintings have operated as both art and literature.

The same freedom that allowed Ringgold to create a dynamic dialectic between painting and sewing allowed her to merge visual arts and verbal texts. Ringgold states

that she was motivated by a desire to redefine herself as a black woman and share that new definition with others:

I feel that there's some need to shed . . . light on who I am as an African-American woman outside of the limitations that people's stereotypes place on me. I don't want to argue about it. I just want to re-tell the story and get a chance to have it communicated to people all over the world.³⁸

Evidence of the sincerity of Ringgold's sentiments lies in the fact that she stopped writing on her paintings the moment her first book was published in 1991.³⁹

Ringgold accepts Cooper's charge to African-American women in her own inimitable style. Cooper's words, within the context of Ringgold's pictorial language, become the "primal lights" that flash out at us from richly colored, cloudless skies. The *Feminist* paintings provide a forum for a seldom heard and rarely appreciated voice—that of black women. Through Ringgold's paintings, the words of black feminists are spoken within the silence of the shimmering and unpeopled landscapes, whose settings bring to mind the old question: If a tree falls in the forest but there is no one to hear it—is there any sound?⁴⁰ Ringgold refuses to allow silence to prevail. Her voice, reaching the viewer in a kind of visual/verbal stereo, seems overwhelming at times because she insists on being heard above the deafening silence that has haunted the history of African-American women.⁴¹ A young scholar, Nicole Muller, put it best when she wrote, "Black women, for the most part, have been victims of the highest degrees of oppression, yet black men have taken the spotlight when it comes to speak[ing] out on matters of shared exploitation."⁴² One of the goals of Ringgold's *Feminist Series* is to provide a voice for women of color who so often go unheard.

The *Feminist* paintings, through Ringgold's careful choice of texts, reify the intellectual and emotional battle against racism and sexism that women of color in America have been fighting for centuries. The paintings achieve this through a conflation of the African-American oral tradition and the European artistic tradition of landscape painting. Mara Witzling describes the value of Ringgold's conscious melding of oral and visual techniques, within the context of American quilting customs:

Ringgold's use of the quilting tradition is a deliberate statement of her identity as a woman of African-American heritage. Her awareness of the quilts' relationship to traditional African quilting methods and her sensitivity to the significance that quilts have had in women's lives underlines their appropriateness as vehicles for telling black women's stories.⁴³

The use of fabric art as a form of language is a highly significant tradition for African-American women.

In her 1995 anthology, *Gumbo Ya Ya*, Dr. Leslie King-Hammond, Dean of Graduate Studies at the Maryland Institute College of Art, discusses the importance of this tradition. She points out that reading and writing were forbidden to the first African slaves brought to America. Slave women thus began to transform the tradition of the African textile weaving into a "secret language." Scraps and rags from the master's home were made into bed covers by the slave women. The clever seamstresses incorporated the symbolic forms and colors of their African homeland into the very blankets under which their owners slept—an act of subversion not unlike that of Ringgold's painting. Says King-Hammond about the early African-American quilts:

They are the first vital material records from the hearts, minds, and spirits of [black] women These women began to transform traditional [media] to create new visual languages through the medium of fiber. This elevated the quilt

to a new level of understanding, critical to the African-American experience.⁴⁴

King-Hammond's words describes Ringgold's fabric art as much as it does that of her ancestors. Ringgold's *thankas*, too, are vital material records of the artist's feelings about her world; and, like her forbears, Ringgold transformed a traditional medium into a new visual language.

Mainardi refers to the woman artist's transposition of pen and needle as a form of communication--a "secret language" of signs, symbols, and images that imbued the fabric object with spiritual power.⁴⁵ Ringgold's *Feminist thankas* can be placed within this nearly four hundred-year-old fabric-and-language context, making them a unique pastiche of intellectual and painterly elements. The artist's seemingly radical approach to verbal and visual expression is, in fact, rooted in her heritage as an African-American woman.

In *Feminist Series #14*, the words of Maria Stewart express Ringgold's determination to succeed and to overcome the odds facing her as a woman artist who used unconventional creative methods:

Men of Eminence have mostly risen from obscurity; not will I, although female of a darker hue, and far more obscure than they, bend my head or hang my harp upon willows; for though poor, I will virtuous prove.⁴⁶

Stewart's words are the ideal expression of the artist's determination to rise from obscurity despite economic and racial constraints. When Ringgold entered college in the late 1940s, it was rare for a black woman to study art. If Ringgold was not aware of this, her colleagues were quick to remind. The artist remembers the pessimistic criticism that greeted her when she first declared her major in college:

To be an artist in *those* days, before the gallery systems, . . . and then also being black and a woman, [the response was] “Who the hell do you think you are? Do you know what it takes?” I guess a lot of [male artists] said, “Look at me. I’m not famous. I didn’t make it and I’m a white man. Who the hell do you think you are?”⁴⁷

Many saw Ringgold’s desire to pursue an art career as naive—even laughable. Why should a black woman succeed as an artist in a highly competitive arena where even a man would have difficulty? Fortunately, the artist was not deterred.

From childhood, Ringgold had never once considered becoming anything but an artist:

I never [consciously] thought about being an artist. I just did it all the time. I was always the class artist . . . [from] elementary [school] right through I used to take my allowance and buy pastels and paper Everybody that came to the house, I drew a portrait of.⁴⁸

Even when one of Ringgold’s instructors at City College told her that, in his professional opinion, she would never make it as an artist, she was not discouraged. Quite the contrary, the more Ringgold was told how impossible her chances were, the more determined she became.⁴⁹

Ringgold’s determination to pursue her artistic goals and to have her art accepted on its own terms, in part, can be attributed to her close relationship with her father. Indeed, psychoanalytic studies suggest that the female artist’s father helps to mobilize her creativity, as Kavalier-Adler explains:

The nature and degree of involvement of the father with his daughter’s cognitive, imaginative, and creative efforts are highly consequential in determining the degree of the future motivation toward the use and development of these artistic abilities.⁵⁰

Though the mother is often credited with shaping creative tendencies, Kavalier-Adler

feels certain that an artist's father plays a major role as well—one that is not often acknowledged.⁵¹

The father-daughter bond begins early, and serves an important function in the daughter's emotional and creative growth. The father mirrors, reflects, and confirms his daughter's self-image. He helps her to feel pretty and intelligent, and strengthens the confidence that was nurtured during the period of psychic bonding with the mother. Psychologically, the female artist creates an art object *with* her father. The creative process is thus a shared experience that may be seen, if theoretically applied to Ringgold, as a life-long, self-determined interaction with her father.⁵²

Although Ringgold's father kept close and regular contact with her while she was growing up, the fact that they no longer shared the same home likely had an impact on the evolution of the artist's creative personality. Ringgold had her first asthma attack when she was two years old, at about the time her parents were separating; and, as discussed earlier, it was while recovering from one such illness that she first began to draw.⁵³ Art-making may be perceived as the artist's way of maintaining a connection with her father who, although still accessible, was no longer in the home. Creative activity made him an ever-present and tangible part of her daily life.

In general, Kavalier-Adler feels that creativity is also enhanced when a father readily spends time with his daughter and allows her to share in his own cognitive processes which, for the daughter, serve as inspiration.⁵⁴ Ringgold spent a great deal of time with her father even after her parents had separated. He took her on outings during which they shared memorable moments, such as the one recounted here by Ringgold:

Daddy took me out, too. By order of the family court, he could spend time with us on his day off, weekends, and holidays We went to see his lady friends and then we would stop off at the bar on Seventh Avenue Daddy would sit me up on the bar, and have me entertain his friends by reading all the signs I mistook “Bar and Grill” for “Bar and Girl.” Daddy . . . would explain to me with great care that a bar had to have food in it by law, that a grill was a stove, thus “Bar and Grill.” Many bars didn’t allow women, and those that did often had a sign saying “Ladies Invited.” I always thought that meant it was alright for me to be there My father . . . roared with laughter. “No, baby,” he said, “that sign is for ladies to come in and sit at the tables. You’re with your daddy.”⁵⁵

Intimate moments such as these, shared by Ringgold and her father, embodied the very inspirational, cognitive processes Kavalier-Adler discusses.

Ringgold’s father was generous with both his time and thoughts; and it is not surprising to learn that he gave the artist her first easel, despite the general disapproval she initially received from other family members regarding her choice of career.⁵⁶

Ringgold herself confirms the significant role her father played in the development of her artistic methods—particularly the emphasis on language:

My father[’s] father was a minister and [my father] had some of those skills. He did his public speaking in the bar. [He] entertained his friends with stories So my father was an inspiration to me because he was a very jovial person. As I remember many of those stories, I remember the style in which they were told So I decided to write my stories and put them on my work⁵⁷

Ringgold acknowledges with pride the inspiration she received from her father, and she dedicated her published memoirs to the man who always made her “feel special.”⁵⁸

Manipulation of language has always been an important ability of Ringgold and her family, that which her children have also inherited. Ringgold’s daughter, Michele, who is a writer, remembers: “Quite early, my sister and I were persuaded that the world was most profoundly known through the accretion of language, the nuances of interpretation,

anecdotal accumulation and overlay.”⁵⁹ The construction of language within the formal design of the art object is, for Ringgold, a compelling force that has fueled her creativity. Ringgold’s art has been, from the first, a conversation. The eventual incorporation of lengthy conversational texts into the painterly process seems a logical development in a lifelong search for an identity embodied in art.

Schneider Adams maintains in her essay, “Biography, Autobiography and Psychobiography,” that visual artists express themselves “primarily in imagery and only secondarily in words.”⁶⁰ But increasingly in the twentieth century, this “secondary” interest has become a vital component of the work of many visual artists. Since the Cubists first began to incorporate lettering into their art in 1909, words and word fragments, often adopted from popular culture, have become a familiar component of the works of many artists.⁶¹ From Italian Futurism, German Dada, and Surrealist art to Pop art and Conceptualism, text and image have merged in fine art representation throughout the century. Ringgold’s experiments fall within this rich tradition, and to it she adds her gift and passion for story-telling.

Ringgold’s art-making involves a certain sense of creative freedom which has allowed her to include both visual and verbal components in her painting. Even before painting her first “textual” work in 1967 (*U.S. Postage Stamp Commemorating the Advent of Black Power*, fig. 19), Ringgold’s creative free-spiritedness was inspired by the compellingly unrestricted creative impulses of the school children whom she taught.

Explains Ringgold,

I attribute a lot of my learning to paint [to] teaching children I taught in a

public school for eighteen and a half years Think of Marc Chagall Think of Joan Miro. Think of Picasso. Those people know what I'm talking about because they have achieved it as mature artists--the freedom that children have in painting.⁶²

Ringgold understands the unrestricted joy of creativity which children experience naturally. It was what she wanted in her own art; and it eventually helped her to combine story-telling and painting.

Story-telling is an integral part of Ringgold's life. Her mother and father told "fabulous" stories and Ringgold loved to listen to them. "Everybody told stories," the artist says of her family. "I was the baby. I listened." She experienced her parents' conversations as an eavesdropper. "They weren't talking to me. They were just talking to each other." One explanation for Ringgold's recollections and for the importance of story-telling in her life and art may lie in psychoanalytic concepts of the "primal scene." "The primal scene refers to the child's fantasy of sex between the parents--whether or not the child has actually witnessed it," and this scene, with its power to rivet the observer, is related to the gaze (and thus to painting, as a "trap" for the gaze--see chapter 7) and to listening.⁶³

A child's observance of the primal scene is often experienced aurally rather than visually (as loving words spoken between parents which the child overhears). In Freud's 1914-15 essay, "From the History of an Infantile Neurosis" ("The Wolfman"), the author suggests that, on the part of a child, attentive listening to parents' conversations reiterates the observance of the primal scene. The words of parents become as riveting as the scene itself would have been, since their conversations correspond to "childhood

fantasies of oral impregnation—whether by kissing, whispering, or breathing.” In this context, words become magical and, as Adams theorizes, derivatives of the primal fantasies of childhood “can be seen in certain recurring iconographic themes” of artists. If this theory is applied to Ringgold’s art, albeit speculatively, the “recurring theme” of word and image (sound and gaze) is significant, implying in childhood the possession of “secret [or sexual] knowledge” and evolving in later years into the possession of theoretical and artistic knowledge. (Adams discusses at length the relationship between sexual and artistic knowledge in her chapter “Psychoanalytic Readings of Primal Scene Iconography.”)⁶⁴

In his essay “Group Psychology,” Freud describes words as having “truly magical powers.”⁶⁵ For Ringgold, words have always been magical. Not only was she fascinated as a child by the words of her parents, but by the narratives of her siblings as well: “. . . we would come back from the movies and Andrew [my brother] would tell us the story all over again. Of course, with a lot of editorializing and stuff.” The artist, as the youngest, was not privileged to be the storyteller. She was the audience. She was also a devoted listener, motivated as she was by the fear of being put to bed. As long as she kept quiet, no one would notice that her bedtime had passed.⁶⁶

Surrounded as she was by family and friends, all of whom seemed to have a penchant for weaving tales, Ringgold yearned one day to become a story-teller herself. Ultimately, she was granted her wish, becoming the narrator by holding her own conversations through her painted inscriptions. It was the viewer’s turn to eavesdrop as the artist once done. “Now I’m the storyteller,” Ringgold declares with satisfaction.⁶⁷ In

painting, Ringgold at last became the raconteur, simultaneously formulating narrative and design.

The culmination of the artist's love of story-telling occurred in 1988 when Crown Books offered to publish her story quilt, *Tar Beach*, as a children's book. In 1991, the year of its publication, *Tar Beach*, won over a dozen literary awards and the following year earned the prestigious Caldecott Honor Book Award and the Coretta Scott King Award for illustration. *Tar Beach* became the first in a series of highly successful children's books which Ringgold produced. It had been the artist's life-long dream to tell her own story. Her children's books fulfilled that dream. They represent painting that also serves as literature and gives voice to the adolescent Ringgold, who was denied the privilege in childhood. Ringgold's memoirs, published in 1995 and entitled *We Flew Over the Bridge*, are the latest chapter in the relationship between artist and narrator, painting and language. The voice in the memoirs is the evolved voice of the mature Ringgold whose "story" first began to unfold on her canvases nearly a quarter of a century earlier.⁶⁸

The construction of language within the actual composition of Ringgold's paintings allies her art with that of other feminist artists such as Judy Chicago who also incorporated extensive, conversational texts into her painting in the early 1970s. Ringgold's use of text functions on a very different level, however, from that of her feminist contemporaries in that, even without the words, her paintings operate autonomously as landscapes. Her technique differs, too, from that of other contemporaneous modes of expression such as Pop and Conceptual art. Words, in

Ringgold's paintings, are not the anti-contemplative, disembodied phrases of, for example, Roy Lichtenstein's work of the 1960s; nor are they the iconic, pop culture idioms of Andy Warhol.⁶⁹ They do not function to deconstruct conventional modes of artistic expression. Instead, Ringgold's inscriptions, deeply emotive, are accommodated within the formal construction of a landscape.

Ringgold's technique in *The Feminist Series* is distinct from that of conceptual artists of this period, such as Mel Bochner, Joseph Kosuth, and others, who frequently configured their compositions so that words became the dominant (and, sometimes, virtually the only) elements of their design.⁷⁰ In the works of these artists the formal presentation of letters and phrases is often as insistent as their meaning, whether scratched expressively onto the canvas, formed in neon, or block printed onto a white wall. In Ringgold's *thangka* paintings the words occupy a relatively small area of the art work. Though they are written out in cohesive, conversational language that often encourages a response from the viewer, the texts, because they are painted vertically, take on a form that camouflages their purpose and integrates them into the landscape.

One should emphasize that Ringgold's *Feminist* paintings do not operate exclusively, or even mainly, as text. They are works of visual art, formal compositions, of which text is one part. The letters, which hover in stalactite fashion above the landscapes and mirror the vertical thrust of the trees, are subtly integrated into the design so that at first they are experienced visually rather than cognitively. The landscapes exist independently of the inscriptions. The often dense flora is brushed on in an energetic, all-over style of expressive abstraction, with a palette of varying shades of green, from pale

malachite to the dark greens of perennial vegetation. Bright accents of white, yellow, and turquoise dot the landscapes, drawing the eye quickly and rhythmically across the canvas. The trunks of trees are sketchily applied in dark brown hues. The brilliant blanket of the firmament often appears ubiquitous, covering the entire canvas, filling the background behind the mass of foliage to create the effect of a shimmering mosaic or a perpetually active kaleidoscope.

Ringgold's repeated preference for intense hues in the skies above her landscapes brings to mind the philosophy behind her *Black Light Series* (see chapter 3) which called for non-local, symbolic colors reflective of an Afrocentric outlook. "Black art," Ringgold told a critic in 1972, "is also [about] the colors of black people because that is, after all, what makes us different" Ringgold consciously avoided a pastel palette, gravitating instead to rich browns, vivid blues, dark grays, and blacks because she believed there was a certain active power in strong color. Dark colors, with all their racial connotations, are especially integral to Ringgold's aesthetic language. "I work from the blacks and browns and grays that cover my skin and hair. My vision of myself necessarily extends to [the] colors of everything else in the world."⁷¹

With the *Feminist* paintings, this philosophy manifests itself in the stratospheres that float above the landscapes, acting as writing surfaces for the narratives. For example, *Feminist Series #3*, "I Used to Work in the Fields," has a russet-colored sky as a backdrop for the triangular landscape construction. The reddish-brown curtain envelopes the canvas, completely confounding the ground plane; and this color is an arbitrary one--not pale sky blue, but brown--reminding us that the artist does indeed work

from the blacks and browns and grays that color her skin and hair.⁷²

Number five of the series, “And If Colored Men,” also confronts the viewer with a brown sky, which correlates with the subject of the title and its text: “And if colored men get their rights and not colored women theirs, you see the colored men will be masters over the women and it will be just as bad as it was before.”⁷³ Here, color as pigment and as skin, becomes doubly symbolic. Truth’s narrative repeats the word “color” three times in the space of one sentence. That the artist chose this excerpt from Lerner’s 600-page tome is an indication of her intense interest in the political symbolism of color as a major component of “Black Art.” “Black is dark,” says Ringgold. “Nighttime is dark. You can add artificial light to see, but that takes away from its natural black presence.”⁷⁴ Not only does Ringgold equate darkness with that which is “natural,” she also equates lightness with that which is artificial. In fact, artificiality (that of African descendants living in a European society) is an issue Ringgold addressed at length in her *American People Series* (see chapter 2).

The 1964 painting from this series, *Cocktail Party* (fig. 11), depicts a black businessman surrounded by stylish white party-goers. Lowery Sims observed that Ringgold has represented the man as an isolated and alienated figure, despite the cramped composition:

Cocktail Party is about the well-meaning tokenism that gripped American mores and manners in the 1960s. Ringgold has most effectively conveyed the discomfort of the lone black male by crowding the faces of the white guests up against his and against the picture plane.⁷⁵

The black man’s unease is also indicated by the fact that, although he holds a martini

glass in his hand, he stares out at us blankly, completely out of touch with his surroundings. The skin of the white guests is painted in unnatural pink and bluish tones, in contrast to the complexion of the black man, whose flesh is reddish-brown. His eyes are also brown, with large areas of white around the irises, greatly emphasizing them. The eyes of the other figures are a gleaming cyan, large, staring (at him), and heavily outlined in black. The stark color choices create a disquieting atmosphere.

Ringgold continues this metaphoric use of color in a more structured way in her 1967-69 *Black Light Series* (see chapter 3), which is specifically devoted to the elimination of pallid tones as inappropriate for “black art.” Since then, color has become a highly politicized element in Ringgold’s painting. She sees herself working within an African aesthetic tradition through colors. She explains that for centuries African artists have “celebrated the beauty of blackness in their art. The dyes they have used in paintings are dark, as are the woods they have chosen [for their] sculpture.”⁷⁶ In fact, rich, deep brown, almost black surfaces are common to much of African sculpture, from the Dogon art of Mali, to Senufo figural sculpture, to the Dan masks of the Ivory Coast. Purifying applications of palm oil are responsible for the “lustrous black surfaces” of much of this sculpture. The oil is applied in such abundance that it continues to ooze from the sculpture for some time.⁷⁷ Inspired by these examples, Ringgold has long preferred saturated pigments in her painting, be they the dark, rich colors of African statuary or intense, vibrant hues.

In *Feminist Series #8*, the artist co-opts the words of Sojourner Truth and uses, for the first time in the series, a bright, saturated red that strikes the eye like a physical blow.

Ringgold's choice of color deliberately contradicts the text, which calls for a "liberty that requires no blood."⁷⁸ She suggests through color a more militant, revolutionary demand for liberty that does require blood. A connection can be made between the use of such a pure, intense color and its symbolic meaning for black nationalists.

Red was one of three colors used in the flag of Marcus Garvey's "Back to Africa Movement" of the 1920s. It refers to the shedding of black blood by whites slavers. Along with Garvey's slogan, "black is beautiful," each of the flag's colors (red, black, and green) were revived in the 1960s by the leaders of the Black Power Movement.⁷⁹ The colors were adopted by nationalist groups such as the Black Panthers who advocated violent self-defense against active forms of oppression--namely, police brutality. Many young African-Americans shared a belief that violent change was the only path to liberation and they wore the black nationalist colors as a sign of their commitment to that change. Ringgold used these colors in the braided cords of the *Feminist thangkas* and was well aware of their significance. She was also sympathetic to the cause of the Panthers.

To show her support she designed her first poster, *Defend the Panthers*, in July of 1970, for a group that was dedicated to raising money for the Panthers' legal defense fund.⁸⁰ The symbolic colors of blood, blacks, and Africa resonate in the stark composition of this poster. Three mask-like heads with opened mouths seem to shout the words that are printed around them: "Defend the Panthers," "Free All Political Prisoners," "All Power to the People." One is reminded of the Marianne image in A.M. Cassandre's 1925 *L'Intransigeant* poster. Marianne, the symbolic voice of France,

shouts her news as insistently as do Ringgold's figures; and Cassandre's flat, art deco angularity has the same powerful, evocative, formal impact as Ringgold's design.⁸¹

Familiar with the tenets of the Black Panthers and with the symbolism of red within the nationalist context, Ringgold's use of such an intense, enveloping color for *Feminist Series #8*, in direct contrast to the tame narrative of the painting, may be interpreted as an expression of the artist's own frustration with racial oppression and her empathy with groups like the Panthers who saw no hope for change except through violent revolution. Taking into account how important colors are for Ringgold, it becomes difficult to view the choice of this particular red as arbitrary or purely formal.

* * *

In the *Feminist* paintings Ringgold writes the text one letter at a time, each followed by the next, vertically. When looking at the paintings, the viewer is not permitted to read in the ordinary fashion, from left to right, but must digest each word by reading from top to bottom. After painstakingly piecing together the first series of letters to form a word, the viewer must then move on to the next, eventually formulating an entire sentence. The process is sensory as well as cerebral—strangely reminiscent of the Kafka tale, *In The Penal Colony*.

In this story, a prison commandant has designed a diabolical writing apparatus as a means of execution. He intends for the device to reveal slowly to each condemned prisoner the reason for his demise. The transgressor is strapped, naked, into the machine,

which then proceeds, letter by letter, word by word, to spell out the unfortunate's crime on his body. Death occurs because the mechanism is constructed of long, mechanical needles that, as they "write," also deeply pierce, and eventually kill, each victim.⁸² One man was condemned to be tattooed with the words "honor thy superiors." The commandant imagined that the prisoner would be able to "read" his sentence as it was being written in his flesh and thus comprehend his evil deed at the point of death. When the commandant realized that he, himself, has been unjust in the sentencing of prisoners, he commits suicide by strapping himself into the contrivance and setting it to write the words "be just" on his own skin.

The irony of Kafka's fable, of course, is that recognition of the words being written into one's skin never occurs. The victims simply die, horribly, painfully--without ever "reading" their sentence at all. This is not the case, however, with Ringgold's narratives. After a few seconds of concentration, the words become clear, as in the examples on the following page → (see also figure 54)

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This is not to say that Ringgold's texts are intended to do the mortal damage of Kafka's apparatus, but they are intended to pierce the consciousness--slowly, deliberately, and permanently. Art historian Moira Roth discusses this effect in her essay on the artist, "A Trojan Horse":

Despite the introduction of texts--lengthy, dense and handwritten-- . . . it is easy for many of [Ringgold's] viewers to *see* rather than truly *read* these works. Yet, read carefully, the texts inexorably lead one to confront painful and disturbing dilemmas around issues of race, gender, and class⁸³

Roth confirms that Ringgold's texts do indeed prick, like Kafka's needles, forcing realization. By the time the messages, camouflaged as they are in their vertical format, are received, it is too late to reject them.

Ringgold has successfully used this technique in the past. In her 1969 painting, *Flag for the Moon: Die Nigger* (fig. 27), the subtitle is camouflaged by the stripes of the American flag so that the viewer's awareness of the harsh sentiment comes only with careful scrutiny. In fact, in 1970, when David Rockefeller's staff contacted the artist in order to purchase a painting for the Chase Manhattan Bank collection from her Spectrum Gallery exhibition, they fell victim to her strategy. Avoiding the more overtly critical canvases such as *Die* (fig. 18) and *The Flag Is Bleeding* (fig. 1), which were also on exhibit, the Chase representatives settled on a "safe" painting of the American flag, which the artist had completed earlier that year.

Their choice turned out to be *Flag for the Moon: Die Nigger*, but the gentlemen from the bank did not at first see the words "die" or "nigger" concealed within the design. The word "die" is painted in muted, dark grey tones and is hidden among the

stars of the flag. “Nigger” is inscribed horizontally in pale gray, forming the stripes. It took the Chase representatives a few moments to realize that they were not looking at an American flag at all, but a subversive hieroglyph which condemned America’s treatment of blacks. “They left in a huff,” Ringgold remembers. She had to coax them back into the gallery to show them slides of other works. Ultimately, they purchased the painting *Six Shades of Black*, which the artist renamed *American Spectrum*. The gentlemen from Chase never knew the original title and presumed that the painting of six African-Americans of varying skin tones represented the American melting pot because it included people of different ethnic backgrounds. The artist was paid \$3,000 for the painting—her largest sale to date.⁸⁴

The power of the *Feminist Series* lies in its ability to engage viewers. They are drawn to the forms of the letters as part of the compositional design rather than as a pedagogical text. The words pierce our defenses, materializing beneath the surface of our consciousness, forcing the lessons of black feminism upon us. Several critics have called Ringgold’s art subversive; Mara Witzling tells us that “Ringgold allows black women to speak with authority about their lives in their own voices, bypassing the stereotypes of the dominant culture, [and] thus giving them power and centrality.”⁸⁵ These paintings go to the source (black women) for a definition of black womanhood—a tactic too seldom used by those who seek to define the the African-American woman. The ability of the *Feminist* paintings to provide an avenue of self-definition for black women contributes to their success as works of art.

The Feminist Series evolved at a critical moment in American history. The theme

of the series--black feminism--coincided with the rise, in the early 1970s, of the Women's Movement--a movement that greatly affected Ringgold's life and career. But at the same time, Ringgold had come under the spell of the Black Power Movement. Both called for aggressive political action to improve the status of blacks and women even though, as movements, they were not compatible. The texts of *The Feminist Series*, because they address issues of both race and gender, are expressions of Ringgold's struggle to decide which group was best for her. She would be forced to choose between them and the battle would be hard won.

NOTES

1. Sojourner Truth (speech delivered at the 4th National Women's Rights Convention, New York City, 1853), in E.C. Stanton, et al., *History of Woman Suffrage*, 6 vols. (New York: Fowler and Wells, 1881-1922), vol. 1, 567-568.
2. Pat Wilcox, "Being Woman Is Black Feminist Artist's Problem," *The Chattanooga Times*, 8 Sept. 1974, 11.
3. Erich Neumann, *Art and the Creative Unconscious* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1959), 123.
4. Faith Ringgold, "Faith Ringgold: Archives of American Art Oral History," interview by Cynthia Nadelman, transcript, 6 September to 18 October 1989, Archives of American Art, Washington, D.C. and New York, New York, 186.
5. Wilcox, "Being Woman Is Black Feminist Artist's Problem."
6. Ringgold, "Faith Ringgold: Archives of American Art Oral History," 120.
7. Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge: The Memoirs of Faith Ringgold* (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1995), 193.
8. Gerda Lerner, ed., *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History* (New York: Random House, 1972).
9. Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 195; Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1929); Margaret Diane Stetz, "Anita Brookner: Woman Writer and Reluctant Feminist," in *Writing the Woman Artist: Essays on Poetics, Politics, and Portraiture*, ed. Suzanne W. Jones (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), 106.
10. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 5; Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (Freedom, Calif.: The Crossing Press, 1984), 42; Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 195.
11. Ringgold, handwritten notes, artist's archive.
12. Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 276.
13. Maria Stewart, "Mrs. Stewart's Farewell Address to Her Friends in the City of Boston," (speech delivered on 21 Sept. 1833), in *Productions of Mrs. Maria Stewart*

(Boston: W. Lloyd Garrison and Knapp, 1833), 76-77.

14. Lerner, *Black Women in White America*, 563.

15. *Ibid.*, 83, 563.

16. Stewart, "Mrs. Stewart's Farewell Address to Her Friends in the City of Boston."

17. *Ibid.*

18. Ringgold, "Faith Ringgold: Archives of American Art Oral History," 113, 114, 140-152, 160; Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, chaps. 7-9 *passim*; *The Political Landscapes* were exhibited at Louisiana State University, the site of her first show outside New York, entitled "Political Landscapes and Posters" (exhibition held at Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, 1972 with accompanying lecture entitled, "What's Black Art?").

19. Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 182-186.

20. Ringgold, "A Conversation with Faith Ringgold On the Politics Behind Black Feminist Art," interview by Sandra Kaufman, 10 May 1975, unpaginated.

21. Regarding Marcia Tucker, then of the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, see Ringgold, "Faith Ringgold: Archives of American Art Oral History," 150-151; regarding Ed Spriggs, then of the Studio Museum in Harlem, see Michele Wallace, "Review: Elizabeth Catlett and the Studio Museum," *Women and Art* (Winter 1971), 10.

22. Harriet Tubman, quoted in Sarah Bradford, *Harriet Tubman, The Moses of Her People* (New York: Corinth Books, 1961), 29.

23. S. Truth (speech delivered at the 4th National Women's Rights Convention, New York City, 1853) in E. C. Stanton, et al., *History of Woman Suffrage*, 567-568.

24. Anna J. Cooper, *A Voice from the South by a Black Woman of the South* (Xenia, Ohio: The Aldine Printing House, 1892), 134-135.

25. Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 175.

26. *Ibid.*, 54-55.

27. Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 124.

28. Joshua Goldberg, *Tibetan Tankas* (Tucson: University of Arizona Museum of Art), 8.

29. The inscriptions, as reproduced herein, were originally written in white and black. The artist later restored the paintings, adding more elaborate borders and changing the color of the inscriptions to metallic gold.

30. Cooper, *A Voice from the South by A Black Woman of the South*, 134-135.

31. Legba is the name of the loa or orisha (spirit) of several religions of the African diaspora, including Brazilian Candomblé, Haitian Voodoo, and Cuban Santaria. His persona originated in the Yoruba and Fon cultures of West Africa. He is known as the messenger of the gods. See Alfred Metraux, *Voodoo in Haiti* (New York: Schocken Books, 1972), 28, 82, 360-361; and Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York: Vintage Books, 1984), 17-33, 42, 43, 47, 51, 85, 97, 116.

32. Lerner, *Black Women in White America*, 574.

33. Ibid.

34. Ibid.

35. Ibid., 573.

36. Lerner, *Black Women in White America*, 572; Cooper, *A Voice from the South by A Black Woman of the South*.

37. Ringgold, *Faith Ringgold: The Last Story Quilt*, a film produced by Linda Freeman (Chappaqua, N.Y.: L&S Video Enterprises, Inc., 1991).

38. Ibid.

39. Ibid; one exception occurs in Ringgold's painted quilt "Marlon Riggs: Tongues Untied, A Painted Story Quilt," completed in 1994, which includes quoted, not from the artist but from Marlon Riggs, the subject of the quilt.

40. Other African-American women artists such as Vivian Browne, S. Diane Bogus, Valerie Maynard, Judith Jackson, Maren Hassinger, and Betye Saar, among others, have also, in recent years, incorporated trees, branches, and leaves into their art in order to effect female-oriented spiritual and metaphysical symbolism. See, for example, Sylvia Moore, "Vivian Browne," in *Gumbo Ya Ya: An Anthology of Contemporary African-American Women Artists*, Leslie King-Hammond, ed. (New York: Midmarch Art

Press, 1995, 24-26; M.J. Hewitt, "Betye Saar, An Interview," *The International Review of African American Art*, vol. 10, no. 2 (1992), 6-23; and Lowery Stokes Sims, "African American Women Artists," in *Bearing Witness: Contemporary Works by African American Women Artists*, ed., Jontyle Theresa Robinson (New York: Rizzoli and Spelman College, 1996), 83-93, especially 91-92.

41. See Patricia Morton, "The Invisible, Shrinking Woman," in *Disfigured Images: The Historical Assault on Afro-American Women* (Westport, CT.: Praeger), 99-112.

42. Nicole C. Muller, "African-American Women Artists," (research paper, The New School for Social Research/Parsons School of Design, New York, 1995).

43. Mara R. Witzling, ed., *Voicing Our Visions: Writings by Women Artists* (New York: Universe), 354.

44. Dr. Leslie King-Hammond, introduction to *Gumbo Ya Ya: Anthology of Contemporary African-American Women Artists*, ed. King-Hammond and Sylvia Moore (New York: Midmarch Art Press, 1995), vii-viii.

45. Patricia Mainardi, "Quilts: The Great American Art," in *Feminism and Art History: Questioning the Litany*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), 330-346, especially 338.

46. Stewart, "Mrs. Stewart's Farewell Address to Her Friends in the City of Boston."

47. Ringgold, "Faith Ringgold: Archives of American Art Oral History," 50.

48. *Ibid.*, 43, 46.

49. Ringgold, *Faith Ringgold: The Last Story Quilt*.

50. See Phyllis Greenacre, "Woman as Artist," in *Emotional Growth*, vol. II (Madison, Conn.: International University Press, 1960), 575-591; Susan Kavalier-Adler, *The Compulsion to Create* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 62.

51. Kavalier-Adler, *The Compulsion to Create*, 63.

52. *Ibid.*; Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 7.

53. *Ibid.*, 8.

54. Kavalier-Adler, *The Compulsion to Create*, 61-65.

55. Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 10.
56. Ibid., ii; Ringgold, "Faith Ringgold: Archives of American Art Oral History," 48-49.
57. Ringgold, *Faith Ringgold: The Last Story Quilt*.
58. Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, vii.
59. Ringgold, *Faith Ringgold: The Last Story Quilt*; Wallace, *Invisibility Blues: Form Pop to Theory* (New York: Verso, 1990), 27.
60. Laurie Schneider Adams, *Art and Psychoanalysis* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 259.
61. Georges Braque's *Lighter and Newspaper: "Gil Blas"* has been identified by Cubist scholars as the first Cubist painting to incorporate lettering. See William Rubin, *Picasso and Braque: Pioneering Cubism* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1989), 146, 364.
62. Ringgold, *Faith Ringgold: The Last Story Quilt*.
63. Adams, *Art and Psychoanalysis*, 226-227.
64. Ibid., 227-228, 242-243; Sigmund Freud, "From the History of an Infantile Neurosis," also known as "The Wolfman," *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, standard edition, trans. James Treachey (1918; London: Hogarth Press, 1986), vol. XVII, pp.3-122.
65. Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (London: Sigmund Freud Copyrights, Ltd. and James Strachey, 1959; W.W. Norton & Co., 1989), 16. For additional references to, and discussion of, "word magic" see chapter 3.
66. Ringgold, "Faith Ringgold: Archives of American Art Oral History," 314-315; Ringgold, *Faith Ringgold: The Last Story Quilt*.
67. Ringgold, "Faith Ringgold: Archives of American Art Oral History," 315.
68. Ringgold, *Tar Beach* (New York: Crown, 1991); Idem, *Aunt Harriet's Underground Railroad in the Sky* (New York: Crown, 1992); Idem, *Dinner at Aunt Connie's House* (New York: Hyperion Books for Children, 1993); Idem, *My Dream of Martin Luther King* (New York: Crown, 1995); Idem, *We Flew Over the Bridge*.

69. When asked in 1992 how he would describe his own work, Lichtenstein responded in formal terms, describing it as anti-contemplative; he also stated that his work related to industrial forms of communication that reflected his environment; see *Roy Lichtenstein* (Pully/Lausanne: FAE Musée d'art contemporaine in collaboration with The Tate Gallery, Liverpool, 1992), 22, 24; see also Werner Schmalenbach, *Picasso to Lichtenstein: Masterpieces of Twentieth Century Art from the Nordheim Westfalen Collection in Dusseldorf*, trans. Sarah Twohig (London: Tate Gallery, 1974). Furthermore, Charles A. Riley, II states that Lichtenstein, by emphasizing visual process over subjective iconographic reading when discussing his work, is "the best explicator of his own work." Riley admires the ways in which Lichtenstein avoids detours of associations, emphasizing process over subject matter; and he warns viewers against over-reading his paintings; see *Roy Lichtenstein*, 12.

70. Since the beginning of the Conceptual art movement in the late 1960s, there have been numerous artists who have worked in a similar vein, using text as the major component of their art work. Some examples from the late 1960s and early 1970s include the works of Ed Ruscha, Tom Phillips, Sheila Levrant de Bretteville, Stephen James Kaltenbach, Lynn Hershman, Alighiero Boetti, Louise Fishman, Hans Haacke, Bruce Nauman, Gilbert & George, and Shusaku Arakawa. Later examples of artists working within this tradition in the late 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s are Lynn Yamamoto, Kenny Scharf, Sue Williams, Ilya Kabakov, Adrien Piper, Yolanda M. Lopéz, Neil Jenny, Barbara Kruger, Mary Kelly, Sue Williams, Suzanne Lacey, Leslie Labowitz, Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger, and Richard Prince. Examples of these artists works can be seen in William Olander, *Holzer, Kruger, Prince* (Charlotte, N.C.: Knight Gallery, 1984), Edward Lucie-Smith, *Art Now* (Milan: Mondadori-Kodansha, 1976), Lisa Phillips, *Richard Prince* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1992), Duane and Sarah Preble, *Artforms* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), and Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, *The Power Of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994). There are also an increasing number of artists who, since the late 1960s, have published "artist's books," which art historians and curators have begun to classify as part of these artists *oeuvre*. Some of these artists include Roni Horn, Sherrie Levine, Jonathan Borofsky, Daniel Spoerri, Carl André William Anastasi, Sean Landers, Kenneth Goldsmith, and Joseph Grigely. See Raphael Rubenstein, "Visual Voices," *Art in America*, April 1996, 94-102, 133.

71. Mary Walker, "Artist-Lecturer Cites Women as 'Thrown Out with the Riot'"; *Daily Reveille*, Baton Rouge, La., 5 October 1972, 3; Doris E. Brown, "Artist Molds Proud Heritage Into Soft Sculpture," *The Home News, Arts Section*, New Brunswick, N.J., 2 April 1978, C9.

72. *Ibid.*

73. Truth (speech delivered at the Convention of The American Equal Rights Association, New York City, 1867) in Stanton, et al., *History of Woman Suffrage*, vol. 2, 193-194, quoted in Lerner, *Black Women in White America*, 568-572.

74. Transcribed from notes made available to the author by the artist; see also Sheila Smith's untitled essay on the artist in *Tuesday Magazine* (October 1969), 21.

75. Lowery S. Sims, "Race Riots, Cocktail Parties, Black Panthers, Moon Shots and Feminists: Faith Ringgold's Observations on the 1960's in America," in *Faith Ringgold: A 25 Year Survey*, 26.

76. Cynthia Johnson, "Black World 'Has to Have Art'," *The Lincoln Star*, Lincoln, Nebraska (22 February 1975): 6.

77. Kate Ezra, "Africa," in *The Pacific, Africa and the Americas*, Bradford D. Kelleher, ed. (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1987), 56-107.

78. Truth, (speech delivered at the Convention of The American Equal Rights Association, New York City, 1867) Stanton, et al., *History of Woman Suffrage*, vol. 2, 225; quoted in Lerner, *Black Women in White America*, 568-572.

79. Red, black, and green were the colors chosen in 1920 for Marcus Garvey's Back to Africa Movement, to decorate the flag of his United Negro Improvement Association (U.N.I.A.). These colors symbolized the "blood of the race, pride in its blackness, and the promise of a new day in Africa." See Elton C. Fax, *Garvey: The Story of a Pioneer Black Nationalist* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1971), xx, 2, 124. The phrase, "The red, black, and green forever," also appeared in the 1920 anthem of the Black Muslims (Nation of Islam) of the U.N.I.A. See Amy Jacques Garvey, *Garvey and Garveyism* (Kingston, Jamaica: A. Jacques Garvey and United Printers, Ltd., 1963), 176-177.

80. Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 187; many Panthers had been arrested and jailed for their violent confrontations with the police. Huey P. Newton was convicted of manslaughter for shooting a white police officer in 1968. Three Panthers were arrested that same year for attacking a New Jersey police station with machine guns. In 1969 Panther leader Bobby Seale was chained and gagged in court after criticizing a judge during trial in which he and seven other Party members were accused of conspiracy to incite a riot. Also in 1969, two other leaders were shot to death by Chicago police while asleep in their beds. See Hugh Pearson, *In the Shadow of the Panther: Huey Newton and the Price of Black Power in America* (New York: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1994), 140-41, 180, 205-6, 208-10, 214, 220-21, 248; see also Tom Cowan and Jack Maguire, *Timelines of African-American History: 500 Years of Black Achievement* (New York: Perigree Books, 1994), 257-261.

81. Philip B. Meggs, *History of Graphic Design* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1992), 263-264.
82. Franz Kafka, *In The Penal Colony*, in *Franz Kafka: The Complete Stories*, ed., Nahum N. Glazer (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 140-167.
83. Roth, "The Trojan Horse," 49.
84. Brown, "Artist Molds Proud Heritage into Soft Sculpture;" Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 164, 174.
85. Witzling, ed., *Voicing Our Visions*, 354.

CHAPTER 6

FAITH, FEMINISM, AND BLACK POWER

Faith's work has long included the substance and strength of the Women's Movement, particularly from a black woman's perspective because the black woman remains at the bottom of the bottom, "the slaves slave." ¹

*Amiri Baraka
1985*

Ringgold's black, feminist art mirrored the politics, violence, and power of the age. She pondered both questions: "Is there a black art?" and "Is there a woman's art?" and found the answers in the realities of her life, and the world around her. Before moving on to a discussion of the second series of *thangka* paintings, *Slave Rape*, it is necessary to situate Ringgold's early works, especially *The Feminist Series*, within a personal, political, social, and historical context. Events that occurred in the United States (particularly in New York) during the 1960s and 70s, played an important role in the shaping of Ringgold's iconography. Ringgold's art evolved in response to her milieu and (in the case of the often sexist politics of the black power movement) in spite of it.

The *thangka* paintings visualize and express the artist's responses to her world. It would be impossible to fully understand Ringgold's paintings without carefully examining the era in which they were created, not only because she was active in both black and feminist art politics, but because her life was intimately touched by issues of racism, economics, and urban strife. Ringgold found herself coming of age artistically in a decade that pulsed with revolutionary ideas and activity.

“As I look back, the sixties provided a fantastic revelation, an inspiration, and a milestone in my development as both a woman and an artist,” Ringgold recalls.² The struggle for desegregation and equal rights, which began in the 1950s, reached a fever pitch in the next decade. Marked by the Freedom Rides, organized by the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) in 1961, an age had begun wherein young African Americans launched vigorous assaults on institutionalized racism. A new generation of African-Americans demanded the rights and freedoms promised by the Constitution to all, so that they, too, might live the American dream.

That year, Ringgold was living her own version of the American dream. She had made her first trip to Europe-- with her mother and two daughters, Barbara, age 9, and Michele, age 8. They visited the Louvre and Notre Dame, traveled to the French Riviera, and saw the Renaissance masterpieces at the Uffizzi in Florence. But, back in the United States, the political revolution raged. The Freedom Riders were viciously attacked by civilians and arrested by police as they traveled through southern cities. For the first time in the nation’s history more than fifty percent of African-Americans lived in the North, having emigrated there over the previous half century, to escape the violence and poverty of the southern states. What they found in the North was more of the same in the form of economic adversity, over-crowded ghettos, and police brutality. Angry and disillusioned, many redirected their ire toward political activism, but some, less fortunate, sought solace elsewhere--often in drugs; and it was in 1961 that the artist’s brother, Andrew, died of a heroin overdose.³

In retrospect, Ringgold believes that Andrew may have been destined for tragedy

“ever since that cold winter night in 1942 when he was beaten up by a gang of boys called the ‘Irish Dukes’.” The incident permanently traumatized Andrew. He had ventured into a white section of Harlem to visit a friend, and had been attacked and beaten by local gang members, while a jeering crowd looked on. The nearest hospital did not accept black patients, so Andrew had to be rushed in a taxicab to a hospital that was fifteen blocks away, where he remained for several months.⁴ “He was never quite the same after that,” Ringgold remarks, remembering that she and Andrew experienced race hatred as an unassailable force in their adolescent lives:

Prejudice was all-pervasive, a permanent limitation on the lives of black people in the thirties. There seemed to be nothing that could really be done about the fact that we were in no way considered equal to white people. The issue of our inequality had yet to be [challenged], and to make matters worse, prejudice was blindly accepted as beyond anyone’s control.⁵

Andrew eventually became involved with a Harlem gang himself and soon after, with drugs. He, like countless others in Harlem in the fifties and sixties, escaped the pain of living in an oppressive world through heroin.

As the decade progressed, the political activities of the African-American community reached a fever pitch as did the backlash from those who hoped to prevent blacks from improving their social standing. Nineteen sixty-three marked the year of the March on Washington and Martin Luther King’s legendary “I Have a Dream” speech. This was also the year in which NAACP field secretary, Medgar Evers, was brutally assassinated by a white separatist in Jackson, Mississippi. Governor George Wallace of Alabama declared in his inaugural address, “Segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever;” and Ringgold, inspired by the milieu, and more specifically by the

writings of James Baldwin and Leroi Jones (Amiri Baraka), began work on her first political series—*The American People*—allowing the events of the time to shape her art.⁶

In 1964, President Lyndon Johnson pressured Congress into passing a civil rights bill that banned discrimination in education, employment, and public accommodations. The following year, Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act, outlawing discrimination at the polls; and Malcolm X was assassinated in the Audubon Ballroom in Harlem, where Ringgold lived. In 1966, Stokely Carmichael, spokesman for The Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), began advocating militant civil rights and Black Power; the Black Panther Party was founded in Oakland, California; and Ringgold's ex-husband and the father of her two children, Earl Wallace, became the second member of the family to die from a drug overdose.⁷

Earl was a jazz musician whose friends included such musical legends as Sonny Rollins, Miles Davis, and Charlie Parker. He and Ringgold had gone "steady" since high school and the first time he experimented with drugs, he was still a teenager. He told Ringgold it made him feel "cool." She, perhaps naively, thought that she could somehow help him to overcome his addiction:

Earl was always looking to get stoned. I thought I could change him, stop him from getting high. We "colored girls" were always trying to change our men, and always finding out too late that the changes that had to be made were by us and usually involved leaving.⁸

The couple married in November of 1950, and had two children. As a musician, Earl earned from fifteen to thirty dollars a week. With this small sum, he and Ringgold managed to eat, pay their rent, and buy sheet music and art supplies.⁹

While Ringgold was completing her degree at City College, Earl began to use drugs more and more often. By the time their daughters were born his addiction had become unmanageable. Ringgold recognized that anger and frustration were the emotions that fueled his habit. In her memoirs, the artist describes the frustration her husband and other black jazz musicians felt while unsuccessfully attempting to pursue their careers:

The first angry black men I ever knew were the jazz musicians of the fifties. Their anger came from their daily struggle to be heard. The major radio stations played exclusively pop music performed by white bands with white singers. Black musicians and singers were only played on so-called black stations But the black stations rarely played jazz Because of their lack of exposure, jazz [musicians] had a tough time getting an opportunity to cut records and get gigs.¹⁰

Soon, Earl was using drugs regularly. In an age without drug rehabilitation centers, his marriage to Ringgold suffered greatly. Ringgold attended to her husband constantly. When he came home in a drug-induced stupor, she would walk him up and down the street to keep his heart pumping. Ringgold lived with the overwhelming fear that heroin would one day kill Earl. After two years, she gave up trying to help him and had her marriage annulled. She had two daughters to raise and did not want them to grow up witnessing their father's addiction. Her daughters were not yet teenagers when Earl finally died.¹¹

Two years after Earl's death, in 1968, Ringgold began to actively participate in art world politics. As discussed at length in previous chapters, she helped to organize protests against New York's Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum, to draw attention to the under-representation of women and blacks at these institutions; and the

artist's arrest for flag desecration occurred in the winter of 1970. On the national scene that year, race riots took place in Georgia, Florida, New Jersey, Connecticut, Louisiana, and North Carolina; and Black Panther leader, Angela Davis, was indicted on charges of murder, kidnaping, and conspiracy.

"Nineteen-seventy was an extraordinary year," Ringgold recalls. It hit me like a tidal wave."¹² That year, she designed her first poster for the Committee to Defend the Panthers. By 1972, the artist had resigned from her job as a public school teacher in order to paint full-time. It was then that she completed *The Political Landscapes* and began her *thangka* series. Her university lecture tours had begun, as well, and she was, by this time, totally committed to the Women's Movement.

The year I began to realize my place in the Women's Movement was in 1970 That's [when] I figured out what I was supposed to be doing . . . working with women to help women.¹³

Ringgold came to feminism at a time when American women were taking great strides forward. In 1970 and 1971, respectively, Toni Morrison and Maya Angelou published their first books.¹⁴ In 1972, Jean Westwood was named chairman of the Democratic National Committee (becoming the first woman to head a major U.S. political party), and Helen Reddy's feminist ballad, *I Am Woman*, was at the top of the charts, indicating the existence of widespread sympathy for the Women's Movement. Ringgold's painting during these years reified and interpreted the changes that were taking place around her.

A burgeoning African sensibility (enhanced by the Black Power Movement) and feminism were the two major political forces that shaped Ringgold's early *oeuvre*. Art historian Frieda High-Wasikhongo uses the term "Afrofemcentric" to describe both the

feminist and Afrocentric components of Ringgold's paintings. High-Wasikhongo indicates that Ringgold's "Afrofemcentric" art embraces principals of harmony—a harmony of words, images, methods, and materials—as well as a sense of holistic existence.¹⁵ Black feminist scholar, Patricia Hill Collins, believes that an Afrocentric world view is vital for the social and cultural well-being of African-American women. In *Black Feminist Thought*, Collins states that African-American women have, for centuries, tapped into an Afrocentric worldview to cope with racial oppression. Collins also points out that while, on one hand, being black means being forced to assimilate an often hostile, white-dominated culture, on the other hand, it means experiencing a sense of one's individual importance by way of a "long-standing Afrocentric consciousness," or an awareness of one's African heritage.¹⁶

As we have seen, from 1967 to 1969, Ringgold explored in her art an interest in African rhythms, patterns, and repetition, through the use of African patterning and a darker, more intense palette.¹⁷ Ringgold wrote in 1970 that black art must "use its own color to create an inimitable light, since that color is the most immediate black truth."¹⁸ Ringgold preferred these forms and colors, as she explains, because they correlated with her ethnic identity and were, for her, imbued with symbolism:

The way we see color . . . , our own color for instance, is indelibly etched in our own mind(s) and . . . it influences our overall sense of color. As an artist and woman of color . . . I had noticed that black artists tended to use a darker palette. White and light colors [were] used sparingly and relegated to contrasting color in African-American . . . art—and used as a "mood" color in African supernatural and death masks. In Western art, however, white and light influence the entire palette, thereby creating a predominance of white pastel colors¹⁹

Ringgold believes that the formal element of color incorporates cultural significance. She

further speculates that the discomfort felt by the average museum-goer when viewing a black painting by, for example, Ad Reinhardt, originates in experiences of culture and race:

Reinhardt's paintings are so hard to see; a guard at the Museum of Modern Art once told me that often people get frustrated looking at them because the canvases appear to have no image at all. Only after intense concentration do Reinhardt's images become visible. People got angry about his style of painting. Were they angry because it was black? . . . And how much of the hatred directed at black people had to do with the lack of visibility? Is black racism just another term for low "color" visibility?²⁰

Ringgold theorizes that Reinhardt's paintings are problematic for viewers primarily because of his use of black pigment. She also associates the supposed anger that Reinhardt's pictures elicit from some viewers with the race hatred that is directed toward black Americans. The artist entertains the possibility that blackness is despised simply by virtue of its darkness or, as she puts it, "low color visibility."

In fact, it is not the use of black alone that makes Reinhardt's paintings "difficult," to use curator William Rubin's description. The difficulty lies in what Rubin terms "a kind of willed barrier" which does not allow for "instantaneous comprehension" (and, as we have seen in chapter 3, art works comprised primarily of white can be equally as enigmatic). The time and effort that is required to discern the geometric forms of Reinhardt's paintings is more than many viewers are willing to expend, particularly in an age, as curator Barbara Rose has remarked, when time has become "increasingly precious in our harried lives."²¹ What Ringgold senses as a relationship between the viewer's experience of Reinhardt's black canvases and society's experience of black people is precisely what Rose and Rubin have identified—an unwillingness on the part of

the perceiver to invest the time necessary to understand that which is not instantaneously comprehensible.

One can extrapolate from Rose's description, below, of the viewer's obligation to Reinhardt's work a similar obligation on the part of American society to its black citizens. This correlation between black art and black people is inherent in Ringgold's philosophy of "Black Light." Rose asserts that

The very act of visualizing and focussing the black paintings, of paying them the attention they demand, defines the quality of experience they deliver. In other words, it is literally impossible to see them given our normal state of consciousness and insensitivity to perceptual nuances²²

Rose argues that there is a direct relationship between the viewer's comprehension of the black paintings and the degree to which he or she is willing to participate in the viewing process. Without a commitment to a new way of "seeing" the viewer of a Reinhardt painting, again in the words of Rubin, "will literally not see it."²³

In this light, Ringgold's question, "Is black racism just another term for low 'color' visibility?" can be answered. Visibility is not the issue—difference is. Reinhardt's paintings, seeming at first to lack both figure and ground, are unlike other works of art and thus not readily intelligible. African-Americans, unlike white Americans in both their culture and their appearance, are not readily understood either. The additional effort required to see the paintings is similar, ideologically, to the additional effort required to understand other cultures. This is the relationship that Ringgold alludes to in her statement, cited above.

Based on the kinds of observations and correlations that Ringgold makes, and on

the kinds of questions that she asks, it is evident that her ethnic identity is an integral part of the way she sees and creates art. She chose the colors for the *Black Light Series* with specific racial issues in mind. The compositions of these paintings are deliberately designed to remind us of Africa and indicate Ringgold's determination, as Collins suggests, to experience, through an Afrocentric consciousness, a sense of her own importance in an alienating society.

Psychiatrist and philosopher, Frantz Fanon, has stated that in Western cultures racial prejudice drives many African-Americans away from the Eurocentric ontology to which they were acculturated, and directs them back to a neo-African or Afrocentric way of thinking.²⁴ Since culture is not biologically inherited, one might expect that, after four centuries in this country, African-Americans, like others who emigrated to the United States in the 1600s, would have completely assimilated the American way of life. However, German scholar Janheinz Jahn argues that one vital characteristic of the displaced African has made this assimilation impossible:

Millions of African-Americans in South America, the Antilles and the United States grow up in a European-American environment, and without any knowledge of African culture. Except for the color of their skins, they are Americans like any others. Yet the others think this color is a blemish, and let those in question feel it. Thus the African-American is constantly reminded of his origin.²⁵

In other words, that which makes African-Americans so easy to identify, so vulnerable as targets of racism—their skin color—is also the vehicle through which they have been able to maintain a spiritual connection with Africa. It is not unusual then to find that a strong Non-western creative orientation emerged in Ringgold's *oeuvre*, four years *before* her first trip to Africa.²⁶ Ringgold's paintings, in form and content, seem clearly intended to

help the artist cope with both racism and sexism, concepts which are inseparable for black women.

Ringgold, as previously noted, used the black nationalist colors of red, black, and green in her first *thangkas*, as an indication of her solidarity with the Black Power Movement. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the pervasiveness of the Black Power Movement caused a dramatic increase in blacks' awareness of their African heritage. The movement unquestionably influenced Ringgold's political and creative development. The artist's greatest period of political activism (1968-1970) took place within the compelling atmosphere of heightened African awareness that gripped black America at that time.

In the mid-1960s, Stokely Carmichael and the members of SNCC began using the word "black" as a replacement for the then-popular "negro" and they revived the slogan "black is beautiful."²⁷ SNCC members also began growing their hair long and wearing it naturally. (The hairstyle, at first called "the natural," later became known as the "Afro.") These changes, along with the widespread use of maxims such as "Black Power," and symbols like the black panther, constituted conscious and deliberate associations with Africa on the part of black Americans, who were quick to follow Carmichael's lead--wearing dashikis and sporting the black nationalist colors on everything from hats to Afghans.²⁸ Ringgold, too, wore an "Afro" (fig. 59) and red, black, and green African-style clothing; and through highly political pictorial statements such as those found in the *Black Light* and *American People* series, as well as through the *Political Posters* begun in 1970, Ringgold allied herself with the Black Power Movement.

Ringgold was a “black painter,” in both the artistic and the ethnic senses. In a 1969 interview, she explained that her art was intended to reveal essential black realities:

The black experience, with all the struggle, hope, frustration, bitterness, and rage that grows out of contact with white society and its institutions, [is] the experience I try to express in my painting . . . one of awakening, pride, [and] scorn And that’s what black artists must paint. Not angels, or Prometheus, or Napoleon at Austerlitz; these things are completely alien to our experience, and of necessity must be alien to our art.²⁹

Ringgold greatly decreased her use of the color white during this period, preferring instead to use vivid primary colors for contrast, and black for expressive form.

Another factor that enhanced Ringgold’s African creative outlook was that she had lived most of her life in Harlem—a predominantly black neighborhood. Although the ghettoization of minorities in New York communities such as Harlem, East New York, the South Bronx, and South Jamaica, has been a distressing phenomenon plaguing northern cities since the Great Migration, the effect of such de facto segregation has also had a positive side. Patricia Hill Collins observes that black communities have historically provided a space wherein African-Americans can “articulate an independent Afrocentric worldview”:

Every culture has a worldview that it uses to order and evaluate its own experiences. For African-Americans this worldview originates in the Afrocentric ideas of classical African civilizations Confining African-Americans to all-black areas in the northern urban ghettos fostered the continuation of certain dimensions of this worldview.³⁰

Ringgold’s Harlem experience reinforced a sense of her African heritage. That heritage is manifested in the subject, materials, and techniques of her art.

Ringgold’s *Feminist* paintings deal with both the black experience and the

woman's experience. Through the voices of African-American women, whose political commitments mirror her own, Ringgold's *Feminist* paintings encourage a discourse between artist and viewer about the unique problems facing African-American women. Ringgold hoped, through these paintings, to encourage black women to think consciously about their own needs, which were being repressed and ignored. In her autobiography, Ringgold explains her desire to communicate with other African-American women:

Back in the early seventies, black women were in denial of their oppression in order to be in support of their men. This made it very important for me to put the words of these valiant black feminists in my art, so that people could read them and be as inspired as I had been.³¹

Ringgold's *Feminist* paintings serve to alert African-American women to the fact that their needs and concerns need not always come last—after those of black men and certainly of white America.

Ringgold believes that everything in her life, especially her art, is related to the fact that she is black and a woman. She addresses issues that are pertinent to African-American women because she is “struggling against being a victim, which,” she says, “is what black women become in this society.” She wants to share her experiences of the “struggle” with others by “speaking” through her art. In *Feminist Series #19*, for example, Ringgold expresses her compassion for the plight of African-American women through the voice of Amy Jaques Garvey: “Be not discouraged, black women of the world, but push forward regardless of the lack of appreciation shown you.” Within the framework of her painting, Ringgold extends Garvey's message to women, like herself, who routinely grapple with the debilitating realities of sexism and racism.³²

The issue of the victimization of black women comes up early in Ringgold's work. Her 1967 painting, *The Flag Is Bleeding* (fig. 1) addresses the ways that racism ravages America (see discussion in chapter 2). The painting portrays a black man, a white man, and a white woman. The absence of a black woman in this monumental representation of America is painfully obvious. In the words of Michele Wallace, this void can be interpreted as a "silence on the part of African-American women, which has doomed to failure most efforts to change the black women's status or condition within society." This silence, says Wallace, results from a tendency on the part of Western culture to trivialize both racial and sexual issues.³³

In the sixties and seventies, this trivialization was exacerbated by several phenomena—in particular, the release of the Moynihan Report by Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, the birth of the Black Power Movement, and the increased popularity of the Nation of Islam, and.³⁴ As we will see, these occurrences effectively silenced any complaints black women might have had regarding their status and treatment in America. Patriarchal attitudes that existed within the Black Power Movement and similar attitudes perpetuated by the Moynihan Report qualified any signs of aggression, intelligence, or independence on the part of black women as subversive and detrimental to the healthy socialization of the African-American male.³⁵

In brief, the authors of this government-sponsored report saw a causal relationship between the high educational achievement of black women and an opposing phenomenon in black men. They also saw a relationship between the professional advancement of women and black male crime—the implication being that it was

somehow inappropriate for females to be better educated than males. Finally the report implied that the education of black women was in some way responsible for the failure of black men to attain higher academic and professional goals. The philosophical basis of the report manifested itself in what has since become known as “the Myth of Black Matriarchy,” which characterizes black women as superwomen--personified in such stereotypes as “Sapphires” and castrators who dominate men. The report essentially blamed African-American women for the ills of black men and the black family.³⁶

Stereotypes of the domineering black female affected not only the way African-American women were perceived by others, but also the way they viewed themselves and, consequently, feminism. In order to avoid being labeled matriarchal and to show solidarity with black men, black women rejected feminism. They did so at the very moment that Ringgold chose to endorse it. Ringgold, however, had specific reasons of her own for embracing feminism. After working for two years to break down racial barriers in New York museums, Ringgold felt betrayed when black women artists like herself were passed over for museum exhibitions, in favor of male artists such as Romare Bearden and Richard Hunt. Ringgold concluded that she couldn't work with men anymore:

They use you and you don't grow It took all that dedication and all that time, . . . all those years and all those demonstrations, all that typing [and] all those flyers, all that running around . . . [to] meetings with those trustees . . . for that--[exhibitions of black men]--to happen When the time came to negotiate with museum officials and to be interviewed by the press, none of the men could remember my name See? That's not my life. That's not what I'm here for And later on when I talked to other black women and they said, “Oh, well I don't really think that the Women's Movement relates to black women,” I said, “Well, I can understand how they feel because they haven't done

what I've done. They haven't been out there supporting these men like I have."³⁷

Ringgold had learned a hard lesson: that supporting black men did not necessarily translate into self-support.

The artist's frustration with the sexism that infected the art world was reified in the *Feminist* paintings. Using the words of Sojourner Truth, Ringgold wrote in the azure sky of *Feminist Series #4*, "I have a right to have just as much as a man." Her statement is demanding and contradicts the passive female stereotype. Ringgold acknowledges that her feminist attitudes often estranged her from her colleagues:

Nineteen-seventy was [the year of] my coming out as a feminist and in doing that I alienated a lot of people Things were opening up for women and things were happening, but not for me. I had stepped on a few toes, I guess, and they were the wrong toes You know, if you do the yelling, somebody else gets the rewards.³⁸

The art world, and American society in general, were not yet ready to accept an outspoken female artist who dared to point an accusing finger (or painting) at sexism and identify it as unjust or immoral. Ringgold was seen by many as a troublemaker and her vociferous political attitudes and strong sense of independence placed her squarely within the territory of the mythological matriarch, or superwoman.³⁹

The label of superwoman, attached to women of African-American descent in some form or another since slavery, has had damaging socio-psychological repercussions. Clinical analyst, Joseph M. Natterson, has examined the phenomenon of categorizing women in terms of extremes—either of the Freudian passive/masochistic type (typical of the 19th century "cult of true womanhood"), or of the aggressive/sadistic type associated with feminists of the present century. Such labels, explains Natterson,

are unhealthy, fantastic images that cause excessive anxiety in women. The identity of the superwoman is as much a false self as is that of the dependent, passive woman.⁴⁰

Natterson notes that when forced upon women, false identities can seriously threaten a healthy self-image:

The current ideal of an aggressive and competitive woman represents a constructive variation from the traditional [passive] norm, but since such women are still regarded (and therefore regard themselves) as deviant, they continue to experience excessive guilt, anxiety, and depression for their deviation from the [passive] stereotype. It seems possible that the effort to create a new feminine identity through transformation into "superwomen," creates a different kind of false self.⁴¹

Although Natterson is not referring specifically to African-American women, his observations about the modern career woman apply rightfully to the black female, who has been active, out of necessity, in the labor force since the 17th century and who has always shared familial, political, and community leadership duties that Western society prefers to relegate to the male.

Ringgold, a working mother and professional, would not reject feminism simply because she was subjected to criticism and ostracization from some of her peers. Instead she redoubled her artistic efforts, focussing her attention on the *Feminist thangka* paintings and on finding an audience for them. She voiced, through these canvases, her feelings about her personal difficulties and those of being a woman. "We do as much . . . we want as much," the artist declares in the third painting of the series. "I suppose I am about the only colored woman that goes about to speak for the rights of the colored woman."⁴²

Issues about the roles of women in society were of primary concern to Ringgold,

particularly the role of the working woman. The subject first gained national import for white America in the decades immediately preceding, and during, World War II because white women were entering the work force on a grand scale for the first time. This was not the case for black women, whose large-scale presence in the labor pool had begun with slavery. As a consequence, African-American women have long suffered the painful reality of being viewed as deviant or “other.” The Moynihan Report did not invent, but simply reaffirmed and revitalized an age-old false image of black women as manly and matriarchal. From our perspective today, however, it seems absurd that the intellectual advantage or familial status of black women should be deemed culpable for the problems of the African-American male or family, as the Moynihan Report suggested, particularly with centuries of slavery, racism, and segregation so suitably to blame.⁴³

Indeed, by 1970, the Moynihan Report had been debunked thoroughly by social scientists and feminist scholars. Far from being an empowered group, black women were working in the lowest-paying jobs, and facing unemployment levels significantly higher than those of whites or black men. Data showed that

by the 1970s, it was no longer credible to point to any black matriarchy African-American women were at the bottom of the American sex-race hierarchy in terms of all socio-economic indices Unable either to dominate or to count upon the support of males, it was ludicrous to associate them with this conceptualization of female power.⁴⁴

In the space of just a few years, the Moynihan Report had been completely discredited, at least in academic circles, though the image of the superwoman continued to persist in popular culture.⁴⁵

Toni Cade Bambara's 1970 anthology, *The Black Woman*, included insightful essays that successfully deconstructed the false paradigm of a causal relationship between female strength and male impotency. Robert Staples's essay, "The Myth of Black Matriarchy," which appeared in *Black Scholar* in 1970, argued that black families were not, by and large, matriarchal. Staples wondered how it is possible for black women to emasculate men who were presumably, as Moynihan asserted, absent from the family setting? Ringgold's daughter, Michele Wallace, in *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*, established how the male-biased politics of the 1960s, embodied in the Report, devalued black women and undermined their right to self-determination. Wallace also discussed ways that black women fell victim to their own mythology, seeing themselves as "women of inordinate strength," apathetic to feminism, as the artist herself discovered, because they perceived their victimization to be a result of racism and not sexism.⁴⁶

African-American women faced a dilemma: to support feminism meant to turn their backs on black men and the struggle for liberation; not to support feminism meant to deny their own oppression as women. Literary critic, Linda Dittmar, discusses the difficulty women had in negotiating this treacherous territory:

Their problem is one of conflicting allegiances and contradictory definitions of self-interest. Where class position urges alliance with men, gender requires revolt. Where racial oppression demands support of black institutions, gender—and sometimes class—stir antagonism. In this context individuation is particularly hard for artists. Denied a place in the masculine *Künstlerroman* tradition of solitary inspiration, excluded from the marketplace of artistic commerce, and expected to channel their gifts into the domestic and ornamental spheres of production where their art is usually unpaid, often discredited, and indeed rarely called "art"—women artists experience an overwhelming pressure to contain their creativity within

socially approved bounds.⁴⁷

This pull in two directions between the politics of black liberation and the politics of feminism was keenly felt by Ringgold. In 1974 she distilled her feelings into a simple question posed to an interviewer at a conference on women in the arts: “I’d like to ask *you* a question,” she said. “When there is a group for blacks and there is a group for women, where do I go?”⁴⁸

Ringgold remarks in her memoirs that, in the 1970s, being black and feminist was equivalent to being a traitor to the cause of black people. “You seek to divide us,” she was told by women who, like herself, were living within a society that enlisted “their collusion with an ideology that thrived on race, class, and gender oppression.”⁴⁹ Many African-American women considered themselves already liberated, since they had been active for so long in the work force, alongside their male counterparts.

The artist was repeatedly told that Women’s Liberation was for white women, that black women were too strong, and that they were already liberated. This attitude sadly ignored the fact that African-American women historically had worked the same hours and done the same jobs as men, under worse conditions and for a far lower wage, a circumstance that could hardly be construed as empowering.⁵⁰ Ringgold, personally aware of the fallacies inherent in this particular mythology, addresses the subject in the text of *Feminist Series #3*, in which she quotes Sojourner Truth:

I used to work in the fields and bind grain, keeping up with the cradler; but men, doing no more, got twice as much pay⁵¹

The strong presence of African-American women in the work-force disguised their true

status and gave them a mistaken impression of empowerment that resulted in a rejection of feminism.⁵²

With so much confusion regarding the true nature of African-American womanhood, it became necessary and important for black women to begin to define themselves—to “write their own histories,” as Wallace suggests.⁵³ Ringgold accepted this challenge. By invoking powerful feminist doctrines, she hoped to re-sensitize African-American women to sexist and racist oppression, and possibly move them to action. She achieved this through words, like those of Amy Jacques Garvey, inscribed on *Feminist Series #18* (fig. 56):

Mr. Black man, watch your step! Ethiopia's queens will reign again, and her Amazons protect her shores and people. Strengthen your shaking knees, and move forward, or we will displace you and lead on to victory and to glory.⁵⁴

Garvey wrote these sentences the year her husband, black nationalist Marcus Garvey, was imprisoned and subsequently deported.⁵⁵ Her comments invoke an image of the all-powerful woman, fearless in the face of oppression, and impatient with the “shaking knees” of black men—the very image black feminist scholars have worked so hard to repudiate. Though it may at first appear that Ringgold's choice of text invokes the self-same myth of the superwoman, closer examination reveals that Garvey's is the voice, not of a mythological woman, but of a real one, who is fed up with her situation and no longer willing to remain passive.

Wallace describes the mythological black superwoman as “the embodiment of Mother Earth, the quintessential mother with infinite sexual, life-giving, and nurturing reserves,” deconstructing a fantasy woman of immeasurable strength who has a

boundless capacity for misery and suffering. On the other hand, Garvey conjures up a vision of women who must, in her own words, “take their places beside their men . . . extending [their] influence outside the realms of the home.” While acknowledging the deprivations black women have suffered, Garvey calls for a new and modern woman who “agitates for equal opportunities and gets them; . . . She prefers to be the bread winner rather than a half-starving wife at home.” Garvey’s woman, while determined, assertive, and anxious to throw off the shackles of the past, wishes to be neither domineering nor masculine, merely equal.⁵⁶

Deciding which black feminist voices from Lerner’s book to adopt as her own was an important process for Ringgold. She settled on texts that were overtly feminist but also indicative of an existing antagonism between black men and women that proliferated during the Black Power era—a circumstance that has been referred to as the “love and trouble” tradition in black women’s relationships with black men.⁵⁷ The sexist orientation of the Moynihan Report, which advised black women to stay at home so their jobs could be filled by men, helped to intensify a black male chauvinism already in existence, and to undermined healthy relations between the sexes.⁵⁸

In *When and Where I Enter*, social historian, Paula Giddings, notes that in writings that appeared in the wake of the Moynihan Report, African-American women were advised to concern themselves solely with the status of their men.⁵⁹ This exacerbated an existing breach between black men and women. In the home, black women were encouraged by the findings of the Report and by prevailing social pressures to be subordinate to their husbands, while outside of the home, economic realities, as Giddings

documents, required African-American women to work as hard or harder than their male counterparts. This expectation ran counter to those that white men had of their wives. Although white women, too, were expected to live in their husband's shadows, they were not required to work outside of the home or to earn a living equal to that of their spouses.

As bell hooks explains in *Ain't I a Woman*, working black women, having assimilated the traditional American belief that the man should be the sole family provider, felt anger and resentment toward their men, who were often unable, given their status in the racial hierarchy, to assume the role of the provider. While the majority of the women in the Feminist Movement were eager to engage in the labor force as a way to free themselves from domestic drudgery, black women were looking for relief from arduous working conditions and low paying jobs. For them, work, since the time of slavery, had been equated not with freedom, but with the degradation of toiling in the master's fields and with forced labor. bell hooks observes that

black women . . . regarded the black male who could not free them from the labor force, with hostility, anger, and contempt Black wives were bitter about having to enter the workforce. Much of the tension in black marriages and other male-female relationships was caused by black females' pressuring men to assume the breadwinner, head-of-the-household role.⁶⁰

hooks goes on to explain that the antagonism was reciprocal:

Unlike many white men who responded to the materialistic demands of wives by becoming devoted disciples of the cult of work, many black men reacted with hostility to such demands.⁶¹

As a consequence, black men felt emasculated, not by the true culprit, the capitalist power structure, but by their wives, who were in fact as victimized as they.

In the essay by Leonard Schein, "All Men Are Misogynists," the author explains

that patriarchal societies condition men to hate women, beginning with their experience of the nuclear family in which the father-husband is placed at the top of the family hierarchy. Children perceive the father as powerful and the mother as powerless. Schein pessimistically concludes that *all* men hate women, and until men take responsibility for their hatred, they will be unable to explore their emotionality seriously, or to treat women as equal human beings.⁶² On the same note, Abbey Lincoln states the following in her 1970 essay, "Who Will Revere the Black Women?":

I've heard it echoed by too many black full-grown males that black womanhood is the downfall of the black man, in that she (the black woman) is "evil," "hard to get along with," "domineering," "suspicious," and "narrow-minded." In short, a black, ugly, evil, you-know-what.⁶³

Similar sentiments of anger and resentment between black men and women are echoed in a wide variety of literature of the period, which reflects the mood of the time.⁶⁴

Ringgold was not immune to the milieu. In the following passage she acknowledges that sexism and racism are oppressive and intimately connected forces that continue to influence the art world:

The issue of racism and sexism is a continuing problem Citizens don't demand equal rights for artists of color and women in museums Significant art production of men and women of color is ignored by the major art institutions in this country Right now the art world continues to have a field day and for the most part the only team players are white men.⁶⁵

While noting the link between sexism and racism, Ringgold also understands that sexism is the more compelling force and that male artists receive greater art historical attention than women, whether black or white. This knowledge is what ultimately convinced Ringgold to embrace feminism, despite the criticism and alienation she has had to

endure because of that decision.

As a feminist, Ringgold was subject to ridicule from both black men and women because she did not succumb to social pressures requiring black women to subordinate their personal interests to those of the African-Americans as a group.⁶⁶ Black women were being trivialized by the African-American community because they were women, and by the larger American community because they were black. For instance, during the late-1960s and 1970s, women who were married to members of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense were routinely treated with flagrant disrespect by their husbands, who openly engaged in extra-marital affairs with other Party women. The Black Panther Party, founded by two Oakland City College students in the fall of 1966, had many male members who coerced wives into quietly accepting their husbands' infidelities. In fact, the Party engaged a security force which counted among its duties the task of preventing wives from making any public denouncements of their husbands' behavior.⁶⁷

Single women were no less vulnerable to maltreatment. They found themselves constant targets of unwanted sexual advances from party leaders. Hugh Pearson, in his riveting account of the evolution of the Black Panthers, describes the extent to which these women were used and manipulated by Party men:

By the end of 1968, free sexuality was flourishing within the Black Panther Party The flagrant disrespect for women on the part of many Panther men was becoming routine. One party leader . . . began ordering women to go to bed with him. And because he was part of the leadership, his behavior went unchecked. He and many other men in the party would lay guilt trips on the women they desired, coercing them to bed, applying Marxist-Leninist ideology to the situation if the women refused their advances: "Here I am in the revolution putting my life on the line and here you are denying me." The woman would be accused of harboring a petit bourgeois idealism that she needed to lose. Not every male in the party took

advantage of women in this manner, but enough did that if a woman still refused to cooperate she might be gang raped.⁶⁸

Although behavior of this type was the extreme, such power struggles between the sexes had been waged on various levels over time, throughout African-American history.

Very soon after slavery was abolished, women such as Sojourner Truth and Anna Cooper, whose words are inscribed on Ringgold's *Feminist* paintings, spoke out against the disenfranchisement of black women. The ratification of the 15th Amendment on March 30th, 1870, which assured the right to vote irrespective of "race, color, or previous condition of servitude," constituted not black suffrage, but black *male* suffrage. Women, both black and white, would not be given the right to vote for another half century.⁶⁹ Nineteenth-century women's rights advocates were forced to face the fact that, at least for this brief moment in time, society's convictions about sexism were less flexible than its convictions about racism.

Sojourner Truth spoke out most vehemently on the issue of suffrage. In 1867, at the Convention of the American Equal Rights Association in New York City, she exposed an unpleasant truth about the rights that were at long last being made available to African-Americans:

There is a great stir about colored men getting their rights but not a word about the colored woman; and if the colored men get their rights and not colored women theirs, you see, the colored men will be masters over the colored women, and it will be just as bad as it was before.⁷⁰

Truth's sentiments, the last few words of which are inscribed on *Feminist Series* #5, echo those of many black women of the period who, having then only recently been freed from the cruelties of their white masters, were now faced with the possibility of a new form of

servitude, sanctioned by a patriarchal society that refused to recognize them, or their white sisters, as true citizens.

Anna Cooper's words of 1892, featured in *Feminist Series* numbers 1 and 15, express her concerns regarding the devaluation of black women by black men in softer but no less compelling tones (fig. 53):

The colored woman, too, often finds herself hampered and shamed by . . . a conservative attitude on the part of those for whose opinion she cares most [black men]. That this is not universally true, I am glad to admit. There are to be found . . . exceedingly liberal colored men. But as far as my experience goes the average man of our race is less frequently ready to admit need . . . for women's help or influence.⁷¹

Cooper's essay goes on to object to the black man's insistence in 1892 (not so different in 1972) that the black woman's sphere was, and should remain, a domestic one. Cooper recounts a telling anecdote to illustrate her point: "A man once said, when told his house was afire: 'Go tell my wife; I never meddle with household affairs'."⁷² Apparent in Cooper's writings is an acute awareness of the contempt many African-American men felt for their women.

Ringgold chose to feature the words of these women in her paintings because they mirrored her own concerns and those of the early suffragists, both black and white. These sentiments indicate a common ground between women of both races. However, the fact that black men were given the right to vote before white women caused a great deal of tension between the two groups of women. White suffragists saw their association with black women as a hindrance to their own hopes for advancement and thought it necessary to distance themselves from their black colleagues.⁷³ Complicating

the issue, black women felt that to support suffrage was tantamount to supporting women who were admittedly racist. The other alternative was for African-American women to support black male suffrage, even though it excluded them and denied them liberties they had every right to demand.

As a consequence, a long-standing enmity between black and white women--the seeds for which had been planted during slavery--escalated. Since that time, the great majority of black women have been at odds with feminism and the Feminist Movement. Today African-American women continue to criticize the Feminist Movement and its scholarship for being racist and overly concerned with white, middle-class issues. It has been an uphill struggle for feminists to convince women of color to join them.⁷⁴ In 1970, when Ringgold decided to become a feminist, this ideological breach remained undisturbed, despite the intervening years. Black feminists were looked upon with suspicion by those black women who distanced themselves from feminism since, as mentioned above, to ally oneself with an essentially middle-class, white women's movement was seen as turning one's back on the cause of black liberation.⁷⁵

Many who rejected feminism also felt that the movement was insensitive to their particular needs as black women. In a 1993 *Ms. Magazine* interview, bell hooks examines this issue: "I hear women of color . . . saying, 'I cannot go to feminist things because of the racism of white women and because these movements don't meet my needs' "--needs that include addressing concerns about child-rearing, economics, and race.⁷⁶ In a 1980 lecture, Audre Lorde echoes this sense of alienation that black women experience in their dealings with feminism:

As white women ignore their built in privilege of whiteness and define *woman* in terms of their own experience alone, then women of color become “other,” the outsider whose experience and tradition is too “alien” to comprehend.⁷⁷

This alienation undermines attempts, on the part of black and white feminists, to overcome racial obstacles. Though the majority of feminists face real problems of sexual discrimination, their reluctance to acknowledge other types of discrimination (i.e. racial) has resulted in a schism.⁷⁸

In the opinion of many women of color, white feminists of the 1970s co-opted the Women’s Movement as *their* movement, as if only *they* had the right to determine ways in which issues of race were addressed. Consequently, the Women’s Movement was perceived as a *white* women’s movement, and many African-American women opted to ally themselves with black liberation groups instead.⁷⁹ By choosing Black Power over feminism, however, African-American women were forced to accept, and comply with, their own marginalization because it was believed that black liberation hinged on female submission and that female assertiveness was both selfish and harmful to the advancement of the African-American cause.

In her book, *Together Black Women*, published the same year that Ringgold began *The Feminist Series*, Inez Reid Smith interviewed women who believed that they should ignore their own needs in favor of the needs of their men. The following statements typify those made by the women interviewed: “I think the woman should be behind the man. The black man should be up first, before the woman . . . ;” “I think black women have a history of perseverance and strength. I would not like to see that strength turn into domineering tendencies . . . we can be that silent strength the black man needs

...⁸⁰ Throughout the interviews, sentiments clearly ran in favor of female silence and acquiescence. Having internalized the theories postulated in the Moynihan Report, these women accepted the sexist orientation of the Black Power Movement as a necessary evil. Just as feminism favored the needs of white women, the Black Power Movement catered to those of black men. African-American women were effectively left out of both equations.

Even Ringgold, before her disillusioning experiences with the hermetic policies of New York museums, did not warm up to feminism immediately. She feared, as did many, that feminism was merely a mechanism through which white women hoped to achieve equal status with white men and thus perpetuate the racist social order. Ringgold thought, "I don't want to go to that I have different priorities. I'm a black woman. I'm interested in black people. What is this woman's thing?"⁸¹

In the early years of Ringgold's career, the art world reflected the racial biases of the larger culture. Ringgold understood that black artists, particularly women, were doomed, with rare exception, to obscurity because of their race (and sex). She believed, as did many African-American women, that it would be futile to join the Women's Movement because it was racist. In 1975, Ringgold discussed black women's fears about joining the Feminist Art Movement with interviewer Sandra Kaufman:

The black women stay to the side, stay out of it, because they feel that the art world is racist. All black people feel it, because it is true. So they say, "I'm not going to get involved in that women's artist movement because it's just another appenditure of the white male art movement."⁸²

Fueling the distrust black artists felt toward the Feminist Art Movement was the fact that

white feminist artists did not show the same support and solidarity for their black artists as they did for themselves. Ringgold recalls that artists of color often experienced a sense of separatist disinterest on the part of white feminists, the majority of whom rarely supported or attended exhibitions of the art of African-American women with the same frequency as they did their own shows. Ringgold also notes that many black women artists preferred to ally themselves with male-dominated artists groups such as *Spiral*, though she remarks that these women eventually realized that black male artists groups were not going to help them either.⁸³

For African-American women (and many Euro-American women, as well), women's rights issues had no place in the male-biased politics of the late 20th century. In addition, black women, by their silence, played a complicit role in their own nominalization. African-American women, like Ringgold, who ultimately did choose the path of feminism and who spoke out against sexist oppression, were seen as enemies of their own people. As Eldridge Cleaver states so vehemently in his 1968 *Soul on Ice*:

There is a war going on between the black man and the black woman, which makes her the silent ally . . . of the white man All down through history, he has propped her up economically above you and me [black men], to strengthen her against us.⁸⁴

Cleaver's misogyny is so insistent that it appears to outstrip even his hatred for white men. He acknowledges white male oppression, but reserves his strongest emotions for the black woman-traitor, whom he sees as a contributor to black male oppression.

Historian, Paula Giddings, describes the late 1960s and early 1970s as "the masculine decade"—one rife with a misogyny that infected black male thinking within

organizations such as SNCC, CORE, the Black Panthers, and the Nation of Islam.⁸⁵ In *When and Where I Enter*, a historical examination of the role of black women in America, Giddings recounts instances in which women leaders of SNCC had to endure “vicious attacks” of male chauvinism. Furthermore, the “Black Power” theme of the late-1960s, the symbol of the black fist, and the black panther emblem, reaffirmed a machismo psychology that glorified men and the male potential for violence. Floyd McKissick, one of the more militant leaders of CORE, when referring to the Black Power Movement, significantly excluded any mention of women: “The year 1966 shall be remembered as the year we lift our imposed status as negroes and become black men.”⁸⁶

In her autobiography, renowned ex-Panther leader, Angela Davis, describes in detail how much resentment male leaders felt toward women in the movement. She recalled that Panther men saw women’s political activism as an attempt at a kind of matriarchal coup d’état. Male party leaders accused women of being controlling and domineering if they so much as suggested changes or improvements in the workings of the Party. Outspoken women were accused of trying to undermine male control—of being the emasculators Moynihan spoke of—and of aiding the so-called white enemy who thrived on black male weakness. “I was tired,” writes Davis, “of men who measured their sexual height by women’s intellectual genuflection One of the unfortunate hallmarks of some nationalist groups was their determination to push women into the background.”⁸⁷

The Nation of Islam leader, Elijah Muhammad, made no secret of the fact that

women were meant to play a subordinate role in the home and in the community. He openly referred to women as “property” in need of protection and supervision because they were prone to evil, in contrast to men who were considered the arbiters of noble deeds. There were those who believed that the Nation of Islam’s most significant achievement was its elevation of the man as the sole dominant figure in the home. Men who joined the Nation of Islam were addressed by women as “sir” and women were expected to defer to men in all things. Women were attracted to the group despite their lowly status because they were treated with greater respect by Muslim men than by outsiders.⁸⁸ The group’s treatment of women paralleled fundamentalist Christian doctrine which saw women as Eves, Pandoras, and Delilahs, whose nature it was to bring evil into the world.⁸⁹ It was the man’s job to keep her in check and at home, like a child, where she could not get into trouble.

The policies of the Nation of Islam—so influential in the revolutionary decade of the 1960s (due in great part to the high profile and charismatic persuasiveness of Malcolm X)—were indicative of the Nation’s belief in popular myths about women, myths that had survived in the Western psyche for millennia. Once the Muslims justified their subordination of women with the temptress rationale, they then extolled these same women, placing them on pedestals as noble, spiritual, and saintly beings. The two extremes—Madonna and Eve—are not as diametrically opposed as one might imagine. As bell hooks points out, images of both the temptress and the saint are expressions of misogyny; one views the woman as inherently evil and the other denies her sexuality.⁹⁰

In conclusion, some of the most influential African-American groups of the 1960s

and early-1970s endorsed the subordination of women. In light of such widespread anti-female sentiment, it is all the more astonishing that Ringgold's *Feminist Series* should have come at this particular moment. Yet, this was obviously a time when African-American women needed a voice, and Ringgold herself needed to find a source of strength and encouragement so that she might persevere in her struggle to succeed as an artist. She found these things in her unconventional creativity and in the words and ideas of the great women anthologized in Lerner's book. *The Feminist Series* reaffirmed the artist's need to assert herself at a time when black female assertiveness was being attacked from all quarters and black women were expected to reduce themselves to silence, becoming what Patricia Morton refers to as "The Invisible, Shrinking Woman" of the seventies.⁹¹

In Morton's historical study, *Disfigured Images*, the author explains that outspoken black women were considered an affront to their more subdued counterparts who, in an attempt to avoid being branded as matriarchs, submitted passively to the patriarchal biases of the decade—and resented those women who did not. Morton also states that as the stereotypes of Jezebel, Mammy, and Matriarch eventually began to fade, a void was left in their place. Not fully aware of the inherent value of self-determination, black women have allowed others to construct their identity. From Morton's perspective, the African-American woman's interpretation of, and role in the shaping of her own historical experience

remained very obscure By the closing decades of the twentieth century the black woman was shrinking into near invisibility as . . . a domestic and/or reproductive prop for male-centered action.⁹²

Likewise, in her 1984 essay, "Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred, and Anger," Audre Lorde asked the question, "Will the real black woman please stand up?" Lorde, like Morton, is concerned with the critical issue of women's self-determination. Lorde argues that if black women do not define themselves, they will be defined by others, "for their use, and to our detriment."⁹³ For a woman in the early-1970s, however, choosing to define one's own role in society, as Ringgold did, was tantamount to being an assertive, aggressive, matriarchal woman—a stereotype black women had come to understand in profoundly negative terms.

While feminism flourished, black women largely absented themselves from the movement. This phenomenon left Ringgold isolated from other African-American women artists. Lucy Lippard examines Ringgold's predicament in *From the Center*:

Both as a feminist and as a black activist, [Ringgold] has been isolated from her peers, from other black women artists; she has been ostracized for speaking out against black male domination at a time when black solidarity seemed more important than women's rights.⁹⁴

Ringgold paid dearly for her decision to support feminism, but it was a decision she had not made lightly and one to which she was totally committed. She did not intend to allow others to dictate to her how she should live her life or decide what was in her best interest.

As we have seen, Ringgold had first hand experience with the ways in which sexism transcended even the rigid racial biases of the art world (see chapter 3). After two years (1968-1970) of fighting to get better representation for blacks in New York museums, Ringgold realized that museums, too, thought of "blacks" as *men*. When

museum reforms finally occurred in response to the steady stream of protests organized by Ringgold's group WSABAL (Women Students and Artists for Black Art Liberation) women were not even considered in exhibition scheduling. Ringgold's struggle with the Museum of Modern Art resulted in the showing of works by two black men--Richard Hunt and Romare Bearden--but no black women. In the face of such apparent sexism, Ringgold was forced to take a second look at the Feminist Art Movement. She hadn't felt the need to embrace feminism until it touched her own life.⁹⁵ Once it did, her work evolved rapidly into a distinctly feminist form of expression, culminating in 1972 in *The Feminist Series*.

Finally, it must be understood that Ringgold's singular ability to challenge tradition with courage and tenacity is rooted in the knowledge that "otherness" can be empowering. She first learned this lesson, not from her political experiences of the 1960s and 1970s, which were undoubtedly important, but from her family. Ringgold's responses to the dynamics of the revolutionary age which propelled her towards feminism and *The Feminist Series*, were grounded in personal experiences as much as in the more broadly defined social and political ones.

Ringgold's mother, Willie Posey, had an enormous and singular influence on the artist's early development, in part because Andrew Jones, the artist's father, worked long, late hours for the department of sanitation in order to support his family. Andrew's mandatory absences, and the artist's childhood asthmatic condition, which frequently required her to remain home from school, set up a situation wherein Ringgold spent most of her adolescent years exclusively in her mother's company. When the artist's parents

were separated in the early 1930s, her mother became one of the strongest influences in Ringgold's life.

Posey was a strict parent as well as a beautiful and energetic woman, who managed her household with efficiency and order. Ringgold remembers her mother, who died in 1981, as an intelligent, forceful, and physically and mentally agile person (a description that, not surprisingly, suits Ringgold herself). As a fashion designer, Posey had a flamboyant style that matched her personality. Ringgold openly adored her mother, whom she describes as "a treasure"--a woman who raised her carefully and lovingly and who was her best friend.⁹⁶ Posey possessed great strength of will that manifested itself in a willingness to be different--a quality that she passed on to her daughter.

The artist recalls that her mother once designed a gym uniform for her, rather than buy a standard one from the school. The color and style of the uniform that Posey had designed made it noticeably different from the suits of the other students. Like many adults who sometimes forget how important it can be for teenagers to "fit in," Posey did not realize that something as simple as wearing a non-regulation uniform might be difficult or embarrassing for her daughter. Like it or not, however, the young Ringgold was obliged to wear the suit her mother had made for her; she was compelled to stand out from the crowd in a way that was less than ideal and she had to learn to live with it.⁹⁷

In another incident, Posey refused to allow Ringgold to wear stockings, even though she was fourteen and all the other girls were wearing them. Ringgold was mortified at the idea of wearing socks and appearing childish to her new high school acquaintances. She eventually solved the problem by foregoing the socks altogether and

cleverly putting make-up on her legs so that it looked as if she were wearing nylons. “I don’t think it was my mother’s intention to make us different from the other kids,” Ringgold comments, “but she did.”⁹⁸

From these early experiences and from those of the “turbulent decade” in which Ringgold came of age, she learned how to cope with “otherness” and how to handle the ridicule that so often came with it.⁹⁹ In adulthood the artist overcame her childhood anxieties and learned that standing apart from the crowd had its advantages. Evidence of this lies in the fact that she chose art at a time when black women artists were virtually unheard of; she chose feminism at a time when most black women were rejecting it; and she chose to “unstretch” her canvases without so much as a backward glance.

NOTES

1. Amiri Baraka, "Faith," *Black American Literature Forum*, vol. 19, no. 1 (Spring 1985): 12.
2. Faith Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge: The Memoirs of Faith Ringgold* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1995), 82.
3. Ibid., 131-138, 194; Tom Cowan and Jack Maguire, *Timelines of African-American History: 500 Years of Black Achievement* (New York: Roundtable Press, 1994), 238.
4. Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 138-139.
5. Ibid., 23.
6. Cowan and Maguire, *Timelines of African-American History*, 244.
7. Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 55.
8. Ibid., 34.
9. Ibid., 43, 51.
10. Ibid., 51-52.
11. Ibid., 53-55.
12. Ibid., 173.
13. Ibid., 137, 151.
14. Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* was published in 1970; and Maya Angelou's *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'fore I Diiie* was published in 1971.
15. Freida High-Wasikhongo, "Afrofemcentric: Twenty Years of Faith Ringgold," in *Faith Ringgold: Twenty Years of Painting, Sculpture and Performance (1963-1983)* (New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 1984), 17.
16. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 27, 206.
17. Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 162.

18. Ringgold, quoted in *Quo Vidas* (Edison, N.J.: Middlesex County College, 22 April 1976); and in Lippard, "Beyond the Pale: Ringgold's Black Light Series," in *Faith Ringgold: Twenty Years of Painting Sculpture and Performance*, 22.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid.

21. William Rubin, preface to Yve-Alain Bois, *Ad Reinhardt* (New York: Rizzoli, 1991), 7-8; Barbara Rose, "The Black Paintings," in *Ad Reinhardt: Black Paintings, 1951-1967* (New York: Marlborough Gallery, 1970), 17.

22. Rose, "The Black Paintings," 18.

23. Rubin, preface to *Ad Reinhardt*, 7.

24. Frantz Fanon, *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs/Black Skin, White Masks* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1952; English trans., New York: Grove Press, 1967), 114-125.

25. Janheinz Jahn, *Muntu: African Culture and the Western World* (London: Faber and Faber; rpt. New York: Grove Press, 1990), 21, 25.

26. Ringgold toured Ghana and Nigeria in 1976, visiting Africa for the first time. See chronologies in, for example, *Faith Ringgold: A 25 Year Survey*, ed. Eleanor Flomenhaft (Hempstead, N.Y.: Fine Arts Museum of Long Island), 62; *Faith Ringgold: Painting, Sculpture, Performance*, ed. Thalia Gouma-Peterson and Kathleen McManus Zurko (Wooster, Ohio: The College of Wooster Art Museum), 28; and *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 276.

27. Fax, Elton C., *Garvey: The Story of a Pioneer Black Nationalist* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1971), xx.

28. The Dashiki is a loose-fitting, brightly colored tunic, modeled after a garment worn by West African men. The word "dashiki" was coined by its U.S. manufacturer, J. Benning.

29. Ringgold, quoted in Lewis Brooks, "Her Art Is Soul," *The Afro-American Woman Magazine* 1, no. 1 (March-April 1969): 11.

30. Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 10.

31. Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 196.

32. Ringgold, "Interview with Faith Ringgold/A Contemporary Heroine," interview by Eleanor Flomenhaft, in *Faith Ringgold: A 25 Year Survey*, 14. Amy Jacques Garvey, editorial, *The Negro World*, 24 October 1925, quoted in Gerda Lerner, *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History* (1972; rpt. New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 579.

33. Michele Wallace, *Invisibility Blues: From Pop to Theory* (New York: Verso, 1990), 162, 242.

34. Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action," in *Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto, Jews, and Italians of New York City* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1967); reprinted in Lee Rainwater and William L. Yancey, *The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy* (Cambridge, Mass.: The M.I.T. Press, 1967).

35. Wallace, *Invisibility Blues*, 20.

36. Glazer and Moynihan, "The Negro Family;" Patricia Morton, *Disfigured Images: The Historical Assault on Afro-American Women* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1991), xii, 1-16.

37. Ringgold, "Faith Ringgold: Archives of American Art Oral History," 136-137; "Arts," *Women Artist News* (Summer 1980): 19.

38. Ringgold, "Faith Ringgold: Archives of American Art Oral History," 160.

39. Marcia Tanner describes the artist as follows: "Faith Ringgold has been a seriously successful troublemaker since the 1960s. Both in her art and in the real world arena of civil rights activism . . . ,” see, "Mother Laughed: The Bad Girls' Avant-Garde" in Tanner, *Bad Girls* (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1994), 68; Moira Roth states that, "Ringgold was, in short, a terrific and successful troublemaker during the 1960's. And to this day, still is on frequent occasions," see, "A Trojan Horse," in *Faith Ringgold: A 25 Year Survey*, 54.

40. See Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820-60," *American Quarterly* 18 (1966): 151-174; Joseph M. Natterson, "Women's Dreams: A Nocturnal Odyssey," in *The Psychology of Today's Woman: New Psychoanalytic Visions*, ed. Toni Bernay and Dorothy W. Cantor (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), 320.

41. *Ibid.*

42. Sojourner Truth (speech delivered at the convention of the American Equal Rights Association, New York City, 1867) in E.C. Stanton, et al., *History of Woman Suffrage*, vol. 2 (New York: Fowler and Wells, 1881-1922), 193-194; quoted in Lerner, *Black Women in White America*, (New York: Random House, 1972), 570; Truth, "I Suppose I Am About the Only Colored Woman That Goes About to Speak for the Rights of Colored Women," (speech delivered at the Fourth National Woman's Rights Convention, New York City, 1853) in Stanton, et al., *History of Woman Suffrage*, vol. 1, 567-568; quoted in Lerner, *Black Women in White America*, 566.

43. Morton, *Disfigured Images*, 5.

44. *Ibid.*, 3, 129.

45. For a discussion of the ways in which myths about black woman have survived in popular culture, see *Black Popular Culture: A Project by Michele Wallace*, ed. Gina Dent (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992); Michele Wallace, *Invisibility Blues*; and bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston, Mass.: South End Press, 1992).

46. Toni Cade Bambara, ed., *The Black Woman: An Anthology* (New York: Penguin, 1970); Robert Staples, "The Myth of Black Matriarchy," *The Black Scholar* 1 (1970): 9-16; Wallace, *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (New York: Dial Press, 1978; rpt. New York: Verso, 1990), 107.

47. Linda Dittmar, "When Privilege Is No Protection: The Woman Artist in *Quicksand* and *The House of Mirth*," in *Writing the Woman Artist: Essays on Poetics, Politics, and Portraiture*, ed. Suzanne W. Jones (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), 148-149.

48. Ringgold, "Higher Education and Women," a discussion facilitated by Margaret Mahoney, in *Women and the Arts* 11, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 1974), 95-99.

49. Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 175; Dittmar, "When Privilege Is No Protection," 149.

50. Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 175; for a detailed examination of the history of African-American women in the work force, see Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family, from Slavery to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1985; rpt. New York: Vintage Books, 1986).

51. Truth (speech delivered at the convention of The American Equal Rights Association, New York City, 1867) in Stanton, et al., *History of Woman Suffrage*, vol. 2, 193-194; quoted in *Black Women in White America*, ed. Lerner, 570.

52. Morton, *Disfigured Images*, 129; bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston: South End Press, 1981; rpt. 1992), 81.

53. Wallace, *Black Macho*, xxi.

54. A. J. Garvey, editorial in *The Negro World*, 24 October 1925; quoted in Lerner, *Black Women in White America*, 579.

55. Marcus Garvey was the founder of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (U.N.I.A.) which organized the widespread "Back to Africa" movement in the 1920s. The movement had an estimated four million supporters. Garvey was convicted of mail fraud, jailed in 1925, and deported in 1927.

56. Wallace, *Black Macho*, 107; A. J. Garvey, editorial in *The Negro World*, 24 October 1925, quoted in Lerner, *Black Women in White America*, 577.

57. See hooks, *Ain't I a Woman*; Jean Carey Bond and Pat Peery, "Is the Black Man Castrated," in *The Black Woman*, ed. Bambara, 113-118; Bambara, "On the Issue of Roles," in *The Black Woman*, 101-110; and Francis Beale, "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female," in *The Black Woman*, 99-100; Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 183; Sociologist Valerie Bentz suggests that antagonism between the sexes is not exclusive to African-Americans, but common to American men and women of all races. Bentz describes this state of affairs as an increase of a pervasive hostility and fear between the sexes resulting from an antisocial brutality that has been fostered in our advanced capitalist society. Valerie Malhotra Bentz, "Applications in the Sociology of the Arts: Madonnas, Hosmer, de Kooning, and Hanstein & Ziaks," in *Women's Power and Roles As Portrayed in Visual Arts and Mass Media*, ed. Valerie M. Bentz and Philip E. F. Mayes (Lampeter, Dyfed, Wales: Edwin Mellen Press, Ltd., 1993), 14-15.

58. Rainwater and Yancy, *The Moynihan Report*, 29.

59. See Carolyn Bird, "Woman Power," *New York Magazine* (March 1969), 38; quoted in Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: William Morrow & Co., Inc., 1984; rpt. New York: Bantam Books, 1988), 329.

60. Hooks, *Ain't I a Woman*, 48, 93.

61. Ibid.

62. Leonard Schein, "All Men Are Misogynists," quoted in hooks, *Ain't I a Woman*, 107.

63. Abbey Lincoln, "Who Will Revere the Black Woman," *Negro Digest* 15, no. 11 (Sept. 1966): 18; quoted in *The Black Woman*, ed. Bambara, 80-84.

64. See hooks, *Ain't I a Woman* ; and Bond and Peery, "Is the Black Man Castrated," 113-118.

65. Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 270.

66. Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 86.

67. Hugh Pearson, *The Shadow of the Panther: Huey Newton and the Price of Black Power in America* (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1994), 173-175.

68. *Ibid.*, 179-180.

69. *Ibid.*

70. Truth, (speech delivered at convention of The American Equal Rights Association, New York City, 1967), in Stanton, et al., *History of Woman Suffrage*, vol. 2, 193-194; quoted in Lerner, *Black Women in White America*, 569.

71. Anna J. Cooper, *A Voice From the South by a Black Woman of the South* (Xenia, Ohio: The Alding Printing House, 1892), 134-135.

72. *Ibid.*, 142-145.

73. hooks, *Ain't I a Woman*, 119-158.

74. It was common for slave masters to force their sexual advances upon slave women. The wives of these slave masters blamed the abused slave women for their husbands' infidelities and, as a result, routinely treated the slave women with contempt and cruelty. See Angela Davis, *Women, Race & Class* (New York: Vintage, 1983), 3-29, 172-201; and Jones, *Labor of love, Labor of Sorrow*, 11-43; Davis, *Women, Race & Class*, 70-86, 110-126; Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 3, 7, 10, 11; hooks, *Ain't I a Woman*; Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua, eds., *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (Watertown, Mass.: Persephone Press, 1981); Tia Cross, Freada Klein, Barbara Smith, and Beverly Smith, "Face-to-Face, Day-to-Day -- Racism," in *But Some of Us Are Brave*, ed. Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith (Old Westbury, N.Y.: Feminist Press, 1982), 52-56; Barbara Smith, "Racism and Women's Studies," in *But Some of Us Are Brave*, 48-51; Bonnie Thornton Dill, "Race, Class, and Gender: Prospects for an All-Inclusive Sisterhood," *Feminist Studies* 9, no. 1 (1983): 131-150; Barbara Hilkert Andolsen, "Daughters of Jefferson, Daughters of Bootblacks": *Racism and American Feminism* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer

University Press, 1986); and Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Culture, and Politics* (New York: Random House, 1989).

75. hooks, *Ain't I a Woman*, 176.

76. hooks, "Let's Get Real About Feminism': The Backlash, the Myths, the Movement," *Ms. Magazine* (Sept/Oct 1993): 38; and Pauli Murray, "The Liberation of Black Women;" quoted in hooks, *Ain't I A Woman*, 147.

77. Audre Lorde, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference," from a paper delivered at the Copland Colloquium, Amherst College, April, 1980; reprinted in Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (Freedom, Calif.: The Crossing Press, 1984), 114-123.

78. hooks, *Ain't I a Woman*, 145.

79. Yolanda M. Lopez and Moira Roth, "Social Protest: Racism and Sexism," in *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Abrams, 1995), 140-157; hooks, *Ain't I A Woman*, 138-139.

80. Inez Reid, *Together Black Women* (New York: Third Press, 1972).

81. Ringgold, "A Conversation with Faith Ringgold on the Politics Behind Black Feminist Art," interview by Sandra Kaufman, 10 May 1975, unpaginated.

82. Ibid.

83. Ibid.; Spiral was the name of a group of black artists who began meeting at Romare Bearden's New York studio on July 5, 1963. According to Bearden, the purpose of the group was to examine the commitment of African-American artists to the struggle for civil rights. Other members of Spiral included (but were not limited to) Hale Woodruff, Charles Alston, Norman Lewis, Richard Mayhew, Merton Simpson, Emma Amos, and Al Hollingsworth. The group also attempted to define aesthetic and ideological problems unique to African-American artists. The group remained divided on many pertinent philosophical issues throughout its existence, and finally stopped meeting in the fall of 1965. See Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists, from 1792 to the Present* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 400-403.

84. Eldridge Cleaver, "The Allegory of Black Eunuchs," in *Cleaver Soul on Ice* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1968); quoted in Wallace, *Black Macho*, 117.

85. Giddings, *When and Where I Enter*, 314.

86. Howard Sitkoff, *The Struggle for Black Equality, 1954-1980* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1981), 215.

87. Davis, *Angela Davis: An Autobiography* (New York: Random House, 1974), 181, 187.

88. Barbara E. Sizemore, "Sexism and the Black Male," *Black Scholar* (March/April 1973): 6; C. Eric Lincoln, *Black Muslims in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961); quoted in Giddings, *When and Where I Enter*, 318; Essien-Udosen, Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism: A Search for an Identity in America* (New York: Dell, 1967), 79-99; cited in hooks, *Ain't I a Woman*, 109-111.

89. The theme of woman as temptress is paradoxically related to the theme of woman as virginal and pure. From Botticelli's Renaissance *Venus* to Hiram Powers 19th century *Greek Slave*, conflated images of women as temptresses and virgins have fascinated men for centuries. Since the Middle Ages, women have been associated, in Christian iconography, with evil, as daughters of Eve—"the original cause of all evil"—who have inherited her disgrace. Twelfth century Christian art is especially misogynous, and indicative of predominant attitudes toward women that have survived down through the centuries. The Virgin Mary, while lauded as the original matriarch, is exempt from evil by virtue of her purity and sexlessness. She is mother, but not woman. She bore the Christ Child, but remained innocent. She is, in fact, the antithesis of the ordinary woman, and thus worthy of male admiration. For a discussion of *The Greek Slave* in terms of Victorian sexism and repressed sexuality, see Carol Duncan, "The Aesthetics of Power in Modern Erotic Art," in *Feminist Art Criticism: An Anthology*, ed. Arlene Raven, Cassandra L. Langer, and Joanna Frueh. (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1988), 60-62; and Samuel A. Roberson and William Gerdt, "' . . . so undressed, yet so refined . . .,' The Greek Slave," in *The Museum* 17 (Winter/Spring 1965): 1-31. For an examination of misogyny in medieval art, see Henry Krauss, "Eve and Mary: Conflicting Images of Medieval Women," in *Feminism and Art History*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Harper and Row, 1982), 79-99.

90. hooks, *Ain't I a Woman*, 31-32.

91. Morton, *Disfigured Images*, 99-109.

92. *Ibid.*, 108-109.

93. Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 170.

94. Lucy R. Lippard, *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women's Art* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1976), 258.

95. Ringgold, "Faith Ringgold: Archives of American Art Oral History," 136.

96. Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, ch. 4 passim.

97. *Ibid.*, 31.

98. *Ibid.*

99. The phrase, "turbulent decade," is borrowed from the title of Dr. Mary Schmidt Campbell's Studio Museum catalog, *Tradition and Conflict: Images of a Turbulent Decade, 1963 - 1973* (New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 1985) which examines African-American art from 1963 to 1973.

CHAPTER 7

SLAVE RAPE

In some sense I made a gift of my body to other women: giving our bodies back to ourselves. The haunting image of Cretan bull dancers--joyful, free, bare-breasted, skilled women leaping precisely from danger to ascendancy, guiding my imagination.¹

Carolee Schneeman, Feminist Performance Artist, 1975

The *Slave Rape* series, begun in the fall of 1972, is one of Ringgold's most enigmatic groups of paintings. One of the reasons for this is that the series features nude and active African women in landscape settings, rendered in a flat, two-dimensional fashion, whose facial expressions allude to caricature. Another aspect of the *Slave Rape* paintings that makes them unusual is the fact that they constitute Ringgold's first artistic collaboration with her mother. This chapter will examine the unusual cooperative effort between mother and daughter that resulted in the *Slave Rape* series, and explore the complex motivations that inspired Ringgold (and a number of her contemporaries) to appropriate images that, for decades, had been construed as negative—even stereotypical—and utilize these images to her advantage.

The *Slave Rape* paintings closely resemble those of *The Feminist Series* in the gestural application of paint and in the *thangka* format (compare figures 57 and 51). However, for the first time since *The Black Light Series*, Ringgold chose not to incorporate the use of text into her work. Instead, *The Slave Rape* paintings are dedicated solely to figurative imagery. Ringgold began this series in oil; she entitled the first three paintings: *Fear: Will Make You Weak*, *Run: You Might Get Away*, and *Fight:*

To Save Your Life (fig. 58). As *thangkas*, the works were rolled or folded for shipping and for storage when not on display. Ringgold realized belatedly that this practice caused the oil paint to crack. As a result, she completed the remainder of the series--some sixteen images--in acrylic.²

In the first three paintings, the female figures (portraits of the artist and her daughters) dominate the pictorial space and are enveloped in layers of flora which have been painted in a variety of intense, non-local colors, such as crimson and cerulean blue.³ Serving as focal points for their compositions, these monumental figures dominate their settings, both formally and symbolically. As the series progressed from oil to acrylic, Ringgold inverted the compositional order to emphasize the landscape over comparatively more diminutive figures (fig. 57). Their forms have been reductively conceived with a few simple brush strokes and have become integral parts of the landscape rather than dominant elements.

When compared to the figures of the first three paintings, the smaller acrylic nudes appear non-heroic and more vulnerable within the context of the narrative. They stare out at us in surprise, and their mouths form "O" shapes which seem to elicit silent cries for help (fig. 57). Their apparent distress, however, does not communicate to the viewer a bona fide sense of their predicament. On the contrary, one finds little tension in these lyrical renderings. Unlike, for example, Munch's painting *The Scream* of 1895, in which the figure's angst is emphasized by a desolate landscape and the skeletal form of a lone screaming figure, Ringgold's works seem almost playful--a fact that unmistakably contradicts their theme. Her figures, like the landscapes that surround them, are lush and

fecund. The sumptuous corporeality of these full-breasted women seems to mock their situation, as does their deliberately unsophisticated portrayal; yet, as the discussions in this chapter will reveal, Ringgold's seemingly light-hearted rendering of the tragic subject of slave rape serves a critical purpose, for both artist and viewer.

The progression of the series from monumental to diminutive figures correlates to the history of the enslaved African, who, having once dominated the landscape, inexorably fell victim first to the slave trade and then to colonialism. The African became progressively "smaller" and more vulnerable as Europeans gained political, military, and cultural control of the continent. *Slave Rape* constitutes a visual and metaphorical reification of this history.

The desire to comprehend that history was a chief motivating factor in Ringgold's decision to paint *The Slave Rape Series*, as she explains:

Slave Rape was . . . like going back and trying to understand some of the roots of black women coming here. What were we doing here? What is the history of us coming to this country, and what were we like before we got here? I wanted to be in touch with that.⁴

Much in the same manner that *The Feminist Series* is an exploration of Ringgold's feminist past, *Slave Rape* is an inquiry into the artist's African past and an expression of her need to understand her women ancestors who managed, against the odds, to survive their enslavement. Ringgold brings to *Slave Rape* a knowledge of the facts of enslavement and a deliberate refiguring of those facts, which empower these women and transform them from victims to victors within the context of the narrative. In doing so, Ringgold deconstructs black female stereotypes.

In examining the figures in the series, one is struck by their ability both to allude to and subvert the stereotypical portrayals of blacks that first appeared in American popular culture at the turn of the century. These false identities were fueled by such films as D.W. Griffith's 1915 *Birth of a Nation*, and even by such plays as the 1921 *Shuffle Along*, which, while lauded for the creative opportunities it provided for African-Americans, nevertheless portrayed them as one-dimensional and dehumanized.⁵ Steven C. Dubin, author of the essay "Symbolic Slavery: Black Representations in Popular Culture," explains that pejorative characterizations such as these

represent blacks in degrading, stereotyped ways, and objectify former sets of work roles and social relations. These [images] were most popular from approximately 1890 to the 1950s, and they symbolically reflected the social control mechanisms underlying majority-minority relations during that period. In addition, they helped to allay status anxiety and promoted a sense of social solidarity and superiority among whites.⁶

The rise in the appearance of these stereotypes in the 1890s coincided with a moment in time when white control over the black minority was diminishing. As Dubin suggests, the reason that stereotypical images of blacks became popular in the late 19th century was because whites needed to recapture the old order wherein blacks were subjected by law to their control.⁷

The function of these caricatures—to undermine black enfranchisement—was mirrored by the political function of "Jim Crow" legislation which, not surprisingly, developed at the same moment. Dubin argues that the elaborate set of "Jim Crow" laws enacted in the South

attempted to minimize the shift in the balance of power by approximating the formerly stable and predictable controls of the plantation system. [Black

caricatures] may have been an additional attempt at reasserting white control by symbolically allaying white status anxiety.⁸

Stereotypes of blacks quickly became part of the American consciousness. These images worked their dreadful magic by representing black people in subservient and powerless roles, often with grossly exaggerated features.⁹ In these negative portrayals, the complex social majority/minority dynamic in America was reinforced and perpetuated.

The production of these images began to decline at the time of the Civil Rights and Black Liberation Movements in the 1950s and 60s. During these decades, many African-American artists, responding to a renewed sense of black political and social consciousness, used their art specifically to deconstruct stereotypes in order to dispel the myths which these images embodied. Black men had been qualified as shiftless, stupid, lazy, and irresponsible on the one hand, and as violent criminals on the other. Black women endured their own set of racial stereotypes which were similar to those of black men. They, too, were perceived as lazy, stupid, irresponsible, and, if not violent, certainly criminal (as potential thieves) who had to be carefully watched to prevent them from stealing from their employers. In addition to these negative portrayals, black women had to deal with a second set of false identities that were grounded not in their race but in their gender.¹⁰

Author and activist, Frances Beale, describes the devastating effects of the abundant and elaborate mythology that has been assigned to African-American women:

Her physical image has been maliciously maligned; she has been sexually molested and abused by the white colonizer; she has suffered the worst kind of economic exploitation, having been forced to serve as the white woman's maid and wet nurse for white offspring while her own children were more often than not starving and

neglected. It is the depth of degradation to be socially manipulated, physically raped, used to undermine your own household, and to be powerless to reverse the syndrome.¹¹

Is the black woman, as Beale suggests, truly powerless to reverse this syndrome?

Certainly in the case of the visual arts, the answer is no. Although racism and sexism have worked together to create for African-American women “a hell of a history to live down,” the false paradigms that portray black women as both physically unattractive and sexually promiscuous, passive and aggressive, good care-givers to white children and bad mothers to their own children, have all been challenged in the art of black women since the 19th century.¹² The efforts of women artists of color, in communion with those of black male artists, have resulted in at least a partial dismantling of these myths. Black feminist author, bell hooks, and historian, Patricia Morton, have argued that black women artists have actively appropriated and exploited their own negative stereotypes to assert control over them.¹³

The most popular of these stereotypes have been identified by Morton as the passive, domestic worker or “Mammy,” the emasculating “Matriarch” or Superwoman, and the chronically promiscuous “Jezebel.” These myths, says Morton, serve to justify white fears and alleviate anxieties by projecting what is feared onto others, a practice that both perpetuates and rationalizes oppression.¹⁴ The devastating consequences of the multiple distortion of black women’s images have necessitated the creating of new images to counteract existing ones. Concerted efforts to accomplish this task occurred first during the Harlem Renaissance and again in the 1960s. During these periods black artists were inspired to use visual imagery as a counter-measure to weaken the impact of

negative black stereotypes.¹⁵

One striking example occurs in the art of Betye Saar. Her utilization of advertisements for “Darkie Toothpaste” and “Hambone Sweets,” in the 1972 mixed-media construction, *Black Crows in the White Section Only*, critiques the race hatred inherent in these commercial images by juxtaposing them with portrayals of the American flag and Ku Klux Klan hoods (figs. 20).¹⁶ Other black artists, both male and female, used similar techniques to further deconstruct fallacious stereotypes. Dubin tells us that

in the 1950s and 1960s, blacks offered alternative sets of cultural definitions and images which helped to trigger major structural changes—changes reflected in the decline of acceptance of the [stereotypes] of popular culture¹⁷

One of the most ubiquitous of these is that of Aunt Jemima.

Two artists of the Black Art Movement, Jeff Donaldson and Joe Overstreet, took advantage of the likeness of Aunt Jemima, using it in their own art to transform the docile “mammy” into an image of power. Jeff Donaldson’s *Aunt Jemima (and the Pillsbury Dough Boy) ‘64* (1963-64) presents viewers with a physically commanding woman who is locked in violent conflict with a pot-bellied, club-wielding policeman (fig. 59). The pair is set against the background of an American flag whose stripes have been distorted to form chevron patterns reminiscent of West African textiles (perhaps a metaphor for a re-ordered American state). Donaldson redefines Aunt Jemima—who is no longer a passive or complacent figure but a “superwoman”—as someone who is quite capable of protecting herself against police brutality by direct, one-on-one confrontation with her uniformed attacker.

In Joe Overstreet's *The New Jemima* (1964), a "Pop rendition of the pancake maker-turned-warrior" smiles cheerfully out at the viewer (fig. 60).¹⁸ Yet Jemima's smile takes on new meaning when seen in conjunction with the machine gun that she fires from her hip. Pancake-like wafers fly through the air like clay targets in a skeet shoot; and their fluttering forms lead the viewer's eye to the words stenciled across the top of the canvas: "Made in the USA." The message alludes to both the stereotype of Aunt Jemima and to the violent and dangerous reaction to the stereotype that she embodies.

Perhaps the most arresting of these attacks on the mammy stereotype is Saar's 1972 construction, *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima* (fig. 61). Saar subverts the convention of the black domestic worker in a manner similar to that of both Donaldson and Overstreet, utilizing literally and metaphorically layered symbolism. In this work, Saar incorporates the silk-screened face of Aunt Jemima, taken directly from the pancake box, and repeats it to create a patterned backdrop. Saar then places in front of this Pop art screen a grotesque rendition of the same icon, with bulging eyes, thick, intensely red lips, and a smile that is more grimace than grin. Jemima is, of course, rotund and she wears her traditional bandana and shapeless dress. Imbedded in the front of her skirt is another variation on the theme—a third "mammy" who also smiles and holds a white infant in her left arm.

Upon careful examination, the viewer realizes that the dress worn by this figure is, in actuality, a magnified black fist—the sign of "Black Power"—and that the infant she holds is in fact resting on the apex of that fist. The baby cries; its face is smudged with

dirt; and its brows are deeply furrowed with anxiety. This is hardly a conventional rendition of the subject which would normally portray the mammy as a helpful care-giver to her white charges. Instead, Saar offers the viewer an unpleasant alternative—that of a neglected, sullen infant for whom the smiling nanny has little empathy.

As the viewer's attention is turned away from this disturbing scene to re-enter the larger framework of the composition, he or she is made to acknowledge the broom which the stout, grimacing figure holds in her right hand. Almost as an afterthought, the viewer is visually struck by the small pistol held in the same hand and again by the larger rifle, potent with lethal energy, which is positioned at the left side of the figure and formally balances the broom.¹⁹ Yolanda Lopez and Moira Roth describe this assemblage as follows:

Psychologically as well as politically explosive, Saar's powerful Aunt Jemima reconfigures the image of a black woman from that of a willing servant . . . to a woman participating in her own liberation.²⁰

Saar, like Overstreet, accomplishes this feat of empowerment by arming her figure and, consequently, negating her subservient status.²¹

Each of these three works (that of Donaldson, Overstreet, and Saar) is meant to portray a “benign matron turned urban guerilla” who has awakened from her smiling passivity with a vengeance.²² Yet, there is one unsettling feature common to these three armed and dangerous protagonists which lessens their ability to subvert the Aunt Jemima convention. In their attempts to eradicate all evidence of passivity and complacency, these artists have, in fact, replaced one stereotype with another—that of the black “superwoman.” Gone is the benevolent matron. In her place stands an angry and violent

fighting machine, ready to do battle with guns or fists, and a malevolent danger to man and child. The latter image is no more sympathetic or realistic than the former. In this regard, Ringgold's *Slave Rape Series* differs from the works of her contemporaries in critical ways that deftly allow the artist to avoid the "superwoman" pitfall—even if the differences may not immediately be apparent.

In the *Slave Rape* paintings Ringgold also has armed her protagonists. Their features also allude to black stereotypes in a general way, if not specifically to Aunt Jemima. The disturbing likeness of Ringgold's figures to popular caricatures is effected through the rendering of their round eyes, widely opened mouths, brightly painted lips, animated postures, and caricature-like expressions of surprise. Like her contemporaries, however, Ringgold, through subtle adjustments to the convention, reclaims the black stereotype, defusing it and making it her own.

Ringgold's reference to caricature, however, is less overt than that of the other artists. As a result, the subversiveness of her paintings is less apparent. For example, as mentioned, Ringgold's works do not allude to a specific stereotype. Also, the features of her women are not excessively exaggerated. Their eyes are large and round, but not quite bulging; their faces resemble cartoon images more so than caricature. By choosing to allude to, rather than overtly imitate black stereotypes, Ringgold avoids replacing the passive mammy with its alter-ego, the castrating, matriarchal superwoman. The superwoman, because she is completely self-sufficient and needs no compassion or support, generally receives neither. On the contrary, Ringgold's figures are more credible. Although they have weapons and have been instructed, by way of the paintings'

titles, to “fight,” they have also rather reasonably been encouraged to “run” and to call for “help.” In this way, Ringgold acknowledges the vulnerability of her women while asserting their active resistance to victimization.

Several details further confound a straightforward reading of the *Slave Rape* paintings. First, the theme—women being chased by slave catchers—is deadly serious. The figures are completely preoccupied with their predicament. They cry out, run in panic, and fight their attackers (figs. 57, 62, 65, 66). Yet, as mentioned, the viewer does not sense any genuine distress on their parts. There is a distinctly humorous, almost farcical, quality to their stiff, awkward—even weak—gestures and animated expressions. The artist has purposely fused a facetious rendering with a grim theme; and this use of humor is the key to symbolism of *Slave Rape*.

Humor, it has been said, diminishes the horrors of the past.²³ Ringgold, through exaggerated gestures and expressions, undermines the gravity of the drama by enhancing its comic nature.²⁴ She mitigates the horror of slave rape by depicting it as somewhat less than horrible. In this way the viewer can absorb the image—and the lesson—without becoming unnerved by the subject matter. If the artist did not temper the theme in this manner, the paintings might well be deemed unpalatable by the viewer, and in effect become useless as communicative vehicles. Ringgold’s intention is to draw the viewer into the image first, before revealing the true nature of the subject (much as she once did with the painting *Flag for the Moon: Die Nigger*, fig. 27). Moira Roth explains how the artist accomplishes this with her “deliberate and highly sophisticated use of naïveté”:

If we read Ringgold carefully, we are forced to face that hidden and ugly part of

our history. Here again, however, the narrative often sweetens the message by its beguiling tone²⁵

In the case of the *Slave Rape* portrayals, the beguiling tone is achieved through the clear blue skies and the colorful flowers that crowd the landscape, as well as through the seemingly playful gestures and body language of the women.

Dubin suggests that oppressed people often appropriated stereotypes that mock them in order to

cope with the oppressive aspects of the social structure they commonly confront. Here joking is seen as a safety valve, channeling off tensions and placing individual rage and frustration into a social context.²⁶

Dubin is suggesting that when African-Americans make light of oppression, it helps them to adjust to intolerable aspects of their lives and history that cannot be altered. Ringgold has coined the phrase “wild art” to describe art by black women which is designed to exorcize the painful emotions that are associated with living in an oppressive situation:

Wild art is about self-contained rage It [is] about things we can do nothing about. It is an obsession we cannot escape. So we isolate it, picture it, and then we are free to let it go.²⁷

The routine and systematic rape of enslaved African women has haunted American history, distorting in myriad ways the true identity of black women. This disturbing historical fact is what Ringgold “pictures” and what she ultimately “lets go.”

The reality of the rape of enslaved African women resulted in the perpetuation of another distorting myth—that of the “Jezebel.” Mistaken beliefs that African women were sexually promiscuous and, like animals, fit only for breeding began the moment these women were first taken prisoner by the slave traders—the very moment Ringgold

has chosen to capture on canvas.

The first enslaved Africans were brought to the Carolinas in 1526, when America was still the uncharted New World. The captives who arrived that year, brought by the Spaniards, revolted, escaped, and took refuge among Native American communities further inland. This is the first such revolt known to have occurred in North America.²⁸ It soon became apparent to European slave traders that the spirit of the Africans had to be broken before they arrived in the Americas in order to minimize the possibility of revolt upon arrival. As a result, the “middle passage” across the Atlantic ocean—a trip of five to twelve weeks—became the scene of many untold tortures designed to extinguish any willful resistance on the part of the captives.

During a crossing, African prisoners were stored like freight under the deck of the ship, unable to sit upright or to cleanse their bodies properly. Suffocation, hunger, grief, and illness killed some fifteen to thirty percent of the human cargo. Many of the enslaved, rather than endure the unthinkable conditions to which they were being subjected, were successful in committing suicide by butting their heads against the walls of the ship or against the heads of their fellow captives. Self-starvation, another form of suicide, was often prevented by applying burning coals to the lips of the slaves, forcing their mouths open.²⁹

The torment of rape was reserved primarily for the women who nightly were brought above decks for this ordeal. Refusal to submit could, and often did, mean death. It was a terrible moral dilemma for the African women. Submission to the European sailors, however abhorrent, could mean possible survival and even some measure of

protection from the worst horrors of the voyage. Thus, after examples had been made of the first few uncooperative women (usually by way of beatings), many others chose to capitulate without resistance. Hence, before even arriving in the New World, African women were labeled promiscuous and lacking in morals by the very Europeans who had repeatedly raped them.³⁰ Further, the rape of these women was not only an expression of the sexual urges of the white seamen but also a weapon of domination and repression whose covert goal, like that of the other abuses, was to extinguish the enslaved woman's will to resist.³¹

Once the African woman was in the New World, her sexuality quickly became a commodity. She was seen as a breeder—an animal whose monetary value could be calculated precisely in terms of her ability to reproduce. Thus, her experience of motherhood was shaped, through the slave system, by capitalist efforts to harness fertility for its dollar value.³² By associating the black woman's sexuality so closely with money, the system of slavery arranged for her to be seen as a prostitute. Who else would “sell” her own body?

Enslaved women were also expected to submit passively to the sexual advances of their owners just as they had to the European sailors; and these women understood that lashing, beating, or some other form of punishment awaited them if they refused. Those who agreed to this “passive yet insidious breeding system” by becoming pregnant at an early age and producing as many children as possible were rewarded with lighter workloads, extra rations, and other bonuses. In this way, the slave system ensured that the sexuality of black women would continue to be devalued morally.³³

Comparative literature scholar, Susan Rubin Suleiman, argues that Western conventions have limited how women experience their own sexuality. Suleiman asserts that women have been allowed only two choices:

either to experience herself in sex hyperabstractly (in an “immediate and universal” way, as Hegel would say) so as to make herself worthy of divine grace and assimilation into the symbolic order, or else to experience herself as *different*, other, fallen (or, in Hegel’s terms again, “immediately particular”).³⁴

Suleiman outlines a dichotomy that existed in the colonial era, whereby enslaved women became the fallen “other,” and white women, the chaste, transcendent embodiment of the divine.³⁵ In other words, sexual promiscuity became the purview of the African-American woman and asexual purity the realm of the white mistress. This paradigm created a situation that allowed the enslaved woman to be sexually abused by the white master and simultaneously despised by the white mistress who blamed the slave woman for her husband’s infidelities. The mistress reacted by further mistreating the slave woman, and the latter found herself trapped in a relentless cycle of abuse.³⁶

Black men, of course, were powerless to protest the abuse of their women since any challenge, whether physical or verbal, directed by a black man toward a white, was criminally punishable. In the end, black women, having been completely objectified, were left vulnerable and alone. The alleged promiscuity of these women, which was accepted as fact by many Americans both during and after slavery, has long been an excuse designed to justify their sexual exploitation and objectification.³⁷

The objectification of the black woman’s body is addressed by Alice Walker, in an examination of the works of the poet, Jean Toomer. In her book, *In Search of Our*

Mother's Gardens, Walker states the following:

In the selfless abstractions their bodies became to the men who used them, they became more than “sexual objects,” more even than mere women: they became “Saints.” Instead of being perceived as whole persons, their bodies became shrines: what was thought to be their minds became temples suitable for worship. These crazy Saints stared out at the world, wildly, like lunatics—or quietly, like suicides; and the “God” that was in their gaze was as mute as a great stone. Who were these Saints? These crazy, loony, pitiful women? Some of them, without a doubt, were our mothers and grandmothers.³⁸

It is difficult to look at Ringgold's *Fight: To Save Your Life* (fig. 58) without imagining the crazed saints to whom Walker refers. Ringgold's monumental nude does indeed stare out at us “wildly.” She stands frozen, timeless; and the viewer is left either to stare at her improbable image or to turn away from her evident vulnerability and the blank emptiness of her gaze, which is indeed as “mute as a great stone.”

Ringgold's woman gently, carefully, holds her rounded stomach, perhaps intending to draw our attention to the abdomen as the locus of the uterus and of life. We are thus reminded, as Walker suggests, that this woman is more than an objectified victim; she is indeed a shrine—a shrine of motherhood and future generations. Even in this, however, Ringgold's woman subverts traditional gender roles in the manner in which she is depicted: although she is a mother-figure, she carries an axe. Despite her obvious ability to protect herself, however, she is nevertheless tragic. Unclothed except for the overlapping leaves that brush her shoulders; unprotected except for the carefully carved axe that she holds at her side, Ringgold's slave-to-be is frozen with surprise. Her gaze is locked with ours; and the artist's desperate cry echoing back through time, “Fight To Save Your Life,” seems to fall on deaf ears. This woman, like Eve, has been expelled

abruptly from the Garden, and she is stunned by the sudden and permanent change in her life circumstance.³⁹

For Ringgold, *The Slave Rape Series* is self-reflexive. By arming her female protagonists, the artist metaphorically “arms” herself and joins them in their struggle to retain their freedom, as she explains:

Slave Rape was a narrative in which I placed myself in the time of my female ancestors, those brave African women who survived the horror of being uprooted and carried off to slavery in America.⁴⁰

By locating herself in the past, Ringgold (an empowered woman of the present) is able to stand with her ancestors, put weapons in their hands, and aid them in avoiding capture. She has traveled back symbolically in time in order to alter the future.

Ringgold also sees this series as a form of emotional release. She alludes to this in a further discussion of “wild art,” which she believes helps black women to express their most violent emotions:

“Wild art” is [an expression of] rage about something that has happened to us personally; it is autobiographical; an expression of our rejection, anger, fear, hate, or pain [It is] a release of obsessive feelings.⁴¹

Slave Rape, by focussing on the moment when African woman first fell victim to European oppression, does indeed serve to release the artist’s “obsessive feelings” about the centuries of abuse and misrepresentation that black women have endured. Ringgold’s series provides a consistent search through the past, one which helps her to comprehend the circumstances of her existence in the present.

Walker, in another excerpt from *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens*, describes her similar motivation, as a black poet, to examine her history. Her words shed light on

Ringgold's conception of the power of "wild art":

Guided by my heritage of a love of beauty and a respect for strength--in search of my mother's garden, I found my own. And perhaps in Africa over two hundred years ago, there was just such a mother; perhaps she painted vivid and daring decorations in oranges and yellows and greens on the walls of her hut . . . ; perhaps she wove the most stunning mats or told the most ingenious stories of all the village story tellers.⁴²

Both Ringgold and Walker have found comfort and courage in an examination of the past. Ringgold's paintings, like Walker's poetry, recreate the vivid colors, woven patterns, and stories of past generations. The *Slave Rape* series also documents their greatest tragedy--a circumstance of enslavement and degradation that these women nonetheless survived, leaving a legacy of endurance to their artist-daughters. Ringgold considers herself a "living link between generations of strong, secure women" and this, she says, gives her the confidence to survive in today's chaotic world.⁴³

On a more immediate and literal level, Ringgold was able to connect the *Slave Rape* series with her past "mothers" by involving her own mother in their creation. In 1972, the artist returned from Amsterdam filled with creative inspiration after having seen the Tibetan *thangkas*; she then asked her mother, Willie Posey, to design Tibetan-like fabric borders for *Slave Rape*. Ringgold and Posey visited a gallery of Asian art in New York that sold the *thangkas*. There, Posey was as impressed with the fabric works as Ringgold had been. This critical moment in the artist's career marks the beginning of a decade-long collaboration between mother and daughter, who worked as a team creating an array of textile works including masks, costumes, and *thangkas* until Posey's death in 1981.⁴⁴

In the following passage, Ringgold describes how their partnership began and how quickly her mother became enamored of the *thangkas*:

Mother was fascinated. There were several *thangkas* laid out on the floor in the back of the tiny gallery; before I knew it, Mother was back there inspecting the fabric and the workmanship of the *thangkas* for minute details. The gallery dealer was less than pleased that we had discovered his workroom where he was restoring old *thangkas* to look like new. But mother placated him by telling him how beautiful they were, and he could see that she appreciated the exquisite fabric and fine craftsmanship. After this we were out of there in a flash. Mother took me to one of her favorite places to buy brocaded fabrics and we bought several. Mother made the *thangkas* for all my paintings and they were beautiful, though at times I was horrified by the asymmetrical liberties she took with the design. Later, I realized how skillfully she had translated the Tibetan *thangkas* . . . into a unique African-American expression.⁴⁵

Posey's sense of aesthetic freedom, apparent in the "liberties" that she took with the fabric borders for *Slave Rape* (fig. 62), is reified in Ringgold's own life and creative pursuits. Ringgold readily admits to this, stating that she inherited her self-confident use of unorthodox creative methods, and much of what she knows about art in general, from her mother.⁴⁶ Ringgold sees her art, particularly the *Slave Rape Series*, as belonging within an historic and familial context, like an umbilical cord of sorts, that connects the creative endeavors of past generations--quilting and dress-making--to those of her own time.

* * *

How then do Ringgold's nudes of the past function to alter negative perceptions of black women in the present? Before this question can be answered, it is essential to understand how the nude itself functions in art historical terms. Defining the "nude" as

an unclothed body that is “clothed in art,” writer-historian Kenneth Clark describes a “naked” body as one that is “deprived of clothes, huddled and defenseless.” To be naked, says Clark, is to experience discomfort and embarrassment as a result of having been deprived of one’s clothing. Clark argues further that the viewer of a naked figure is likely to experience similar feelings of discomfort. In contrast, to be nude, Clark assures his readers, carries no uncomfortable tone. Nudity implies a prosperous and confident body—the body reformed.⁴⁷ In challenging Clark’s interpretation, art historian John Berger states that “to be naked is to be oneself,” which would seem to suggest a less pejorative reading of the concept of nakedness. As art historian Lynda Nead points out, however, Berger’s inversion of Clark’s account does not imply a lack of objectification, only a shift in the identity of the figure being objectified—from an anonymous nude woman to one who embodies “the painter’s personal vision of a particular woman.”⁴⁸

According to historian Carol Duncan, male artists “reenact, in hundreds of particular variations, a remarkably limited set of fantasies.” These fantasies place the female nude in the role of adversary as well as victim. She must be controlled through assimilation to male desire, objectification, or degradation so that the male artist/viewer is able to place himself in the role of conqueror, dominator, or savior. Female sexual experience thus is equated with surrender and victimization.⁴⁹ Although there are certainly examples of nude women painted by men that do not conform to Duncan’s qualifications, there are a great many more that do.⁵⁰

Making an argument similar to that of Duncan, art historian Gill Saunders alleges that, as a genre, the female nude has no male equivalent and has no purpose beyond the

construction of an erotic ideal for male consumption. Saunders further contends that the male artist constructs the perfect partner for his own, or for his male patron's, enjoyment. Passive, receptive, and available, the nude female body is thus commonly presented as sexual spectacle—an invitation to voyeurism—and the woman herself is often oblivious to the spectator.⁵¹ While comments such as these are helpful in understanding the traditional premise of the male artist who paints the female nude, Saunders is mistaken in claiming that there is no male equivalent to the female genre. Indeed, when the ancient Greeks first depicted the nude human form, their subjects were invariably men, and this preference resurfaced in the Renaissance.⁵²

The two nude genres, male and female, did not however serve similar symbolic functions. The male nude embodied cognition and energetic forces, while the female exemplified passivity and intuition.⁵³ Saunders notes that a common device used in representing the female nude was to show her sleeping or averting her eyes. In this way, she remained innocently unaware of her sexuality and of the male's attraction to it. Such devices, says Saunders, render the woman anonymous, denying individuality and status. When, occasionally, the woman does look out at the viewer, it is only to invite his continued perusal and to imply "receptivity to male desire."⁵⁴

The question remains, then, where do Ringgold's figures fit within the context of these paradigms? The female figures in the *Slave Rape* series are unclothed, but are not deprived of clothing. Ringgold deliberately portrays them as "nudes"—in a state of dress to which they are accustomed. Yet, they experience discomfort similar to that associated by Clark with the "naked" figure. This discomfort, however, is not derived from their

state of undress, but rather from the physical threat to their bodies posed by the slave catcher.

Ringgold's women are neither huddled nor defenseless; their fertile bodies and surroundings indicate their prosperity. Their confidence, however, has clearly been shaken, and they either gesture frantically or stand frozen with fear. The figures are neither anonymous (since they are portraits of the artist and her daughters), nor are they particularized (since they simultaneously symbolize all enslaved African women). They embody male nude characteristics of energy and cognition; while female nude traits such as passivity and submission are eschewed in favor of the more masculine attributes. In fact, these women cannot be defined as either nude or naked; and they do not completely accommodate either male or female definitions of the nude. It is precisely this obfuscation of artistic conventions that gives the *Slave Rape* series its authority. In a feat of inversion, the *Slave Rape* paintings take the subject of the abduction of African women—a subject that suggests the domination and victimization of women by men—and effectively re-writes the history.⁵⁵

When women artists like Ringgold paint the female nude, they become the objects of their own self-reflexive desires as well as active surveyors of their own bodies. As feminist art critic Maryse Holder notes, many women artists of recent decades have deliberately refrained from imitating male artists in their representations of the nude. Instead, they record an experience that empowers female “sexualism” with mythic qualities (such as the ability of sixteenth-century African women to triumph over slave catchers and rapists). Such depictions enhance self-discovery and promote a sense of

self-worth. In fact, the very nature of women artists painting the female nude implies a contradiction of terms, since the male gaze is replaced by a female one. Although women traditionally have been seen as objects rather than as creators of art, their roles as creators, particularly with the nude image, transform conventions to the extent that new criteria of judgement are mandated. If Carol Duncan's assessment is correct—that male representations of the female nude are in large part about the assertion of the artist's sexual domination—it would follow that when women paint themselves, they are asserting dominion over their own bodies.⁵⁶

The authority of *The Slave Rape Series* is affirmed by the fact that primacy is given to the black nude by a black woman artist. She becomes both the seer and the surveyed, the creator and the object.⁵⁷ Further, Ringgold's images stand in sharp contrast to those of African-American male artists such as Archibald Motley, William H. Johnson, Francisco Lord, Eldzier Cortor, and Romare Bearden. In a discussion of the works of these artists, critic and historian Judith Wilson notes that their representations of black women serve two functions—one positive and one negative. “By undoing the erasure, marginalization, and fetishistic exoticizing of the black female nude,” states Wilson, Bearden, in particular, “participated in an important recuperative project of twentieth-century African-American art.” Yet, at the same time, an examination of Bearden's images (as well as those of other twentieth-century black male artists) reveals a reliance on voyeurism and racial and gender stereotypes (although the profundity of these characteristics in Bearden's work is somewhat overstated by Wilson).⁵⁸

Saunders has noted that images wherein women artists cast themselves as creators

and men as bystanders have become more common since the advent of feminism than ever before. Saunders further believes that in such works the female figure becomes “the life force . . . and the sign of her power is her nakedness.”⁵⁹ Within this context we can begin to understand how Ringgold’s images work to create new paradigms for the representation of black women.

Feminist scholar and author, Audre Lorde, believed that women’s fearless and open acceptance of their own bodies and sexuality—what she calls the “erotic”—is vital for overcoming sexual oppression. In *Sister Outsider*, Lorde outlines her views:

In touch with the erotic, I become less willing to accept powerlessness, or those other supplied states of being which are not native to me, such as resignation, despair, self-effacement, depression, self-denial.⁶⁰

Within this framework, Ringgold uses the black nude form as an empowering element. By tapping into Lorde’s conceptualization of the erotic as a state of sexual self-awareness, Ringgold is able to reclaim the black woman’s body and image, and replace the stereotype of sexual promiscuity (or in the case of the mammy—sexual passivity) with one that acknowledges sexuality.

Erica Jong believes that women artists, like Ringgold, who paint the nude combine sexuality and creativity in a way that is both empowering and inevitable. In a 1972 *Ms. Magazine* anthology, the following words of Jong served as an informal caption for a photograph of Ringgold:

Women artists cannot escape exploring their own sexuality because the connection between sex and inspiration is intimate. They are forms of intense energy. They connect and correspond. The relationship between the artist and the Muse is a sexual relationship in which it is impossible to tell who is fucking and who is being fucked. If sex and creativity are often seen . . . by dictators as subversive

activities, it's because they lead to the knowledge that you own your own body (and with it your own voice), and that's the most revolutionary insight of all.⁶¹

Jong, in reiterating Lorde's concept of the erotic, has ideally expressed the function of the *Slave Rape* paintings. The exploration of creativity and sexuality becomes for Ringgold one and the same activity. Ringgold is both artist and muse; and the process of painting these nude women becomes a tremendous act of self-love, particularly so in the monumental self-portrait *Fight: To Save Your Life* (fig. 58).⁶² By denying the European intruder his captives, Ringgold alters history, giving back to her ancestors control over their own bodies, affirming their autonomy and reifying her own.

Lorde tells us that "the erotic heals the entire being, the body as well as the mind," and Ringgold utilizes the erotic to this end.⁶³ Her wide-eyed, naked women communicate an acceptance and awareness of their bodies as entities that exist independently of male control. The women do not pose or posture for male delectation; they do not avert their eyes from a male gaze; they do not display inviting smiles. They are aware that they are being watched, but their bodies, configured as they are by a woman artist, do not accommodate the scrutiny of their male attackers or of their male viewers. Angela Davis states that "throughout the history of this country, black women have manifested a collective consciousness of their sexual victimization."⁶⁴ This being the case, then it can be surmised that Ringgold's broader intention with *Slave Rape* is somehow to undermine the foundation of that victimization and, in doing so, to challenge the stereotypes that continue to misrepresent women of color.

In its capacity to alter the present by deconstructing the past, the *Slave Rape*

portrayals also invert power relations. In traditional Western art, clothed figures, when juxtaposed to unclothed ones, are often associated with protection and domination. The unclothed figures are thus seen as either victimized or vulnerable.⁶⁵ According to Saunders, images

featuring clothed men and naked women show rescuer and rescued, hero and victim, again a gendered division. Such subjects seem to have had a particular appeal in the 19th century, using the demands of the narrative to excuse and validate the nudity in a . . . moral context.⁶⁶

Examples of nineteenth-century hero/victim representations occur in a wide variety of works, including those of such artists as Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, Sir Edward Burne-Jones, Pierre-Paul Prud'hon, and Sir John Everett Millais (fig. 63, 64). Saunders argues that “these pictures set up a range of opposites: the armored male figure active, hard, invulnerable, . . . against the naked female soft, vulnerable, unprotected.”⁶⁷ Such images are designed to reaffirm women’s subordinate role in society much like post-Reconstruction stereotypes reaffirmed the subordinate role of African-Americans.

In *Slave Rape Series* numbers 14, 15, and 16 (each entitled *Help*), Ringgold has adhered to the hero/victim formula by juxtaposing nude women with a clothed man (figs. 65, 66). The man is represented by legs that are clad in white pants and black boots—the only parts of his fleeing figure that are visible. Yet, despite this work’s affinity with nineteenth-century European paintings, Ringgold alters the conventional reading by introducing several unconventional elements. First, the women are armed. They may be unclothed, but they are not unprotected. Second, the male figure is not the hero; he appears to be as much a victim as the women, and is apparently running away from them.

Third, the slave catcher has been decapitated metaphorically by the picture's left edge and, as such, has been disempowered. The artist once referred to this cropped male figure as "a fragment of a man." Her comment points to the fact that this fragmentation results in a de-centered universe that strips man of his privilege.⁶⁸ Traditional roles have been inverted. The nude figures are active and empowered by their weapons; the clothed male figure is cowardly and removes himself from the confrontation--powerless and unarmed.

Ringgold's interpretation of the roles of hero and victim in *Slave Rape* give to the female characters what the British author, Angela Carter, terms "the advantage of their disadvantages."⁶⁹ The nakedness of Ringgold's women neither undermines their power nor establishes their identity as victims. This is so because, as Carter suggests, women's value in society resides more in their skin than in their clothing. Thus, their strength cannot be lessened automatically by the mere removal of those clothes. Their bare flesh is their armor, comparable to the slave catcher's armor which is represented by his clothing as an indicator of his status.⁷⁰ By defining female nudity as an asset rather than a liability, Ringgold, once she had provided her women with weapons, established for them an advantage over the male antagonist.

There exists a complex relationship between the fact that the women in *Slave Rape* are armed and the fact that they have been armed by the painter, whose very brush can be interpreted as a weapon of sorts. This relationship can be analyzed through an examination of the "penis-as-paintbrush" metaphor and its complement, the "canvas-as-virgin." These two concepts have been articulated by both Auguste Renoir and Wassily

Kandinsky. When asked how he painted after his hands had become crippled, the arthritic Renoir replied, “With my prick”—a comment which Renoir’s son, who is also his biographer, describes as a rare testimony “to the miracle of the transformation of matter into spirit.”⁷¹ Kandinsky, in likening the canvas to the virgin, and the act of painting to forcible intercourse (or rape), stated the following:

I learned to battle with the canvas, to come to know it as a being resisting my wish . . . and to bend it forcibly to this wish. At first it stands there like a pure chaste virgin And then comes the willful brush which first here, then there, gradually conquers it with all the energy peculiar to it, like a European colonist.⁷²

For Kandinsky, painting becomes an act of force, imposed upon the virgin canvas; and ironically, it is also equated with the “rape” by European colonizers of lands such as Africa and, by extension, the women of those lands. In the *Slave Rape* series, a woman (the artist) now holds the “penis/paint” brush. With this metaphorical weapon Ringold similarly empowers her female figures. The artist’s paintbrush is transformed, in the narrative, into a weapon of castration—the axe. Within a Freudian context of downward displacement, if one interprets the slave catcher’s missing head as a castration, the rape of these African women becomes virtually impossible. (Of course, downward displacement hardly seems necessary since the male figure has, in fact, been cut off at the genitals.)

Ringold’s cutting off of the slave catcher’s upper body mirrors a similar ploy used by Edouard Manet in his paintings *Bar at the Folies Bérgères* and *Ball at the Opera* (fig. 67). In each painting, Manet has included at the upper edge of the canvas the cut-off leg (or legs) of a woman, clad in high-heeled boots. Linda Nochlin argues that, in these

works,

by interrupting the flow of the narrative with cut-off legs . . . Manet's painting reveals the assumption on which such narratives are premised. The detached parts of female bodies constitute a witty rhetorical reference, a substitution of part for whole, to the sexual availability of lower-class and marginal women for the pleasure of upper class men.⁷³

Nochlin believes that the “apparently accidentally amputated legs” in Manet's paintings make one aware of the nature of male/female power relations in late nineteenth-century Parisian society. When parts of a woman's body are shown, they imply the sexual attractiveness and availability of the unseen woman. On the contrary, argues Nochlin, “this is never the implication of similarly fragmented masculine legs.” When truncated parts of a male body are presented they function as signifiers of energy and power (as in the cut-off male figure to the left in *The Ball at the Opera* and to the right in *Bar at the Folies Bergère*).⁷⁴

Similarly, sociologist Cathie Mathews argues that this type of objectification is a psychological device used to preclude identification, and thus empathy, with the image portrayed. In examining Willem de Kooning's paintings of women, Mathews notes that the process of visual objectification of the body—mutilation, slashing, fragmentation—has most often been utilized by male artists to attribute to the female “inferior moral, intellectual, and psychological characteristics.”⁷⁵ If we reverse this order, then Ringgold's objectification of the once-empowered slave catcher renders him the sexual object. Saunders argues further that although the male nude can be eroticized, only the female is fetishized, mutilated, fragmented, and rendered anonymous.⁷⁶ Certainly, Ringgold's paintings challenge this statement. It is the male figure who is fetishized and

fragmented.

Fragmentation of both male and female bodies also occurs in the works of the artist Philip Pearlstein. Pearlstein treats bodies objectively, like “human still lifes,” by casually cutting off the figures “around the edges.” Art historian, William Gerdtz, succinctly describes Pearlstein’s approach as follows: “that part of the figure that ‘fits’ is included, but what does not is simply cropped.”⁷⁷ In Pearlstein’s 1969 painting, *Standing Male, Sitting Female Nudes* (fig. 68) it would seem that the artist has more in mind than the formalist orientation suggested by Gerdtz. Pearlstein not only decapitates the male figure while leaving the female essentially whole, he also directs the woman’s gaze toward the man’s genitals, thus clarifying the question as to who is being objectified.⁷⁸ Pearlstein’s work offers an exception to the rule, however, since it is most often the female figure, and not the male, who is the target of this type of fragmentation—a fragmentation that transforms a figure into a commodity that can be bought or sold.⁷⁹ *Slave Rape*, by mutilating the male instead of the female, succeeds in conflating victim and victimizer. The slave catcher, as well as the slave, is at risk.

Kenneth Clark has also written, “No nude, however abstract, should fail to arouse in the spectator some vestige of erotic feeling”⁸⁰ His statement, made some forty years ago, has been recently challenged by artists such as Alice Neel and Hannah Wilke, whose nude portraits and self-portraits of aging and diseased subjects are not intended as erotic spectacle (fig. 69).⁸¹ On the contrary, they are portrayed as human beings whose identities include (in addition to gender) age, pain, intelligence, self-awareness, impending death, and a great many other human traits which exist independently of

sexuality. The unselfconscious female nudes of the German Expressionist, Paula Modersohn-Becker, are prototypical examples, similar to those of Neel and Wilke, of unidealized women whose sexuality is only one part of their complex personae. Modersohn-Becker's nude females often simply refuse to acknowledge the existence of the desiring male gaze because the artist, as a woman, replaces it with a gaze of her own. When her figures do acknowledge the gaze of an outsider, theoretically male, they hold his attention not with nude flesh but with the intelligence inherent in their intensely staring eyes (fig. 70-71).

One cannot help but compare Modersohn-Becker's *Self Portrait on Her Sixth Wedding Day* (1906) with Ringgold's *Fight: To Save Your Life* (figs. 72, 58). Both feature women whose accentuated abdominal areas allude to fertility and pregnancy as ordinary rather than as delicate or sacred conditions.⁸² Both images acknowledge the women's fertility as the figures place their hands on their bodies, just below their abdomens. Both artists also challenge conventional depictions of the female nude by combining images of nude women—a pictorial construction that traditionally precludes female cognition—with intelligence and direct psychological engagement.⁸³

Much like Manet's *Olympia*, who “does not collude with the male viewer by lowering her gaze in the modest submissive way expected of women,” Ringgold's monumental nude, and similarly Modersohn-Becker's, stares back at the viewer, challenging the idea that to stare is a male prerogative and a strategy for dominating women. Both *Olympia* and the iconic *Fight* figure usurp this masculine territory by boldly engaging the viewer. The difference lies in what each work implies about the

viewer. *Olympia* invites the gaze, is receptive to it, and is represented as an object of someone else's desire, whereas Ringgold's figure is startled to have discovered the presence of any viewer at all.⁸⁴ In the latter painting, the viewer's gaze becomes unwanted, and is effectively arrested by the figure's own implacable stare. *Olympia* is available; Ringgold's woman is not. If, indeed, Ringgold's figure constitutes the Lacanian "trap for the gaze," then it succeeds in changing the nature of that gaze by redefining the way we see the African-American nude.⁸⁵

Ringgold's nudes also present no contradiction to Clark's statement that the nude should arouse erotic feelings in the viewer. Despite the artist's schematic rendering of the figures and the flavor of caricature in their facial expressions, both of which serve to modify the viewer's perception, the bodily proportions of the figures are portrayed, at least to some degree, as ideal. Their waists are narrow; their hips and bellies are rounded; and their breasts are full and pendulous. Their necks, waists, ears, and ankles are adorned with elaborate jewelry. In fact, several of the figures, shown in profile, resemble the pear-shaped, romanticized nudes of Gothic and Northern Renaissance art, as well as the German Expressionist nudes of the early 20th century, which place emphasis on the woman's abdomen as the locus of fertility (figs. 73-74). Ringgold's nudes feature red lips, prominent pink nipples, and thick dark patches of pubic hair to complete a picture that emphasizes beauty, sexuality, and fertility—all classic attributes of the *Venus Naturalis*.⁸⁶ By placing these figures in landscape settings, Ringgold reiterates a standard device that equates woman with nature and the female body with the landscape—a landscape that passively awaits exploration by men.⁸⁷ In order to come to

some conclusion as to how this convention functions in Ringgold's series, the convention must be studied more closely.

The paradigm of "woman-as-nature" has been examined in a wide variety of European paintings from the Renaissance to the modern age. Like the landscape, women generally have been assigned the attributes of passivity and submission. Conversely, men have been credited with energy and activity. The ancient Greek artists, for example, most often reserved vigorous pursuits such as athleticism, heroism, and violence for men, with limited exceptions occurring in female hunter and warrior characters such as Diana, Athena, and the Amazons. Similar exceptions appear in female allegorical figures, who embody concepts of Victory, Revolution, Virtue, and Justice. Active female nudity, otherwise, has been used to negatively portray women as evil or predatory. In the *femme fatale* figures of *fin de siècle* and Symbolist art, for instance, the unleashed sexuality of figures like the Sphinx, Eve, and Salomé menaces and engulfs their male victims.⁸⁸

Inactive and submissive counterparts to these women also proliferated in late-nineteenth century art—in the works of such artists as Paul Gauguin, Gustav Courbet, Pierre Auguste Renoir, and Paul Cézanne (figs. 75-78). Their paintings epitomize the male "fantasy of absolute possession of women's naked bodies" and are, as Linda Nochlin has argued, affirmations of the fact that women are easily obtainable commodities whose purpose it is to fulfill men's sexual desires.⁸⁹

In comparing the pastoral nudes of *Slave Rape* with these various examples, it becomes apparent that Ringgold has succeeded again in disassembling conventions. First, Ringgold's figures are neither allegorical nor specifically mythical. Furthermore,

they are remarkably animated, outstripping even the most energetic Diana. Their flailing arms and legs gesture emphatically; they run, leap, fall, and tumble with spiritedness. Yet, paradoxically, their energy is mitigated by their fear; and their activity does not alleviate their helplessness. Despite their potential for violence, they neither epitomize standard *femme fatales* as women of unbridled lust, nor do they truly represent women of prowess such as the Amazons. Their active gestures result from their attempts to protect their bodies from harm, but these attempts are disorganized and not convincingly successful.

Ringgold contradicts gender stereotypes even as she alludes to them. She associates the nude in nature with energy, rather than with passivity; yet that energy is not essentially powerful. The chaotic gestures, frightened expressions, and quality of caricature of these figures create for the viewer images that are arresting because of their incongruities and contradictions. The viewer's reaction to *Slave Rape* may be one of surprise, discomfort, confusion, or even amusement. Ringgold's concern is less with the type of viewer response than with the fact that there is a response. By creating images that are disconcerting in a variety of ways, Ringgold insists upon the viewer's attention. In this way, the *Slave Rape* series is as problematic for viewers as the painting *Flag for the Moon: Die Nigger* (fig. 27). Ringgold does not necessarily intend for her audience to like what it sees or to readily comprehend the symbolism of her pictures. She does, however, insist upon the engagement of her audience. Her paintings invariably elicit a reaction—be that reaction positive or negative. To that extent, the works achieve what I believe to be one of the artist's primary goals—to compel the viewer to acknowledge a

particular African-American experience by presenting that experience in an unlikely and unconventional way.

Ringgold's rendering of the women in the *Slave Rape* series further deconstructs gender paradigms in that several of these active women appear to be pregnant (figs. 58, 65-66). Despite the existence of women warriors and women hunters in Western iconography, mothers automatically have been exempted from violent activity. Suleiman successfully argues that, in life as well as in art, women historically have been excluded from the realms of both hunting and war. More specifically, the mother's capacity to give life has been viewed as "profoundly incompatible with the act of dealing with death," an idea that precludes her participation in life-taking activities. Warrior and hunter figures, such as Athena and Diana for example, embody the antithesis of motherhood. As virgins, their chastity is linked to their bravery and military prowess.⁹⁰ Ringgold's figures, as both pregnant and armed, challenge such man-made social constructs.

Another critical component of the *Slave Rape* series is the way in which it deals with concepts of beauty with regard to women of color. Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro contend that the woman artist,

seeing herself as loathed, takes that very mark of her otherness and by asserting it as the hallmark of her iconography, establishes a vehicle by which to state the truth and beauty of her identity.⁹¹

Though Schapiro and Chicago specifically refer to the vagina, I would argue that the mark of otherness that Ringgold foregrounds in *Slave Rape* is one of ethnicity.⁹² The artist uses African-style jewelry, coiffures, and facial features to accentuate the ethnic

appearance of these women—an appearance that, for much of American history undoubtedly had been “loathed.”⁹³

Sander Gilman’s analysis of the treatment of black women’s bodies in visual culture offers a useful model for understanding Ringgold’s approach. Gilman has demonstrated that black women’s bodies have been subjected to excessive pathological distortions. Consequently, their bodies have been perceived as both sexually and racially “other.”⁹⁴ Black women’s bodies have thus been

reduced to signs of sexual abnormality, Obsession with [the] appearance of the buttocks and genitalia transformed the bod[ies] of black women into heightened signs of sexual difference. Black female sexuality, as conceived by white society . . . has been the object of both a profound attraction and fear. It could be said, therefore, that the political issues involved in the representation of the female body by black women artists are even more complex than those that have faced white women.⁹⁵

This being the case, the value of the black woman artist’s endeavor to represent their own bodies cannot be over-stated. The *Slave Rape* figures, within the context of their own environment (that of the painted landscape) and as seen through the eyes of a black woman (those of the artist) are not portrayed as “other” but as “self”. The male European interloper becomes the “other” and Ringgold indeed establishes, as Schapiro and Chicago have stated, a “vehicle by which to state the truth and beauty of her identity.”⁹⁶

The figures in *Slave Rape* defy our understanding of the nude. In them Ringgold asserts the physicality of women (not allowing the viewer to objectify them). Not one of these images permits the male interloper to succeed either in rape or capture. Despite their nudity, which in Ringgold’s womanist iconography rejects rather than invites male

attention, fantasy, and voyeurism, the figures in *Slave Rape* remain autonomous of male action. The series, thus, accomplishes a wide variety of goals. *Slave Rape* explores the past history of black women as well as issues of black female sexuality. These paintings deconstruct images of the female nude, portraying them with a new eye by changing the nature of the so-called traditional male “gaze.”

In the series, Ringgold also confounds several stereotypes of black women, replacing the Jezebel, the mammy, and the matriarch with a more sensitive and complex interpretation of black womanhood. Ringgold undermines the classic dualism that assigns passivity, emotions, and the domestic sphere to women, and action, cognition, and the public realm to men.⁹⁷ She deconstructs gender mythologies by thwarting male/female polarities and conflating gender identities. Lastly, she makes the unbearable bearable—her series defuses the tragic and debilitating reality of slave rape, replacing it with an alternative reality designed to empower, to exorcize, and even to humor.

Curator, Terrie Rouse, characterizes the women in *Slave Rape* as “able, radiant, beautiful, and frightened, but not broken.” Rouse believes that Ringgold’s portrayals recreate an innocence and wholeness than can replace the “sense of loss that inhibits the development of Afro-American women.”⁹⁸ The *Slave Rape thangkas* do indeed reify Ringgold’s desire to conquer the horrors of the African-American past, “to reinterpret history from the vantage point of an enlightened present,” and to affirm life and creativity.⁹⁹ As Saunders explains,

women artists are attempting to retrieve the nude and to infuse it with . . . personal and feminist meanings . . . women are searching for ways to remake and to re-present their own naked image free of patriarchal and phallic associations

. . . . Women artists who wish to challenge the existing stereotypes of the female nude as erotic spectacles are using a variety of techniques: the reworking of myths, the deconstruction of dominant visual codes, parody, [and] role-reversal.¹⁰⁰

Ringgold takes advantage of virtually all of these strategies and depicts for us new women who have eluded the limiting framework of the conventional, male-produced, white nude.¹⁰¹ Ringgold's series is the result of a woman artist reclaiming what always has been hers but which had been usurped from her—control over her body and a voice with which to speak about it.¹⁰²

NOTES

1. Carolee Schneeman, *Cézanne, She Was a Great Painter* (New York: Schneeman, 1975), as quoted in Lucy Lippard, "The Pains and Pleasures of Rebirth: European and American Women's Body Art," in *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women's Art* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1976), 121-138, especially 126; and quoted in Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 67.

2. Faith Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge: The Memoirs of Faith Ringgold* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1995), 197; in the artist's photographic archives records exist of three oil paintings and 16 acrylics. In a 1989 interview, however, Ringgold indicated that there were a total of 23 works--3 oils and 20 acrylics, Ringgold, "Faith Ringgold: Archives of American Art Oral History," interview by Cynthia Nadelman, 6 September to 18 October 1989, 229.

3. Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 96.

4. Ringgold, "Faith Ringgold: Archives of American Art Oral History," 234.

5. *Shuffle Along* was written by Flournoy Miller and Paul Gerard. Music for the production was composed by Eubi Black, with lyrics by Nobile Sissle.

6. Steven C. Dubin, "Symbolic Slavery: Black Representations in Popular Culture," *Social Problems* 34, no. 2 (April 1987): 122.

7. Historian Robert Rydell, in dating the first widespread popularity of the black stereotype, attaches great significance to the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition. Rydell states that "the fair did not merely reflect American racial attitudes, it grounded them on ethnological bedrock." The fair directors, inspired by the 1889 Paris exposition, took advantage of the opportunity to organize anthropological pavilions that displayed "representatives of living races in native garb and activities." These pavilions were supervised by two of the world's foremost anthropologists from the Smithsonian--Otis Mason and Thomas Wilson--and presented blacks as "other." Contemporaneous cartoons of the fair depicted African-American fair visitors in African costumes, with spears, exaggerated lips, and eating watermelon. See Rydell, *All the World's a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), chapter 2 *passim*.

8. Dubin, "Symbolic Slavery," 131; regarding the term "Jim Crow," in 1831 in Louisville, Kentucky, a white song-and-dance man, Thomas D. "Daddy" Rice, created a comic character named "Jim Crow." Based on an elderly black stable hand who danced and sang in a "humorous" fashion as he went about his work, the stock character became

a standard feature in white minstrel shows in the United States and Europe. In 1881, Tennessee passed the first of many laws which were nicknamed "Jim Crow" after this fictional character. The Tennessee law required railroad companies to provide segregated first class cars for African-Americans, instead of making all black passengers ride second class or allowing any to ride with first class white passengers. Eventually all southern states passed similar "Jim Crow" laws which led to racial segregation throughout the region. See Tom Cowan and Jack Maguire, *Timelines of African-American History: 500 Years of Black Achievement* (New York: Roundtable Press, 1994), 58, 108, 125.

9. Dubin, "Symbolic Slavery," 123, 139.

10. Ibid., 122; Angela Davis, *Women, Race & Class* (New York: Random House, 1983), ch. 11 passim, "Rape, Racism and the Myth of the Black Rapist," 172-201; Patricia Morton, *Disfigured Images: The Historical Assault on Afro-American Women* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1991), ch. 3 passim, "The Age of Jim Crow: White and Black Stories of Slave Women," 27-54.

11. Frances Beale, "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female," in *The Black Woman: An Anthology*, ed. Toni Cade Bambara (New York: Penguin, 1970), 92.

12. The quote, "a hell of a history to live down," has been taken from Michele Wallace, *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (New York: Dial, 1979; rpt. New York: Verso, 1991), 133. For examples of the art of black women described in this paragraph, see Edmonia Lewis' *Forever Free* (1867), as well as the art of Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller (1877-1968), Laura Wheeler Waring (1887-1948), Augusta Savage (1900-1962), Nancy Elizabeth Prophet (1890-1960), Lois Mailou Jones (b. 1905), Elizabeth Catlett (b. 1919) and innumerable black women artists of later generations who have achieved renown since 1950. References to the latter can be found in Sylvia Moore and Dr. Leslie King-Hammond, eds., *Gumbo Ya Ya: Anthology of Contemporary African-American Women Artists* (New York: Midmarch Arts Press, 1995).

13. bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 65; Morton, *Disfigured Images*, xiii.

14. Morton, *Disfigured Images*, xv, 10-11; see also Davis, *Women, Race & Class*, 182.

15. See W. E. B. DuBois, "Criteria of Negro Art," *The Crisis* (October 1926): 297; see also Alain Locke, "The American Negro as Artist," *American Magazine of Art* (September 1931): 211-20; Locke, *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (New York: A. & C. Boni, 1925); Locke, *Negro Art: Past and Present* (Washington, D.C.: Association of Negro Folk Education, 1936); Locke, *The Negro in Art: A Pictorial Record of the Negro*

Artist and the Negro Theme in Art (Washington, D.C.: Associates in Negro Folk Education, 1940).

16. Mary Schmidt Campbell, *Tradition and Conflict: Images of a Turbulent Decade, 1963-1973* (New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 1985), 61.

17. Dubin, "Symbolic Slavery," 138.

18. Campbell, *Tradition and Conflict*, 64.

19. *Ibid.*, 65. Campbell states: "Much later, in her quilt of 1983, Faith Ringgold continues the attack in constructing a lengthy narrative based on Aunt Jemima's life, woven into an epic quilt."

20. Yolanda M. Lopez and Moira Roth, "Social Protest: Racism and Sexism," in *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), 146.

21. The far-reaching effects of the rejection by blacks, in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, of the stereotype of Aunt Jemima is reflected in the changing public relations and advertising policies of Quaker Oats (the company that markets the Aunt Jemima brand products). For example, in 1989 Quaker replaced Aunt Jemima's ubiquitous bandana with a fashionable hair-do, including in the new image flecks of gray hair, earrings, and a starched lace collar, all designed to make the image of Aunt Jemima more distinguished-looking. Also, Quaker now helps to sponsor the "Tribute to Black Women Community Leaders" program, which honors outstanding women of color who have played active political, social, and educational roles in their communities. Publicity photographs are taken of the women thus honored in which the honorees are tellingly posed in classic "executive" attire (dark business suits), distancing them visually from the Quaker icon. Tribute to Black Women Community Leaders is co-sponsored by Quaker Oats and the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW), whose President and CEO is Dr. Dorothy I. Height. NCNW "encourages and acknowledges role models from all walks of life. These women demonstrate that balancing career, family, church, scholarship, and community service are ideals that everyone can embrace." The program operates in Georgia, California, Illinois, Louisiana, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Texas.

22. Campbell, *Tradition and Conflict*, 54.

23. Davis Robertson, *World of Wonders* (Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1977), 85.

24. Dubin, "Symbolic Slavery," 130.

25. Moira Roth, "A Trojan Horse," in *Faith Ringgold: A 25 Year Survey* (Hempstead, N.Y.: Fine Arts Museum of Long Island), 49.
26. Dubin, "Symbolic Slavery," 131.
27. Ringgold, "The Wild Art Show," *Women's Art Journal* (Spring-Summer 1982): 18.
28. Cowan and Maguire, *Timelines of African-American History*, 9.
29. Molefi K. Asante and Mark T. Mattson, *Historical and Cultural Atlas of African Americans* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1992), 31-32; Martin Ros, *Night of Fire: The Black Napoleon and the Battle for Haiti*, trans. Karin Ford-Treep (1991; New York: Sarpedon, 1994, 18-19.
30. Ros, *Night of Fire*, 18.
31. Davis, *Women, Race, & Class*, 23-24.
32. Davis, *Women, Race, & Class*, 7; Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge), 50.
33. *Ibid.*, 51.
34. Susan Rubin Suleiman, "(Re)writing the Body: The Politics and Poetics of Female Eroticism," in *The Female Body in Western Culture: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Suleiman (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), 7.
35. See Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820-60," *American Quarterly* 18 (1966): 151-74; see also Morton, *Disfigured Images*, 2, 6, 8-9, 11, 22-23, 29, 30, 32, 34.
36. See Davis, *Women, Race & Class*, 3-29, 172-201; and Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work and the Family, from Slavery to the Present* ((New York: Basic Books, 1985), 11-43.
37. Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 54, 70.
38. Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1983), 232.

39. Interestingly, the frozen stare of the figure in *Fight: To Save Your Life* recalls the Freudian “primal scene” (discussed in chapter 5) in which the child-observer’s “gaze” is riveted by the image of sex between the parents. Adams’ suggestion that “the primal scene and the general subject of sexual looking continue to inform works of art, especially visual images” seems appropriate with regard to *Fight*. This connection is strengthened by Adams statement that “children often view the primal scene as an act of violence, imagining the male as the aggressor and the female as the victim.” This idea is especially relevant to Ringgold’s *Fight*, since this painting represents an instance of impending sexual violence. See Laurie Schneider Adams, *Art and Psychoanalysis* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 226, 243-244.

40. Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 197.

41. Ringgold, “The Wild Art Show,” 18.

42. Walker, *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens*, 243.

43. Ringgold, quoted in Kathy Larkin, “Mother, Daughter, Artist,” *Daily News*, Sunday, November 20, 1983, 4.

44. Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 76-78, 196, 199, 201, 216, 236, 250.

45. *Ibid.*, 197.

46. *Ibid.*

47. Kenneth Clark, *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form* (New York: Pantheon, 1956), 3.

48. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London and Harmondsworth: BBC and Penguin, 1972), 54, 57.

49. Carol Duncan, “The Aesthetics of Power in Modern Erotic Art,” in *Feminist Art Criticism*, 60.

50. Traditional images of huntresses such as Diana and warriors such as Athena and the Amazons do not specifically conform to Duncan’s characterizations, although Abby Wetten Kleinbaum has argued that even the Amazon figure was created specifically to allow men to give free reign to fantasies in which they might harm women with impunity. See Kleinbaum, *The War Against the Amazons* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1983), 1-3. Other images, discussed later in this chapter, which in part contradict Duncan’s assessment of the nude, occur in allegorical figures which embody concepts such as Victory, Justice, Virtue, and Revolution.

51. Gill Saunders, *The Nude: A New Perspective* (London: Harper & Row and Toronto: Fitzhenry & Whiteside Limited, 1989), 23.

52. William H. Gerdtz, *The Great American Nude: A History in Art* (New York and Wash., D.C.: Praeger, 1974), 196; see also Clark, *The Nude*, 8.

53. Clark, *The Nude*, 173-224; Saunders, *The Nude*, 21, 26.

54. Saunders argument presumes that the viewer, by definition, is male. Saunders, *The Nude*, 24. For an analysis of the masculine characteristics of the "gaze" in Western visual culture, see Laura Mulvey's influential "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (Autumn 1975): 6-18 in which she discusses Freud's *Three Essays on Sexuality* and his *Instincts and Their Vicissitudes* which associate looking with sexual desire and the object of the gaze as, in Mulvey's words, "an unknowing and unwilling victim." (p. 9). In part III of her essay on the cinema, "Woman as Image, Man as Bearer of the Look," Mulvey assigns masculinity to the activity of looking and femininity to the passive non-activity of the woman/image. (p. 11).

55. This phenomenon recurs in a much later Ringgold series from 1991 entitled *The French Collection* in which black female nude models sit for Matisse and Picasso, altering the relationship artist-model/male-female in much the same way as does Manet's *Olympia*. For an in-depth discussion of the 1991 series, *The French Collection*, see Ringgold, *The French Collection: Part I* (New York: Being My Own Woman Press, 1992).

56. Danielle Knafo, "In Her Own Image: Women's Self-Representation in Art" (paper presented at the New School for Social Research, New York, March 12 and 26, 1996); Duncan, "Virility and Domination in Early Twentieth-Century Vanguard Painting" in *Feminism and Art History: Questioning the Litany*, ed. Broude and Garrard (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), 293-314; Maryse Holder, "Another Cuntree: At Last a Mainstream Female Art Movement," in *Feminist Art Criticism: An Anthology*, ed. Arlene Raven, Cassandra L. Langer, and Joanna Frueh (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 20; Linda Nochlin, "Some Women Realists," in *Women, Art, Power and Other Essays* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 103.

57. Nochlin, "Some Women Realists," 103.

58. Judith Wilson, "Getting Down to Get Over: Romare Bearden's Use of Pornography and the Problem of the Black Female Body in Afro-U.S. Art," in *Black Popular Culture: A Project by Michele Wallace*, ed. Gina Dent (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992), 112-122, especially 118.

59. Saunders, *The Nude*, 123.

60. Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1984), 56, 58.
61. Suzanne Levine and Harriet Lyons, eds., *The Decade of Women: A Ms. History of the '70s in Words and Pictures* (New York: Paragon Books, 1980), 143; and Erica Jong, "The Artist as Housewife, The Housewife as Artist," *Ms. Magazine* (December 1972):105.
62. Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 96.
63. Z. Nelly Martinez, "The Politics of the Woman Artist in Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits*," in *Writing the Woman Artist: Essays on Poetics, Politics, and Portraiture*, ed. Suzanne W. Jones (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press), 300.
64. Davis, *Women, Race & Class*, 183.
65. Dubin, "Symbolic Slavery," 131; Saunders, *The Nude*, 7.
66. Saunders, *The Nude*, 95.
67. Ibid.
68. Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 197; and Rachel Blau DuPlessis, "For the Etruscans: Sexual Difference and Artistic Reproduction--The Debate Over a Female Aesthetic," in *The Future of Difference*, ed. Hester Eisenstein and Alice Jardine (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1980), 139-140.
69. Angela Carter, *Nothing Sacred: Selected Writings* (London: Verago Press, 1982), 103.
70. Ibid., 104.
71. Auguste Renoir, quoted in Janet Hobhouse, *The Bride Stripped Bare: The Artist and the Nude in the Twentieth Century* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1988), 9.
72. Wassily Kandinsky, "Reminiscences," *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, vol. 1 (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1982) 372; quoted in Max Kozloff, "The Authoritarian Personality in Modern Art," *Artforum* (May 1974): 46; first appeared in the album *Kandinsky: 1901-1913* (Berlin: Verlag Der Sturm, 1913).
73. Nochlin, "Women, Art, and Power," in *Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays*, 13.

74. *Ibid.*, 14-15; curator Lowery Sims has noted the similarity between Ringgold's images of men's fragmented limbs and the works of the contemporary African-American artist, Robert Colescott, which offer a converse to Ringgold's theme. Colescott's *Down in the Dumps*, for example, depicts a black man who is jilted by a white woman and "the white woman is also represented only by her posterior and legs." Sims to Farrington, letter of 15 July 1996.

75. Cathie Mathews, "Woman as Other," in *Women's Power and Roles as Portrayed in Visual Images of Women in the Arts and Mass Media* (Lewiston, N.Y.: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1993), 185.

76. Saunders, *The Nude*, 71.

77. Gerdts, *The Great American Nude*, 196.

78. The gaze of the woman in Pearlstein's painting may also be interpreted as looking past or beyond the male figure, as if she were oblivious to him. In this case his importance is even further diminished; the composition of Pearlstein's *Standing Male, Sitting Female Nudes*, in which the male, rather than the female figure, is fragmented, occurs in several of his paintings of the late 1960, including *Two Figures, One Standing* (1962) and *Male and Female Seated Nudes on Green Drape* (1968); see Philip Pearlstein (Athens, Ga.: Georgia Museum of Art, The University of Georgia, 1970), 20-21, 57.

79. Saunders, *The Nude*, 73.

80. Clark, *The Nude*, 8.

81. Other examples can be found in the nude photographic self-portraits of Jo Spence and Mary Duffy from the 1980s and 90s.

82. Danielle Knafo, "In Her Own Image."

83. Modersohn-Becker and Ringgold's works are part of a tradition that began with Edouard Manet who achieved this effect in 1863 when his *Dejeuner sur l'Herbe* was first exhibited at the Salon des Refusés in Paris. Victorine Meurent, the model who posed for the nude female subject in this painting, stares directly at the viewer with a look of knowing intelligence. Meurent was financially independent, an accomplished musician, an active composer, a writer, and an artist. Her social position and self-confidence are reflected in her expression. The way in which Manet portrayed Meurent, as obviously aware of the viewer and lacking in modesty or concern for her state of undress, provoked an uproar when the painting was first exhibited. *Dejeuner sur l'Herbe* "gave Manet a greater notoriety than any painter had possessed before," wrote Théodore Duret, a

lifelong friend of Manet's, in 1910; and in 1884, Paul Mantz, Director General of the Ministry of Fine Arts in France, described the picture as "terrible and cruel." Wrote Roger Fry in 1932 about the reception of *Dejeuner*, "The papers howled with rage; wherever [Manet] was recognized he was a marked man. This refined gentleman, who belonged to the most cultured circles of the professional class, was really believed by the public to be an almost inhuman monster of depravity" See *Manet: A Retrospective*, ed. T. A. Gronberg (New York: Park Lane, 1988), 26, 28, 60, 196-197, 296, 321. This volume reprints dozens of essays and articles on the works of Manet, including those cited here, which are: Adolphe Tabarant, *Manet, Histoire, Catalographique* (Paris: Éditions Montaigne, 1931), 73-74; Théodore Duret, *Manet and the French Impressionists* (London: Grant Richards, 1910), 28-31; Pierre Courthion and Pierre Cailler, eds., *Portrait of Manet by Himself and His Contemporaries*, trans. Michael Ross (London: Cassel, 1960), 167-176; Roger Fry, *Characteristics of French Art* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1932), 119-122; Louisine W. Havemeyer, *Sixteen to Sixty: Memoirs of a Collector* (New York: Mrs. H.O. Havemeyer and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1961), 215-240.

84. Saunders, *The Nude*, 25; T. J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1985), 79-146 passim.

85. Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1978), chap. 9 passim, "What Is a Picture," quoted in Laurie Schneider Adams, *Art and Psychoanalysis* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 215. The picture serves as a trap for the gaze by, in Adams words, diverting the gaze from a sight that provokes envy and refocusing it. In other words, a picture functions to focus the gaze while simultaneously engaging the intellect.

86. See Clark, *The Nude*, 317-319, 71.

87. Wilson, "Getting Down to Get Over, 118.

88. Clark, *The Nude*, 173, 182; Saunders, *The Nude*, 28-29.

89. Linda Dittmar, "When Privilege Is No Protection: The Woman Artist in *Quicksand* and *The House of Mirth*, in *Writing the Woman Artist*, 151; Nochlin, "Women, Art and Power," 10-11.

90. It should be noted that the mother's exemption from acts of killing can be understood as a cultural construct designed to frame women's social activities, since "in the animal kingdom, on the contrary, there is nothing more ferocious than a mother." See Nancy Huston, "The Matrix of War: Mothers and Heroes," in *The Female Body in Western Culture*, ed. Suleiman, 129, 128.

91. Miriam Schapiro and Judy Chicago, "Female Imagery," *Womanspace Journal* 1, no. 3 (Summer 1973): 14.

92. It is important to note, with reference to Chicago and Schapiro's statement, that as early as 1866, Gustav Courbet treated the woman's vagina in his painting in a manner that can hardly be interpreted as loathsome (though allusions to the landscape, and qualities of passivity and submission are inherent in these depictions.) See Michael Fried, *Courbet's Realism* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 209-220.

93. Although the "black is beautiful" ideology became nationally popular during the Black Liberation Movement of the 1960s, the slogan "black is beautiful" was first popularized by Marcus Garvey in the 1920s in conjunction with the Back to Africa Movement of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (U.N.I.A.). This slogan was later revived by the leaders of the Black Power Movement. See Elton C. Fax, *Garvey: The Story of a Pioneer Black Nationalist* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1971), xx, 2, 124.

94. Sander Gilman, *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985), 76-130.

95. *Ibid.*, quoted in Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity, and Sexuality* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 75.

96. Schapiro and Chicago, "Female Imagery," 73.

97. Allison Booth, "Incomplete Stories: Womanhood and Artistic Ambition in *Daniel Deronda* and *Between the Acts*," in *Writing the Woman Artist*, 121.

98. Terrie S. Rouse, "Faith Ringgold—A Mirror of Her Community," in *Faith Ringgold: Twenty Years of Painting, Sculpture, and Performance (1963-1983)*, ed. Michele Wallace (New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem), 9.

99. Martinez, "The Politics of the Woman Artist in Isabel Allende's *The House of Spirits*," in *Writing the Woman Artist*, 297, 301.

100. Saunders, *The Nude*, 117.

101. *Ibid.*, 129, extrapolated from the author's discussion of the works of Roberta Graham.

102. Suleiman, "(Re)writing the Body," 7; many years later, in 1985, Ringgold created the *Slave Rape Story Quilt* which narrates the tale of a woman, eight months

pregnant, who is raped by a drunken sailor on a slave ship. After bearing her child, the woman, Beata, commits suicide by throwing herself into the sea. It is a sad postscript to the hopeful tone of the *Slave Rape thangkas*; however, the story quilt narrative ends with the words of Beata's daughter, "We gonna live and be free"--suggesting that for Ringgold the secret to life, simply and heroically, is to endure.

CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSION: "ONE HELLUVA FOREMOTHER"

"Why don't you fix us something to drink, Daddy?"

"Okay, Mommy."

This simple, gently-spoken exchange took place recently between Ringgold and "Bertie," her husband of thirty-five years. I was sitting with the two of them in the artist's brightly painted kitchen looking at slides of her early work. It occurred to me, while listening to the couple chat about their plans for the day and about what we should eat for lunch, that Ringgold, the loving wife, the mother, and grandmother, seemed far removed from the woman whom I had been researching and about whom I had been writing. How could I reconcile the Faith Ringgold who, through her art, sought to reclaim women from the "social straightjacket of sex-objecthood" with the Faith Ringgold who called her husband "daddy" or with the Faith Ringgold who doted on her grandchildren, taking them with her on trips to Europe or to the Thanksgiving Day Parade?¹ Of course, these seemingly incompatible sides of the artist's character need not be reconciled. Ringgold's personal struggle to reclaim herself through art is precisely what has allowed her to accept, acknowledge, and appreciate the many sides of her dynamic personality.

Ringgold transformed the circumstances of her life into the subject matter of her art. With *Slave Rape*, in particular, she accomplished a "de-colonization" of the black female body by reclaiming its much-maligned form and infusing it with new life. By exploring female experience and identity, Ringgold created a dialogue between art and

society, artist and audience, women of the present and of the past, and, in the process, she performed a simultaneous act of catharsis and redefinition.²

Ringgold's art, with its feminist content and within its feminist context, affirms the value of a matrilineal line or what the artist herself has termed "the family of women."³ It also reaffirms Ringgold's identity as a woman of African descent who reached back into her African heritage "with total recall," so that she might better comprehend her own odyssey through life—an odyssey that is eloquently recorded in her paintings, soft sculptures, and narrative quilts. Ringgold's sojourn represents, in a broader view, a search for human dignity and empowerment which many women artists of color have undertaken. Ringgold sought to re-present black women to the world; to replace the countless misconceived portrayals of black women that proliferated in Western art with reconfigured images that depicted black women as sensitive, heterogeneous human beings.⁴

Ideas and attitudes that were anti-black, anti-female, or discriminatory in any way were said by Shirley Chisholm in 1970 to be equivalent to anti-humanism.⁵ Ringgold's art affirms Chisholm's belief by addressing issues of gender, race, and human interaction in ways that expose the bigotries and prejudices of our society. The artist's black feminist subject matter and material processes, particularly in the *Feminist* and *Slave Rape* paintings, iterate that only when race, color, and sex can be seen as accidents of birth rather than the substance of life will African-American women no longer be compelled to "writhe silently under a mighty wrong."⁶ Ringgold has consistently worked toward that end and has adamantly refused to "writhe silently." She has demanded the

right to be black *and* female *and* respected—a right denied many of her predecessors. By embracing feminism, through her creativity and lifestyle, Ringgold has engaged in a process of self-conscious intellectual, spiritual, and creative growth that has allowed her to realize a humanist vision of herself and her community. By remaining true to a personal vision and ideal, she has been able to tell her own story with the understanding that it was both valid and valuable.⁷

One of the ways in which Ringgold was able to achieve this was through creative collaboration. Such collaboration allies her art with the great craft traditions of the past. As historian Judith Stein has suggested, Ringgold and other women artists of the 1970s “collaborated with their heritage” by fusing decorative and fine art, and also by collaborating with each other to produce works of art that expressed more than an individual artist’s vision. These artists created works that spoke in multiple voices and addressed universal women’s issues. Ringgold is unique in that her collaborative effort was shared with her familial predecessor and fellow artist, her mother, Willi Posey.⁸

Through this true collaboration of heritage, Ringgold was able to branch out, with renewed confidence, into a wide variety of art forms that embraced so-called decorative techniques. The tentative approach of the *thangka* landscapes gave way to more self-assured creative experimentation with fabric, which included masks, costumes, and soft-sculpture. In 1974, Posey and Ringgold’s shared efforts produced a third *thangka* series, *Windows of the Wedding*. These paintings, meant to be exhibited in combination with Ringgold’s soft sculpture (fig. 79), comprise compositions of pure geometric abstraction which are based on the triangular Kuba patterns of which Ringgold is so fond.

Thematically, *Windows of the Wedding* examines the relationships between men, women, and family, exemplified in such works as *Children, Peaceful Love, Mother, and Man* (figs. 80-83), which explore, through abstraction, a variety of human relationships. The familial content of these paintings is represented abstractly, in a variety of active designs, including chromatic, overlapping forms; shimmering, kaleidoscopic compositions of diamond and chevron patterns; and bold, symmetrical configurations of rectangular shapes.

These works, which give the appearance, as the series title suggests, of stained glass windows, serve as ideal background “curtains” for the sculptural environments that Ringgold created during the mid-1970s. These environments incorporate either live figures outfitted with masks and costumes (in the case of Ringgold’s performance pieces) or life-sized soft sculptures (in the case of her installation art). The *Windows of the Wedding* paintings function as focal points for their settings. The stabilizing aim of the *Windows* paintings is enhanced by a Gothic verticality (the works range in height from five to seven feet), which creates settings that are vaguely reminiscent of religious or sacred spaces. Indeed, according to Ringgold’s daughter, Michele Wallace, the *Windows of the Wedding* series has the ability to compel viewers to rethink their ideas about places of worship.⁹

Throughout the decade of the 1970s, while Ringgold designed African-inspired masks for her figures, decorating them with beads, fringe, and embroidery, Posey fashioned the bodies and costumes.¹⁰ In 1980, the mother-daughter team began their final collaboration with the artist’s first quilt, *Echoes of Harlem* (fig. 84), which

combined painting and quilting, paint brush and needle. The importance of this joint undertaking for the artist was best expressed by Ringgold herself, who said, “The quilt was our great work together I couldn’t have done it alone. I needed my mother. And she would never have collaborated with anyone else.”¹¹ Willi Posey died the following year; Ringgold has continued to honor her memory with an ongoing exploration of the quilting tradition that led to the creation of the artist’s now-famous “story quilts.”

For Ringgold, art is a process both of self-learning and of shared learning; it is a progressive process that assists the artist in understanding the complex character of her own life. It is a process that also, once completed, enlightens viewers by fusing thought, feeling, and action, helping others to see their world differently and, ideally, to act to change it.¹² Curator Marcia Tanner describes this process as the mixing together of a long list of ingredients, including,

appropriation, pattern, painting, portraiture, sewing, history, personal narrative, African-American and European-American artistic and cultural forms, rich textiles, gorgeous colors, and complex designs—a transgressive hybrid if there ever was one—to make mordant points about the politics of race and gender. [Ringgold] re-write[s] history from a highly personal, African-American, feminist perspective Ringgold’s [art has] helped legitimize traditional women’s crafts and methods—sewing, quilt-making, doll-making, pattern and decoration—as valid media for making art.¹³

This complex grouping of elements is the result of years of painstaking creative evolution, as well as of personal and professional growth and struggle. It has been my goal, in this study, to trace the path of that evolution; to trace precisely the route taken by Ringgold from her beginnings as a traditionally-trained painter to her transformation into

a mature, eclectic, and diverse artist. The journey has taken us through the artist's childhood; it has examined the familial and psychological forces that shaped her early creativity; it has surveyed her academic training, her personal triumphs and tragedies; it has examined the political and social climate in which the artist lived and the literary and aesthetic traditions that influenced her *oeuvre*.

Through a measured and scrupulous study of Ringgold's personal, professional, social, and cultural milieu we can better understand both the artist and her art. In my examination of the qualities and circumstances that combined to shape Ringgold into the self-defined, self-determined artist that she is today, I issue a call to other historians to look more closely at the art of Faith Ringgold and at the art her black women contemporaries—art that has largely been ignored by scholars. Ringgold is one of the few elite African-American women who has achieved commercial success as an artist. Her odyssey can enlighten us all. It can provide encouragement for artists who are attempting to follow in her footsteps; and it can offer food for thought to art historians whose work it is to shed new light on the history of art and to draw attention to moments in history, to artists, styles, and modes of expression that may have been overlooked, even in the recent past.

Within the feminist movement, women of color led the way in creating effective forms of social protest art; and Ringgold's tireless activism in the late sixties, against racism and sexism, has been acknowledged as a singularly valiant effort.¹⁴ Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, in *The Power of Feminist Art*, articulate that without the feminist agitation and aesthetic innovations of women like Ringgold in the 1970s, many

subsequent American women artists

would not have the subject matter, critical support, or the opportunity for high-level commercial recognition that is now somewhat possible, even though the contemporary American visual art structure continues to critically and economically overvalue the contributions of men and to undervalue those of women.¹⁵

Although it is true that the path for women continues to be a difficult one (and the path for women of color even more so), the path is at least navigable now due to pioneers like Ringgold.

After having struggled for decades outside of the art world support system of patrons, mainstream critics, historians, and dealers, Ringgold did something that historian Moira Roth has described as extraordinary: “She literally went on the road with her art.”¹⁶ With ingenuity, stubbornness, and endurance *sans* dealer, Roth tells us, Ringgold “made contact with a vast array of university and college campus galleries across the country leading to presentation after presentation of her art.”¹⁷ Nonetheless, despite her efforts, Ringgold continued for a time to receive little attention from mainstream galleries, museums, and art publications. It was not until 1980 that her circumstances changed. In October of that year, Ringgold was the only woman artist of color to be included in a group of prominent women artists in the photograph captioned “Where Are the Great Male Artists?” on the cover of *Artnews*.¹⁸ Three years later, Ringgold was honored on her home turf with a major retrospective exhibition at The Studio Museum in Harlem.

Ringgold’s determination to succeed, and her persistence in becoming a commercially successful artist, were fundamental prerequisites to her journey from a

state of inert silence to one of active voice. The fact that Ringgold not only survived, but thrived as an artist is, in many ways, an act of resistance reflective of her revolutionary spirit. No longer on the periphery of the art scene, either as a black artist or as a woman, Ringgold currently enjoys widespread enthusiasm for her work and commands an ever-growing audience. Her success has brought with it innumerable national and international exhibitions, major public commissions, much critical and institutional attention (including eight honorary degrees).¹⁹ Ringgold has accomplished a feat only rarely achieved by a black woman: success, acknowledgment, and veneration as an accomplished artist.

Ringgold once said that after she decided to become an artist, the first thing she had to believe was that she, a black woman, could penetrate the art scene and that she could do so without sacrificing one iota of her blackness, her femaleness, or her humanity. Faith Ringgold is “one helluva foremother” because she believed in the possibility of the improbable which, once realized, became her (and our) fortunate reality.²⁰

NOTES

1. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, introduction to *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), 22.
2. Lucy Lippard, "Sweeping Exchanges: The Contribution of Feminism to the Art of the 1970s," *Art Journal* 39 (Fall/Winter 1980): 362-365.
3. Marcia Tanner, "Mother Laughed: The Bad Girls Avant-Garde," in Marcia Tucker, ed., *Bad Girls* (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1994), 72.
4. Eleanor Flomenhaft, ed. *Faith Ringgold: A 25 Year Survey* (Hempstead, N.Y.: Fine Arts Museum of Long Island, 1990), 7; Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 37.
5. Shirley Chisholm, *Unbought and Unbossed* (New York: Avon, 1970), 181.
6. Anna J. Cooper, speech delivered in 1893, published the previous year in Cooper, *A Voice from the South by a Black Woman of the South* (Xenia, Ohio: The Aldine Printing House, 1892), 78-79; quoted in Bert J. Loewenberg and Ruth Bogin, eds., *The Black Woman in Nineteenth Century American Life* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1976), 330-331.
7. Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 108, 39.
8. For a discussion of collaborative craft traditions in Western art, see Helmuth Theodore Bossert, *Folk Art of Europe* (New York: Rizzoli, 1990) and H. Ruhemann, *Artist and Craftsman: Contrast, Similarity, Influence* (New York: Chanticleer Press, 1948); Judith E. Stein, "Collaboration," in Broude and Garrard, eds., *The Power of Feminist Art*, 226.
9. Michele Wallace, "Critical Analysis of Faith Ringgold's Work," (typewritten document, 30 October 1975), artist's archive; Idem, "Black and Fine: Women's Art," *Majority Report* (12 July 1975).
10. Stein, "Collaboration," 237, 241.
11. Ringgold, quoted in Charlotte Robinson, *The Artist and the Quilt* (New York: Knopf, 1983), 105.

12. Angela Davis, *Women, Culture, and Politics* (New York: Random House, 1989), 200; Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 103.
13. Tanner, "Mother Laughed,"72.
14. Broude and Garrard, *The Power of Feminist Art*, 22-23.
15. Laura Cottingham, "The Feminist Continuum: Art After 1970," in *The Power of Feminist Art*, 285.
16. Moira Roth, "A Trojan Horse," in *Faith Ringgold: A 25 Year Survey*, 52.
17. Ibid.
18. *Artnews* (October 1980); Roth, "A Trojan Horse," 52.
19. Roth, "A Trojan Horse,"49.
20. Ringgold, quoted in Thalia Gouma-Peterson, "Modern Dilemma Tales: Faith Ringgold's Story Quilts," in *Faith Ringgold: A 25 Year Survey*, 23; Tanner, "Mother Laughed," 72.

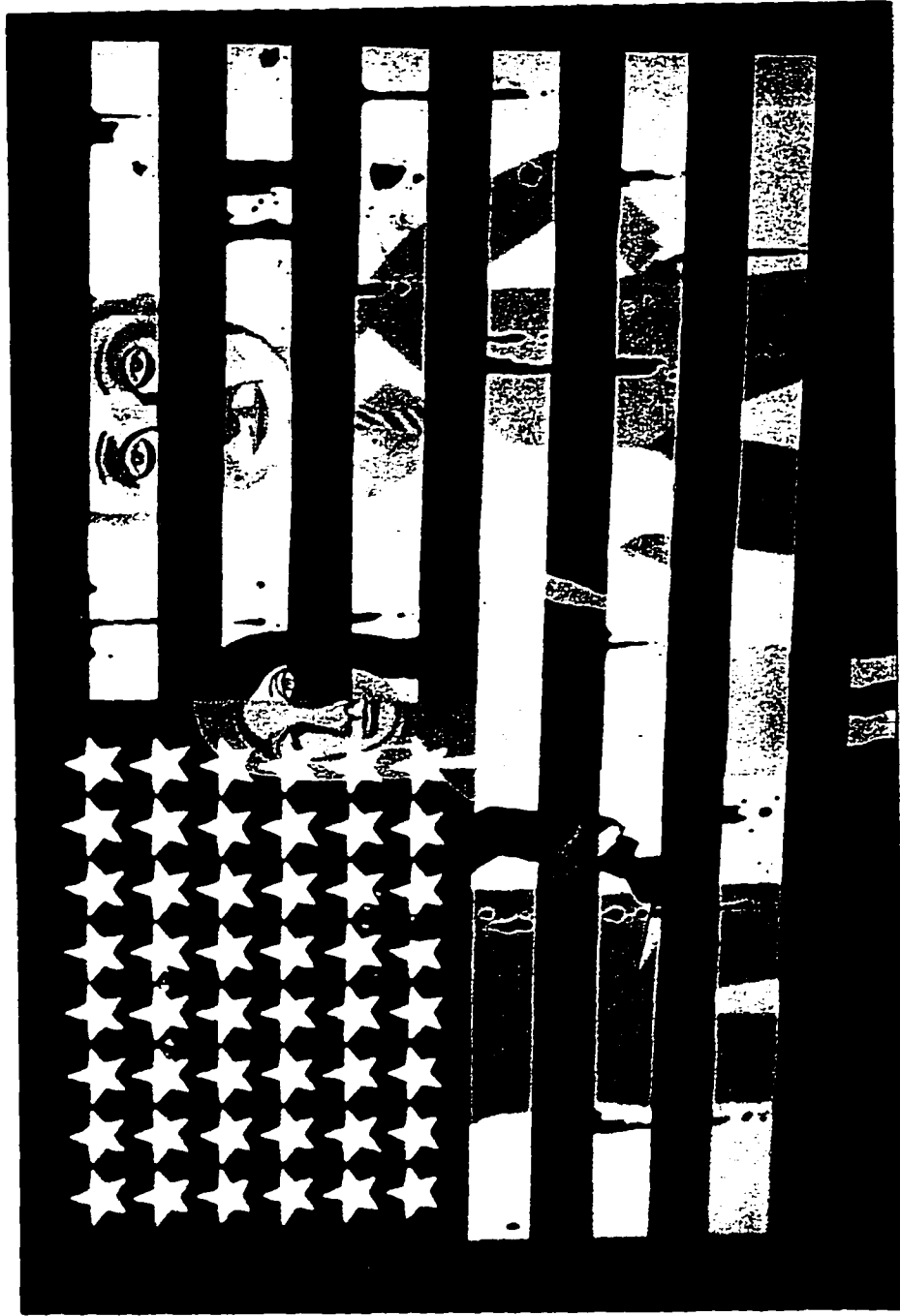


Figure 1 Faith Ringgold, *The Flag Is Bleeding*, *American People Series*, 1967, oil on canvas, 72 x 96". Reproduced with the permission of the artist.



Figure 2 Faith Ringgold, *The French Collection Part I, #7 (Picasso's Studio)*, 1991, acrylic on canvas with fabric border, 73 x 68". Reproduced with the permission of the artist.



Figure 3 Augusta Savage, *The Harp (Lift Every Voice and Sing)*, 1939, cast plaster, 16' high, now destroyed, photo, Carl Van Vechten. Reproduced with the permission of the Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Yale University.



Figure 4 Lois Mailou Jones, *Les Fétiches*, 1938, oil on linen, 21 x 25½". Reproduced with the permission of the National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, museum purchase made possible by Mrs. N. H. Green, Dr. R. Harlan, and Francis Musgrave

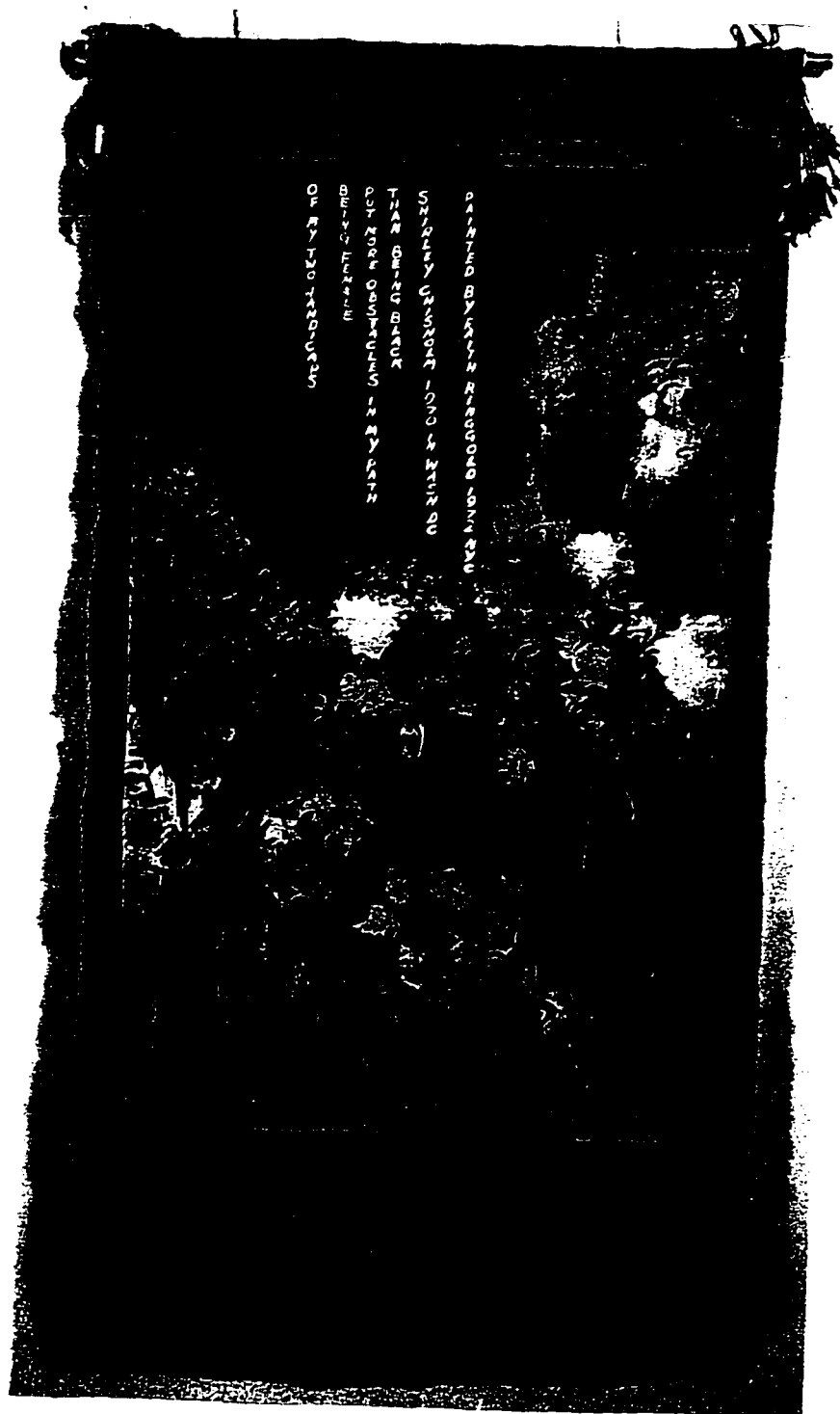


Figure 5 Faith Ringgold, *Of My Two Handicaps, Feminist Series #10*, 1972, acrylic on canvas, 51 x 26". Reproduced with the permission of the artist.



Figure 6 Faith Ringgold, *Camp Craig Meade*, 1959, watercolor on paper, approx. 24 x 36". Reproduced with the permission of the artist.

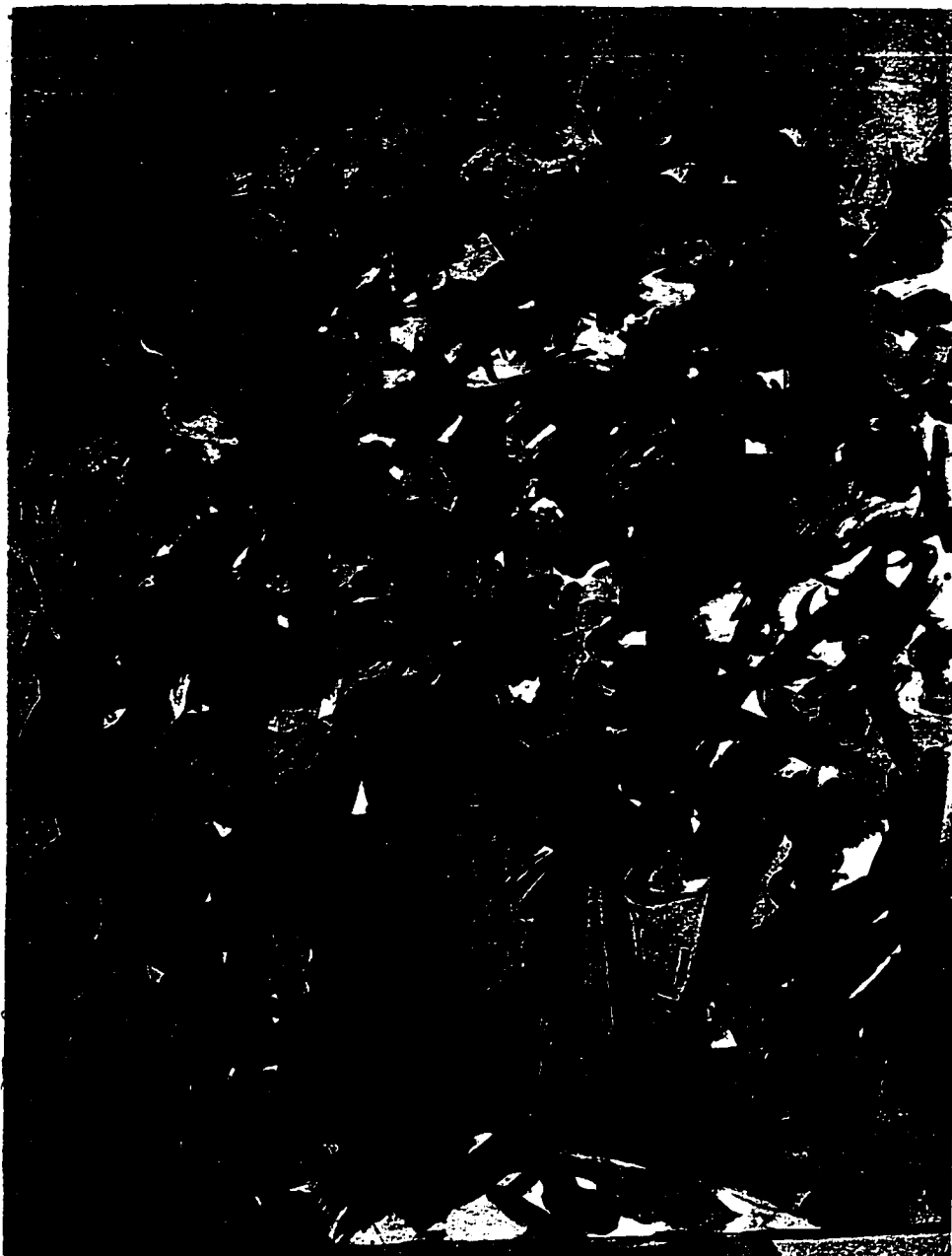


Figure 7 Faith Ringgold, *New Lincoln School Landscape*, 1965, watercolor on paper, approx. 24 x 30". Reproduced with the permission of the artist.

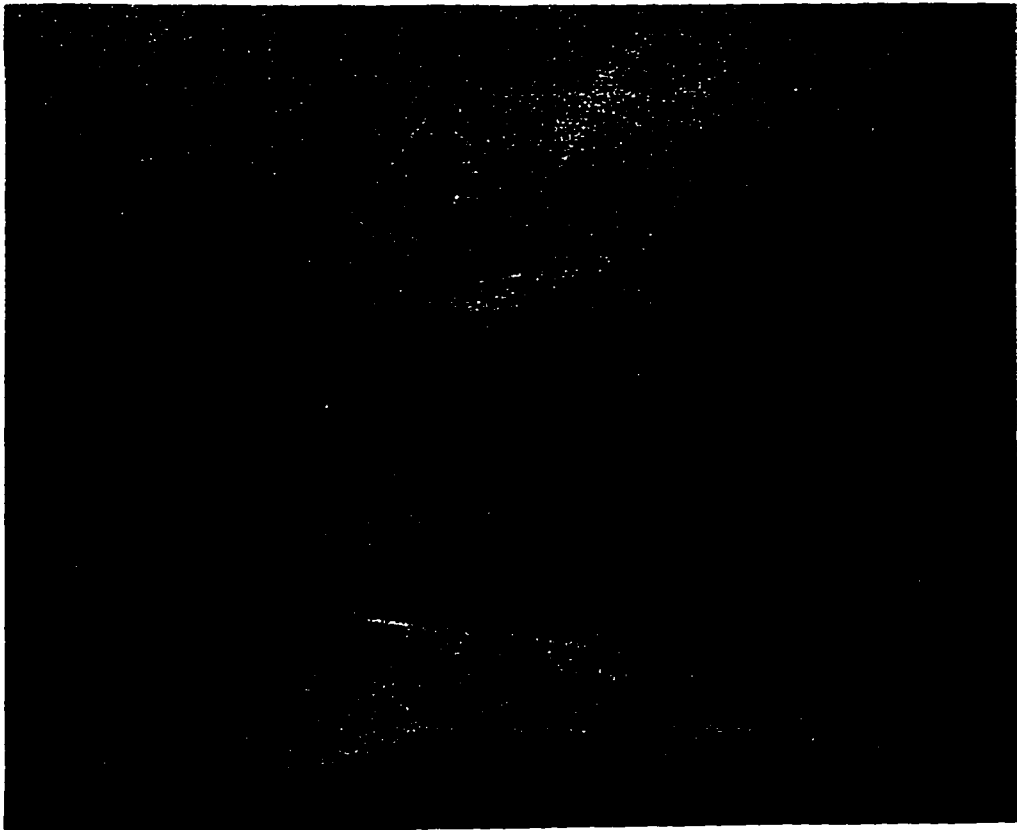


Figure 8 Faith Ringgold, *Provincetown*, 1957, oil on canvas, 24 x 36". Reproduced with the permission of the artist.



Figure 9 Faith Ringgold, *Provincetown*, 1957, oil on canvas, approx. 24 x 36". Reproduced with the permission of the artist.



Figure 10 Faith Ringgold, *Between Friends*, 1963, oil on canvas, 24 x 40". Reproduced with the permission of the artist.



Figure 11 Faith Ringgold, *Cocktail Party*, 1964, oil on canvas, 42 x 24". Reproduced with the permission of the artist.



Figure 12 Faith Ringgold, *American Dream*, 1964, oil on canvas, 36 x 24". Reproduced with the permission of the artist.



Figure 13 Olowe of Ise, *King's Palace Door at Ikerre*, Yoruba, Nigeria, c. 1910, wood, approx. 6' high. Reproduced with the permission of The British Museum.

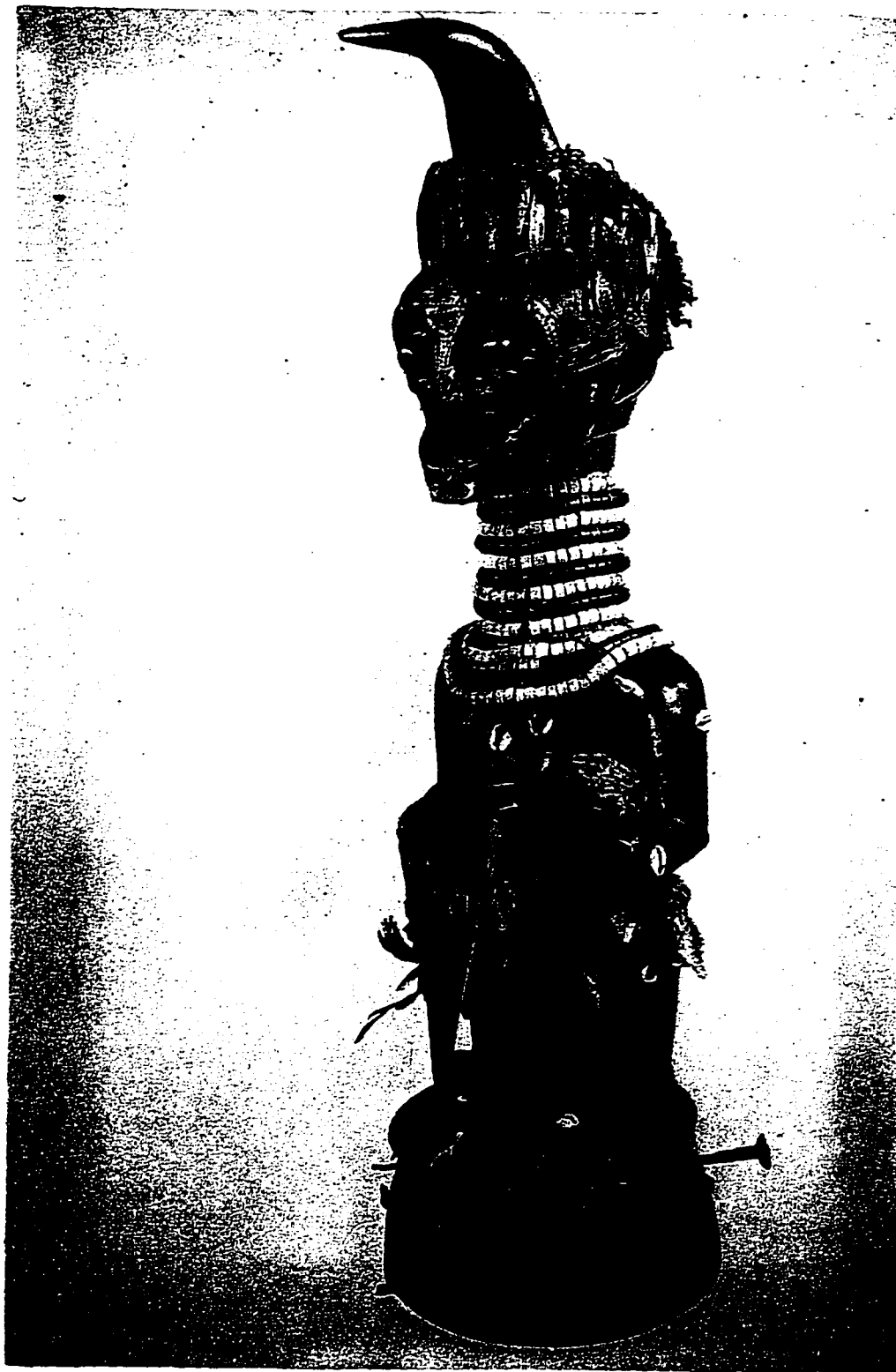


Figure 14 *Power Figure*, Songye, Zaire, 19th-20th century, wood, iron, copper, horn fibers, cowrie shells, feathers, and glass beads, 35" high. Reproduced with the permission of the Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale, Tervuren, Belgium.



Figure 15 Faith Ringgold, *Watching and Waiting*, 1963, oil on canvas, 36 x 40". Reproduced with the permission of the artist.

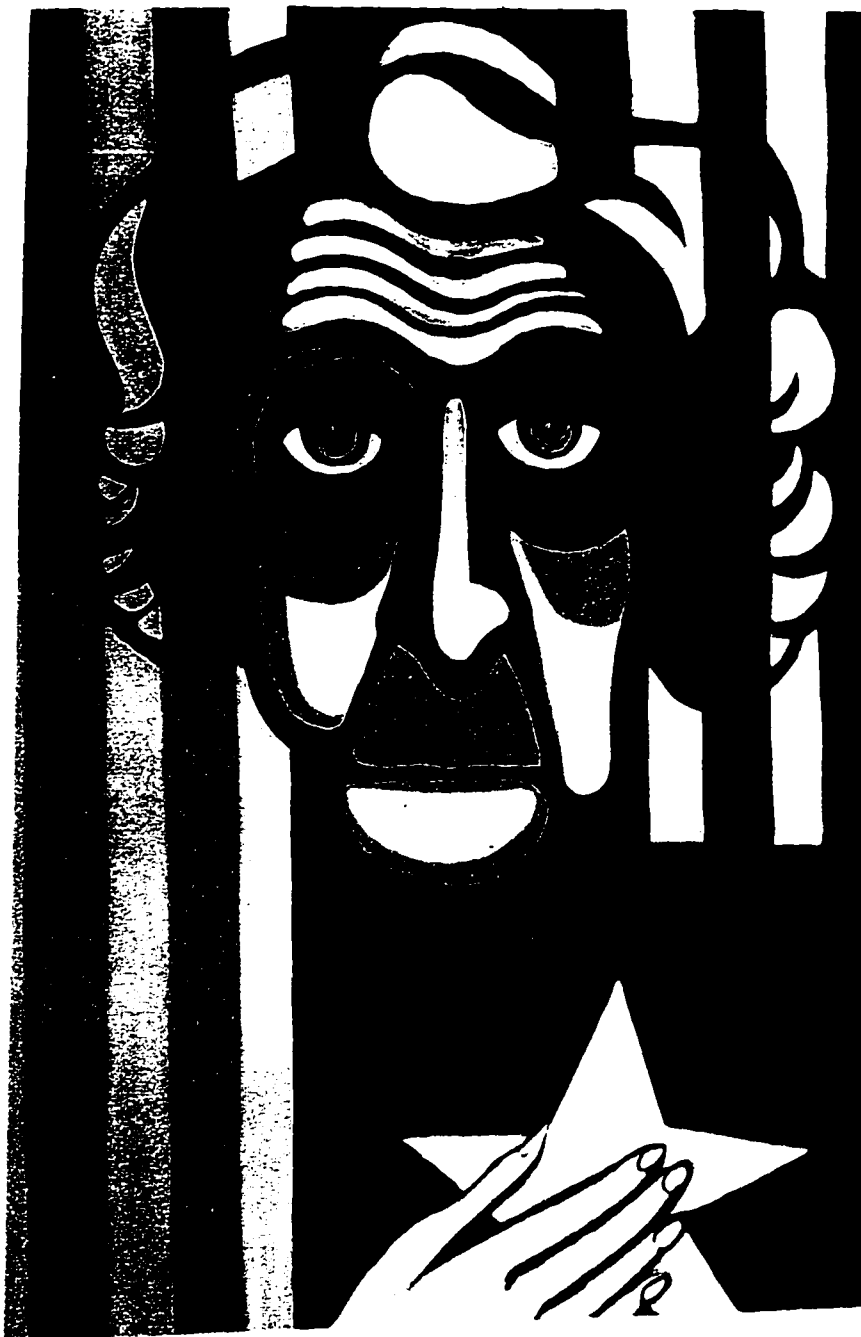


Figure 16 Faith Ringgold, *God Bless America*, 1964, oil on canvas, 31 x 19".
Reproduced with the permission of the artist.



Figure 17 Faith Ringgold, *Hide Little Children*, 1966, oil on canvas, 26 x 48". Reproduced with the permission of the artist.



Figure 18 Faith Ringgold, *Die*, 1967, oil on canvas, 72 x 144". Reproduced with the permission of the artist.

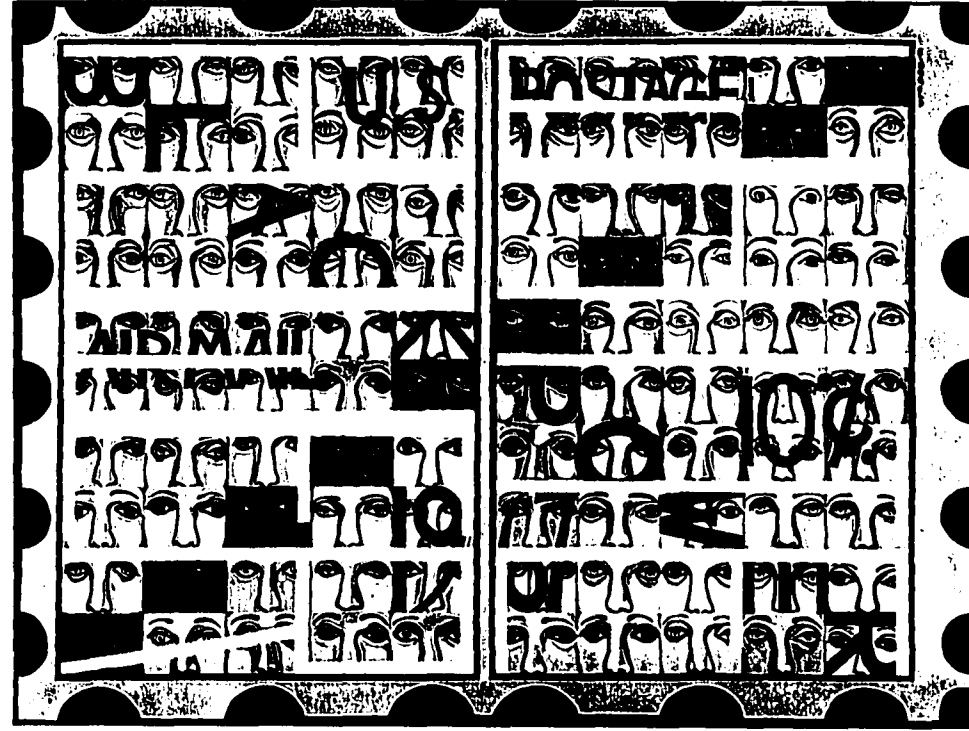


Figure 19 Faith Ringgold, *U.S. Postage Stamp Commemorate the Advent of Black Power*, 1967, oil on canvas, 72 x 96".
Reproduced with the permission of the artist.

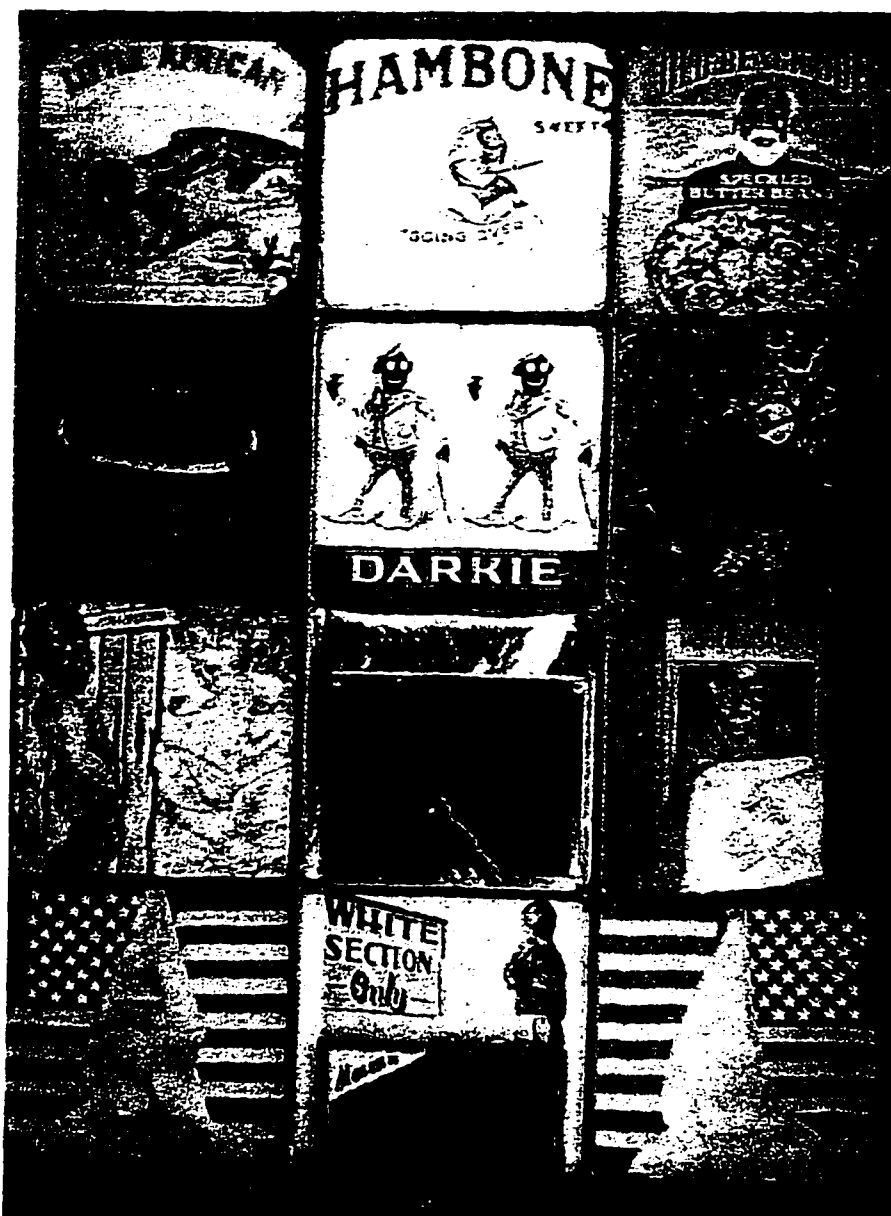


Figure 20 Betye Saar, *Black Crows in the White Section Only*, mixed media, window, 22 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 17 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 1 $\frac{3}{4}$ ". Reproduced with the permission of Richard V. Clarke.



Figure 21 David Hammons. *Pray for America*, 1969, silkscreen and body paint, 60⁵/₈ x 36⁵/₈". Reproduced with the permission of the artist.

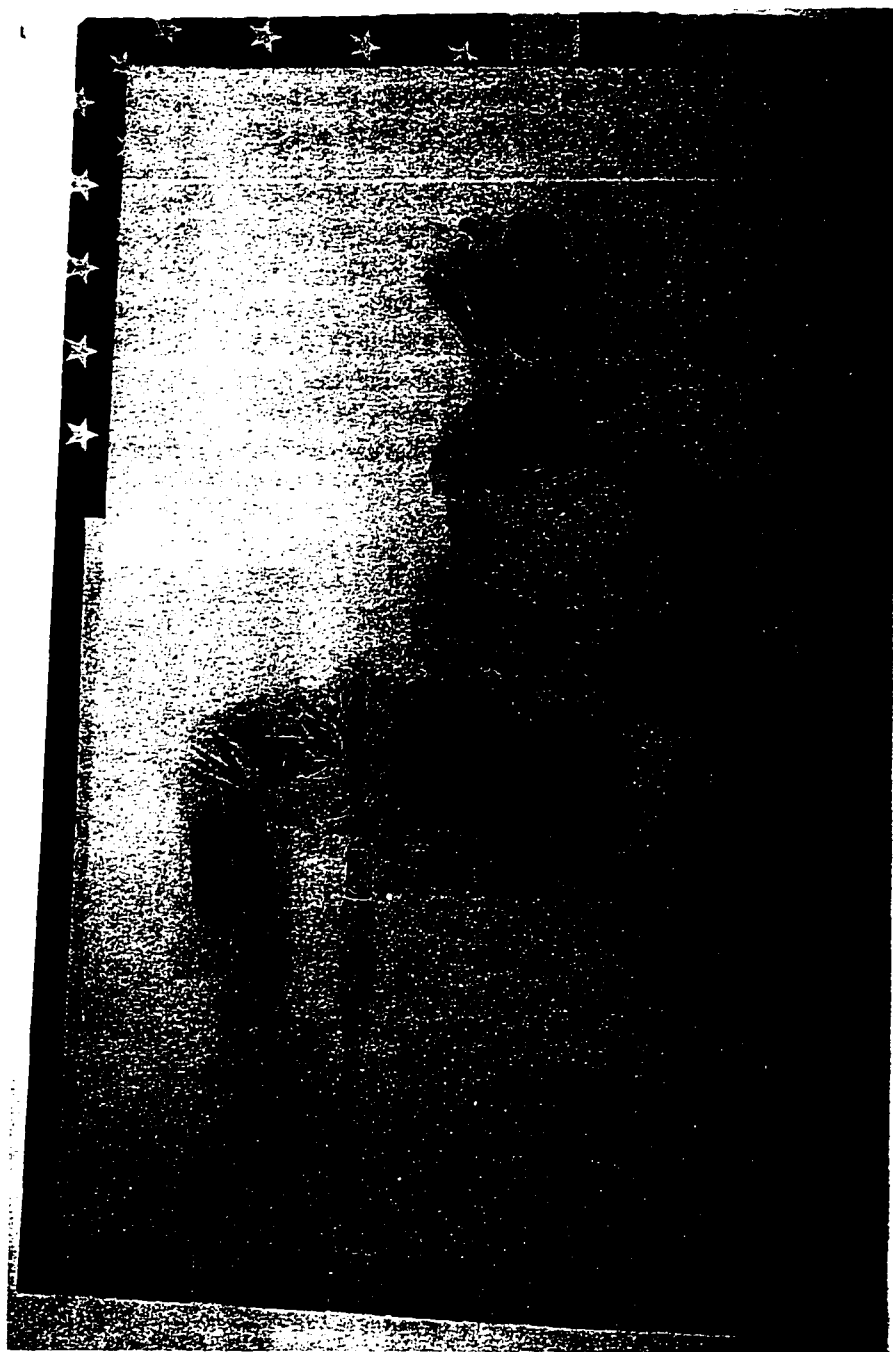


Figure 22 David Hammons. *Injustice Case*, 1970, mixed media body print, 60 x 40½".
Reproduced with the permission of The Los Angeles County Museum of Art.



Figure 23 Charles White. *Wanted Poster Series #17*, 1971, oil on board, 60¼ x 30¼".
Reproduced with the permission of The Flint Institute of Art, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. B.
Morris Pelavin (71.43).

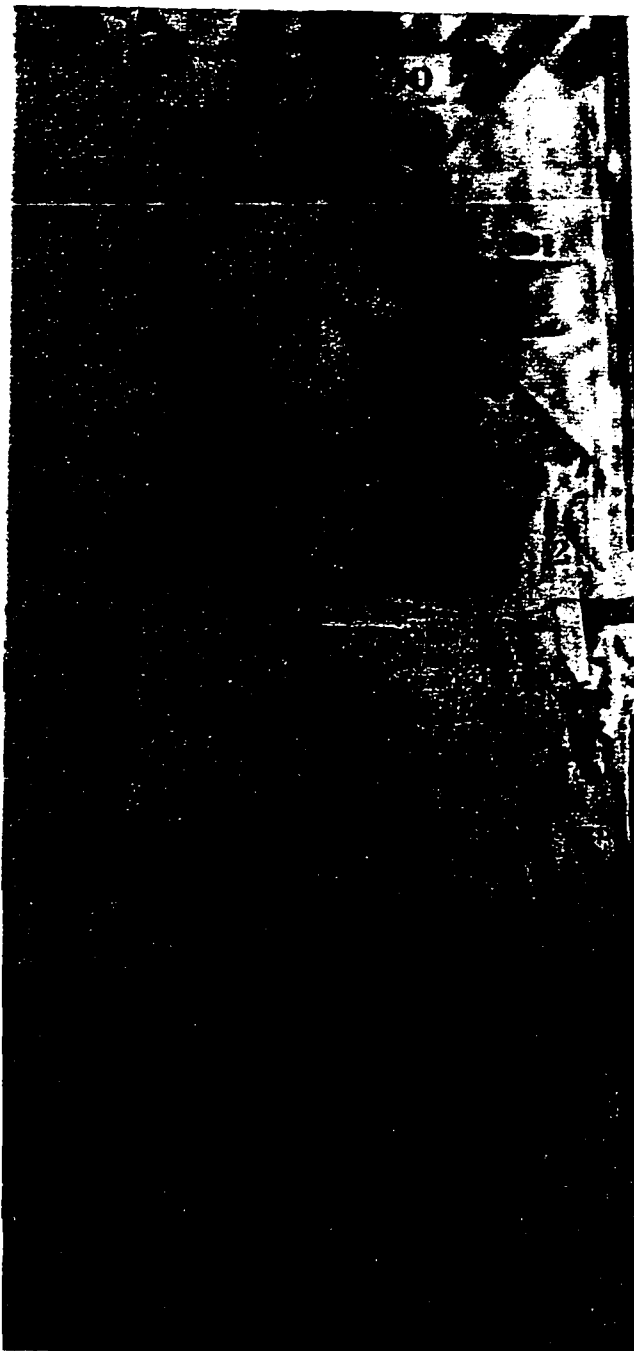


Figure 24 Charles White. *Wanted Poster Series #6*, 1969, oil on board, 4' 11" x 2' 3".
Reproduced with the permission of Jessica White, the Charles White Estate.

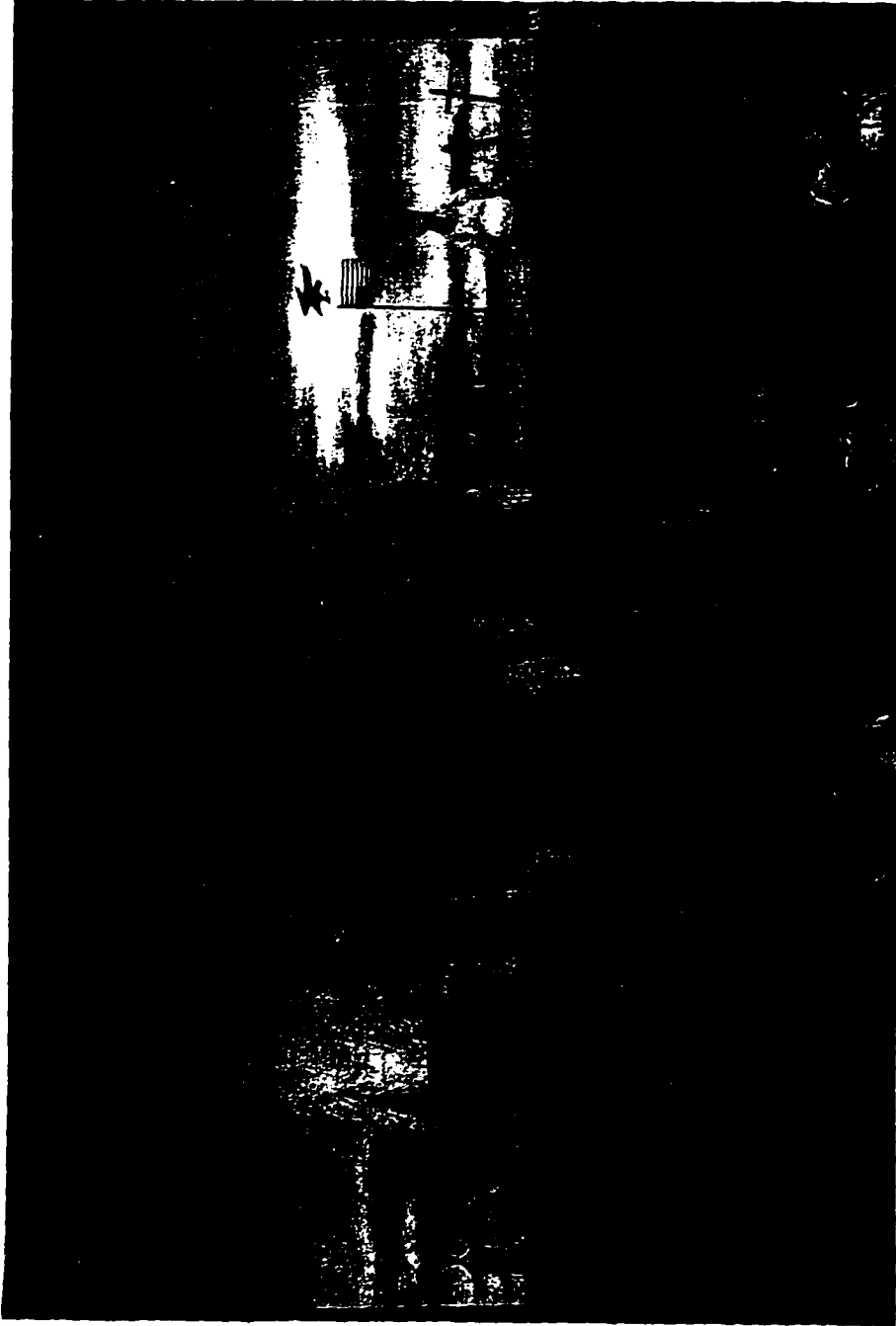


Figure 25 Cliff Joseph, *My Country, Right or Wrong*, 1968, oil on masonite, 32 x 48". Reproduced with the permission of the artist.

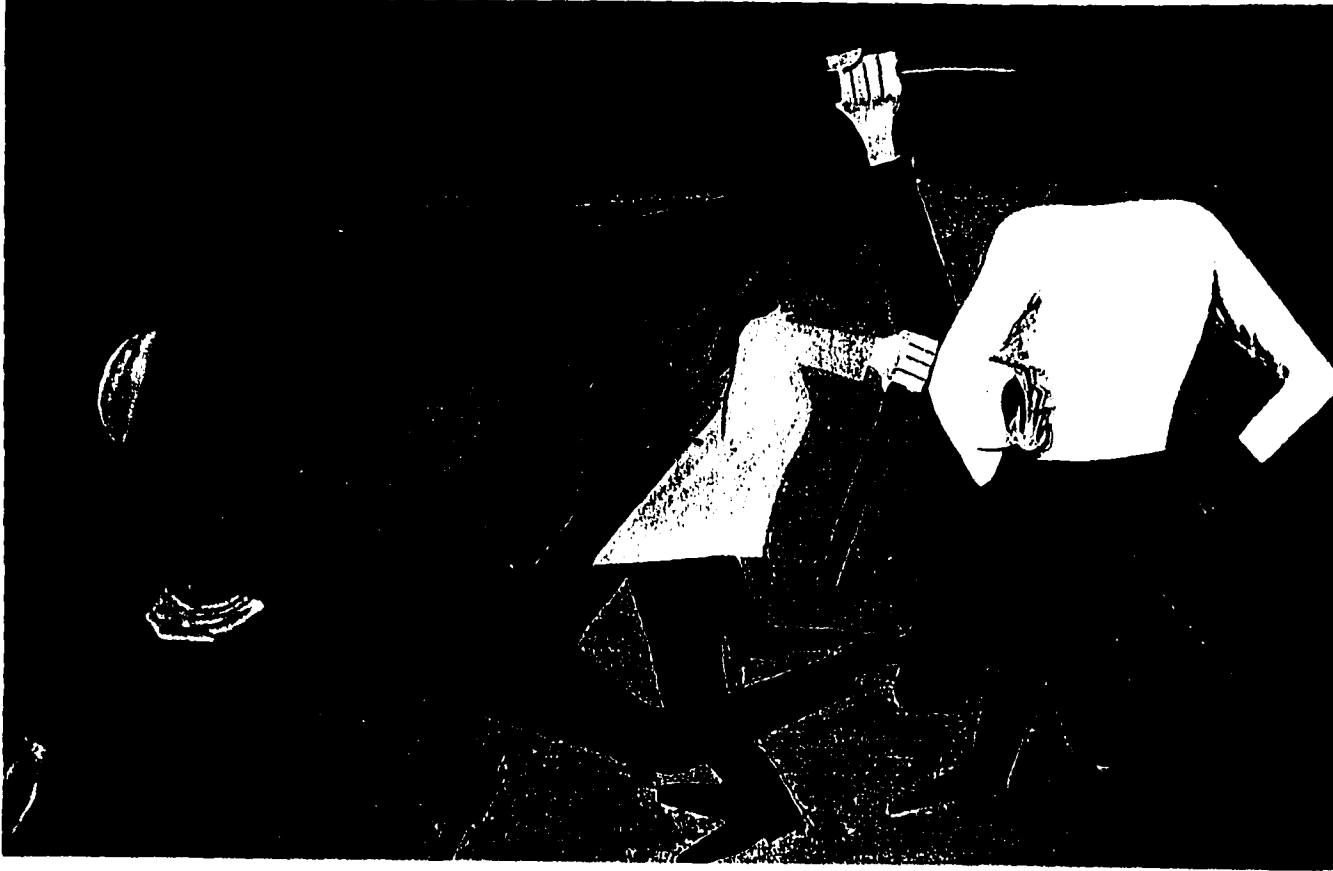


Figure 26 Jacob Lawrence, *One of the Most Violent Race Riots Occurred in East St. Louis, Migration Series #52, 1940-41*, tempera on gesso on composition board, 12 x 18". Reproduced with the permission of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, gift of Mrs. David M. Levy.

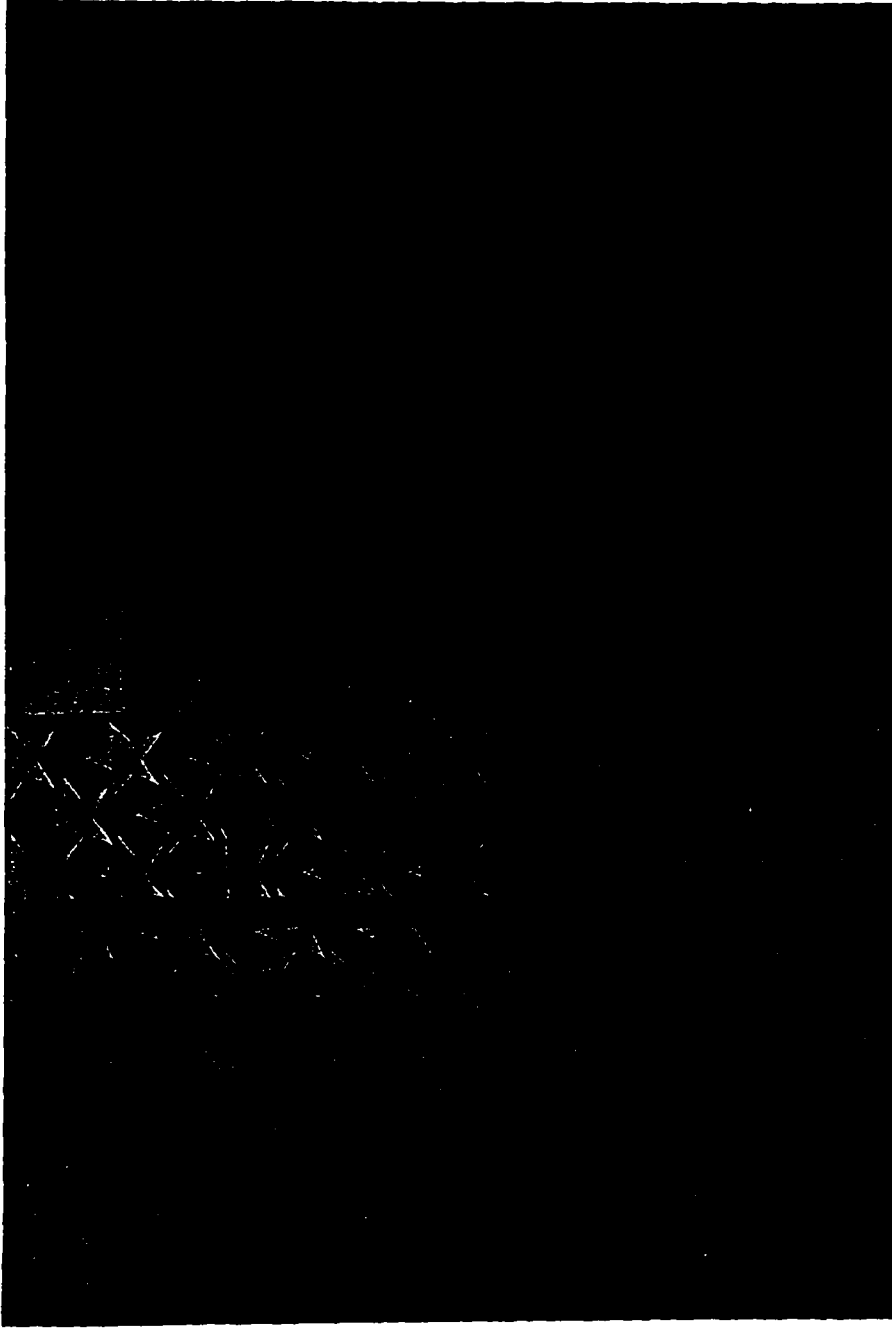


Figure 27 Faith Ringgold, *Flag for the Moon*: *Die Nigger*, 1967-69, oil on canvas, 36 x 50". Reproduced with the permission of the artist.

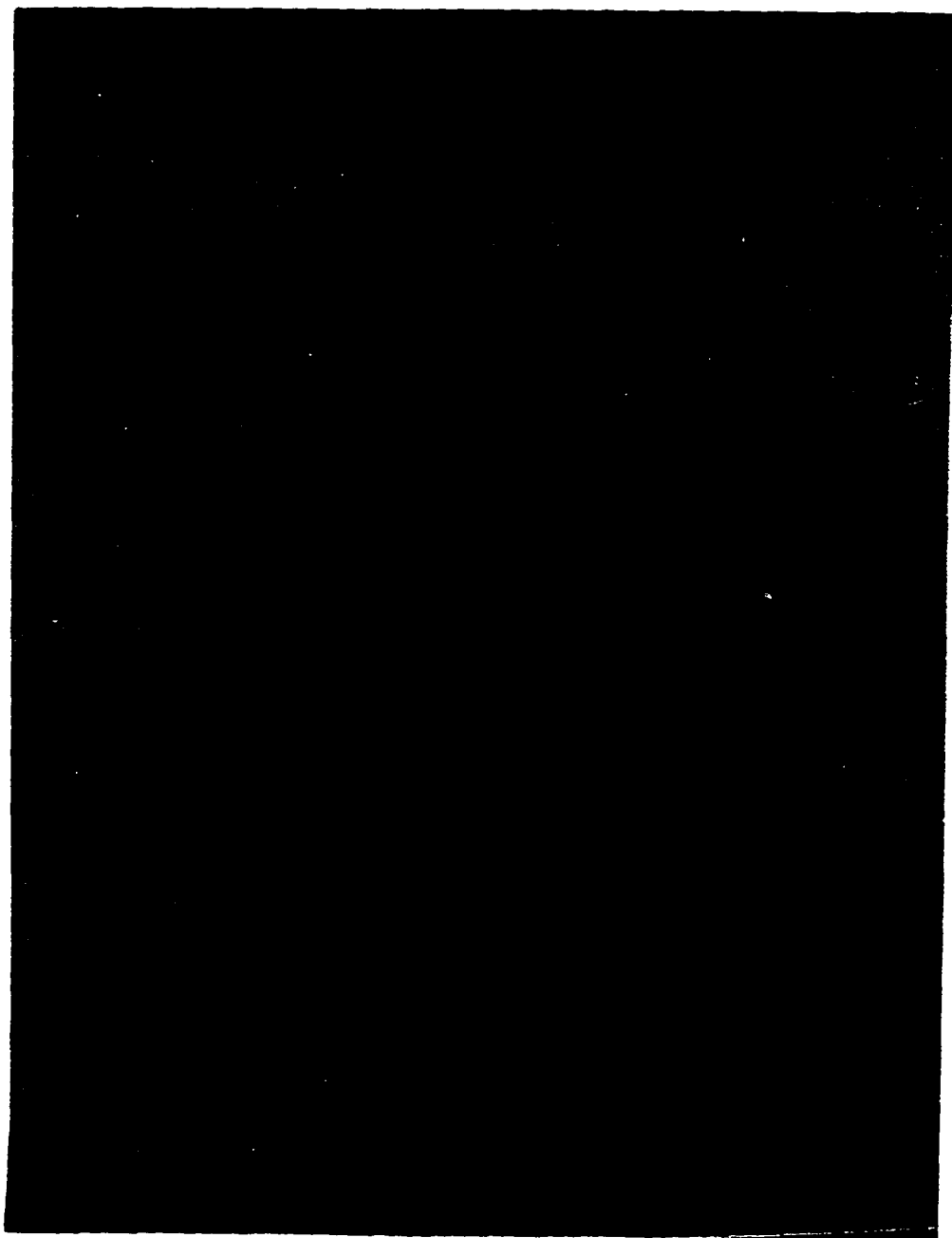


Figure 28 Faith Ringgold, *Mommy and Daddy*, 1969, oil on canvas, 30 x 26".
Reproduced with the permission of the artist.



Figure 29 Faith Ringgold, *U.S. America Black*, 1969, oil on canvas, 60 x 84". Reproduced with the permission of the artist.

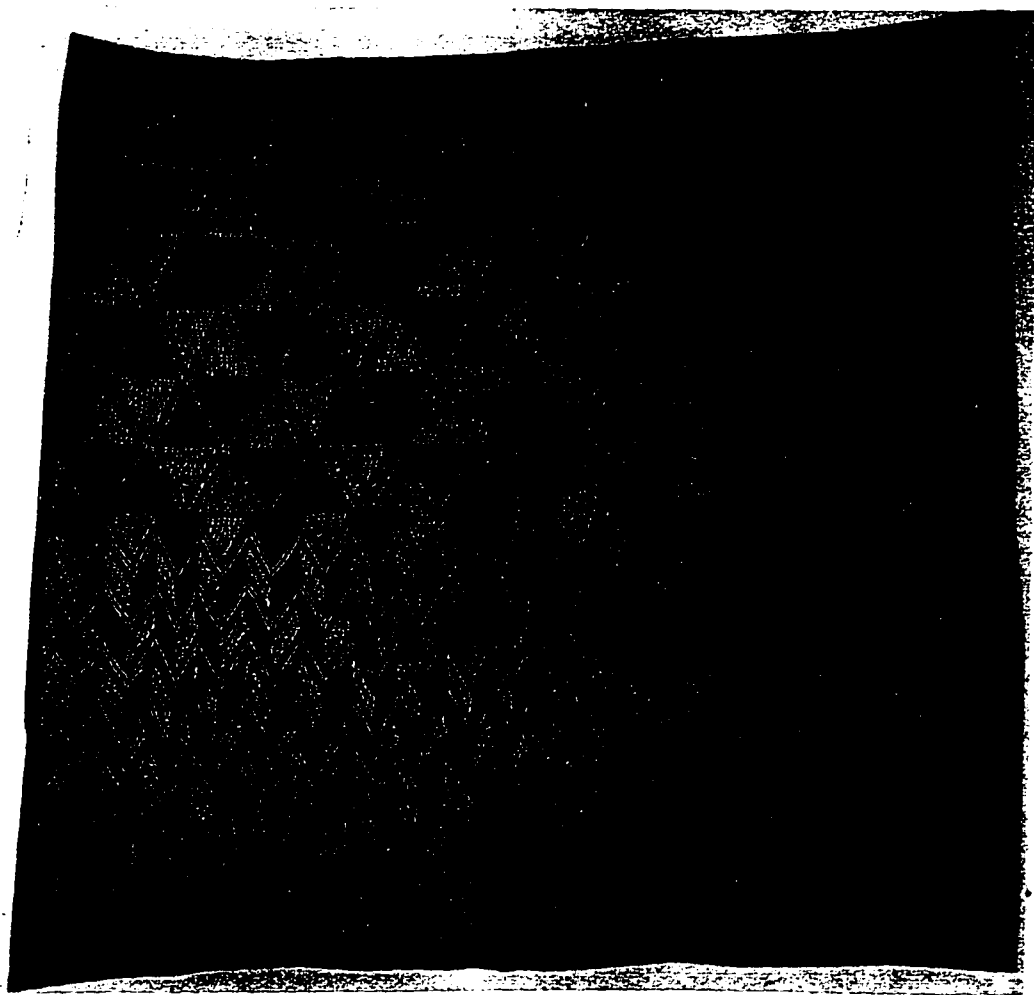


Figure 30 *Woven Raffia Cloth*, Kuba, Zaire, undated, 6 x 24". Collected by Deborah Garner and Jay Bommer. Reproduced with the permission of the owner, Maude Southwell Wahlman and reproduced on page 82 of Wahlman, *Signs and Symbols: African Images in African-American Quilts* (New York: Studio Books, 1993).



Figure 31 Edvard Munch, *The Kiss*, 1895, drypoint and aquatint, 13½ x 11".
Reproduced with the permission of the Graphische Sammlung Albertina, Vienna,
Austria, Inv. Nr. 1912/283 (Neg. Nr. 52.599-C).

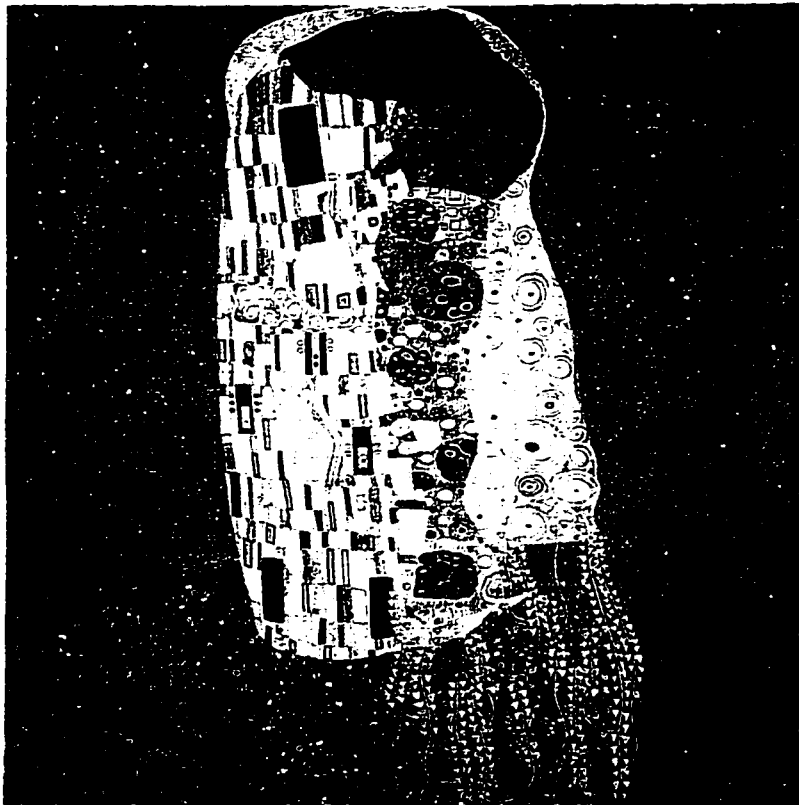


Figure 32 Gustav Klimt, *The Kiss*, 1908, oil on canvas, 71 x 71". Reproduced with the permission of the Österreichische Galerie, Belvedere, Vienna, Austria.



Figure 33 Constantin Brancusi, *The Kiss*, ca. 1912, limestone, 23 x 13 x 10".
Reproduced with the permission of the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

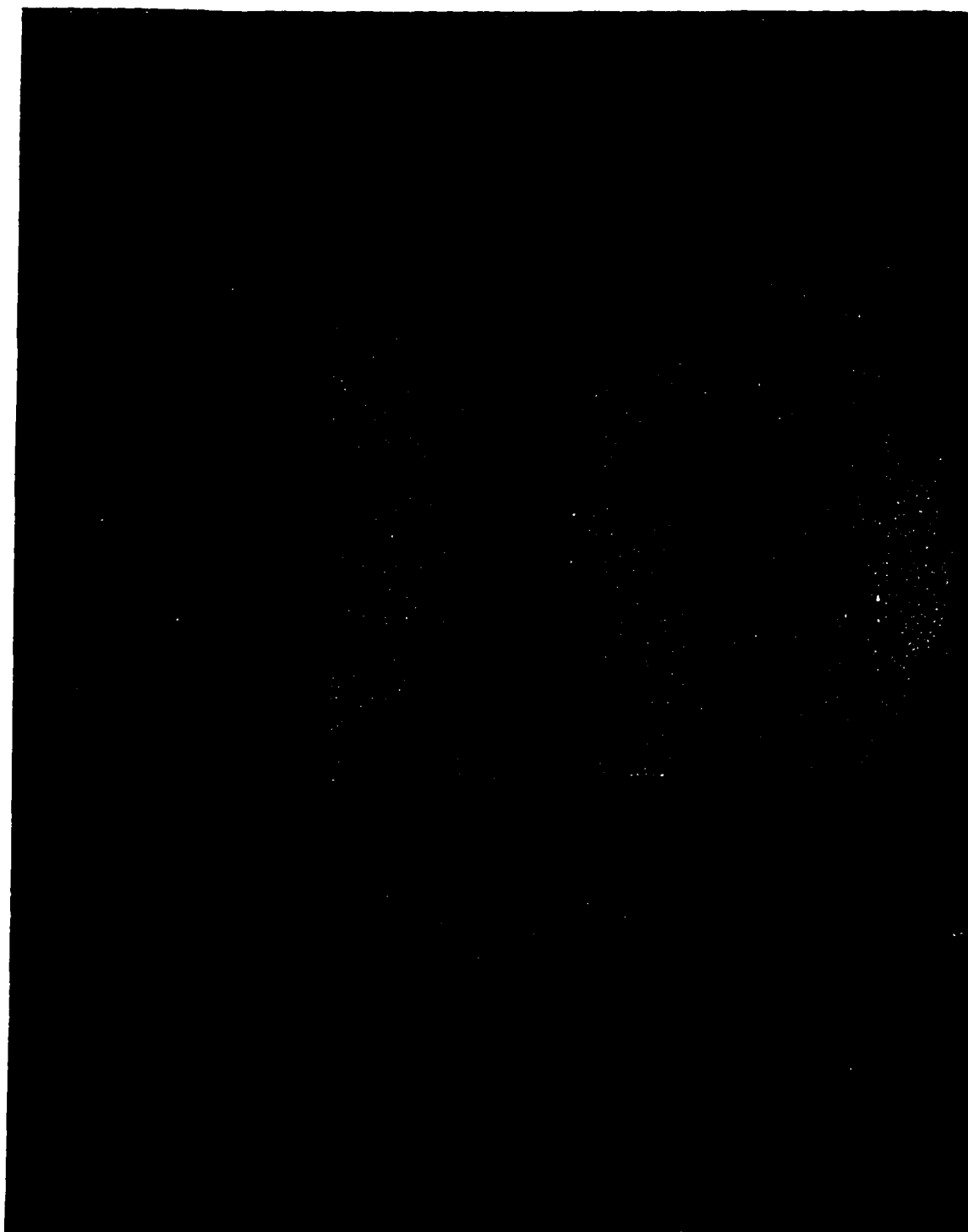


Figure 35 Faith Ringgold, *Man*, 1968, oil on canvas, 30 x 24". Reproduced with the permission of the artist.

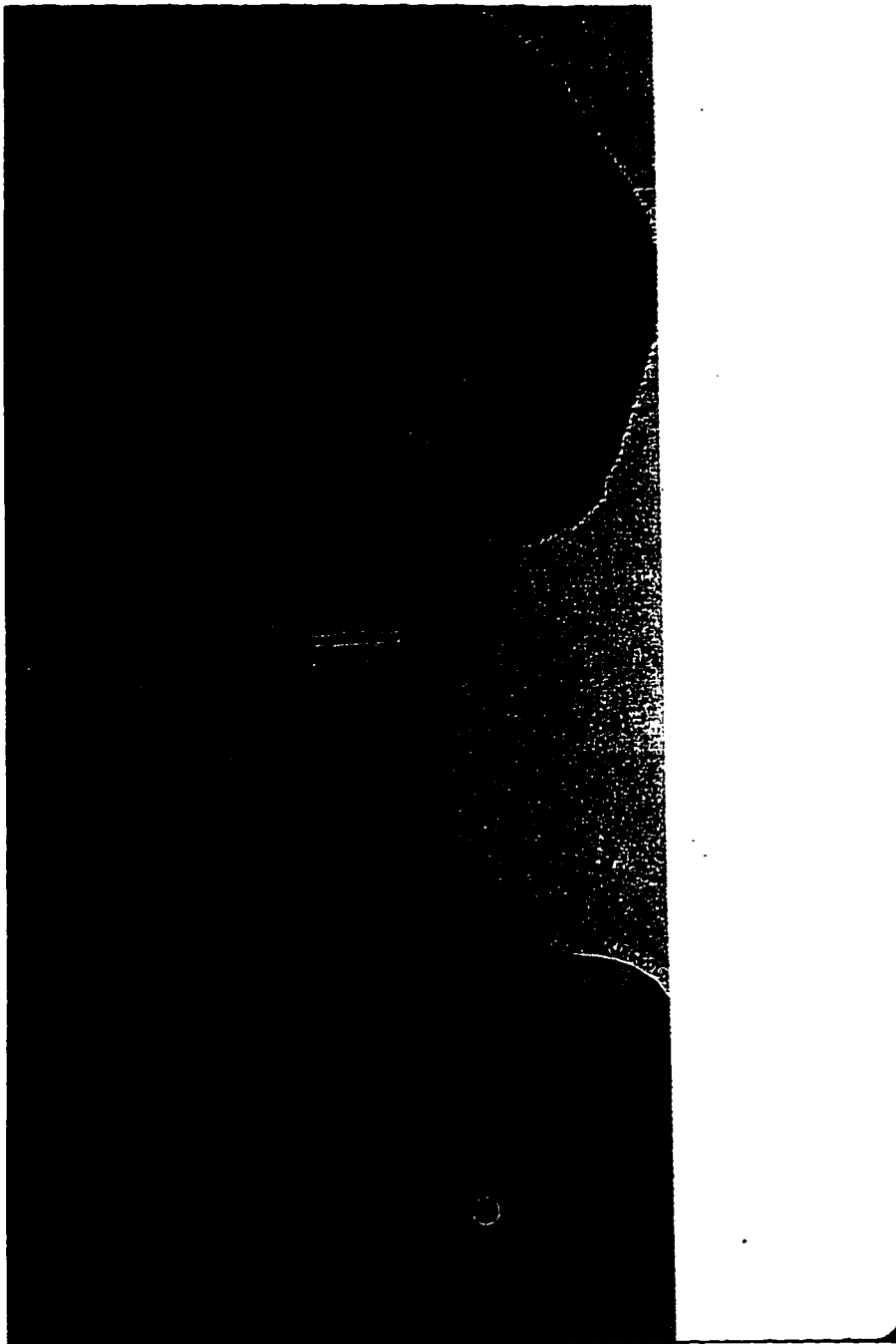


Figure 36 Faith Ringgold, *Soul Sister*, 1967, oil on canvas, 36 x 18". Reproduced with the permission of the artist.

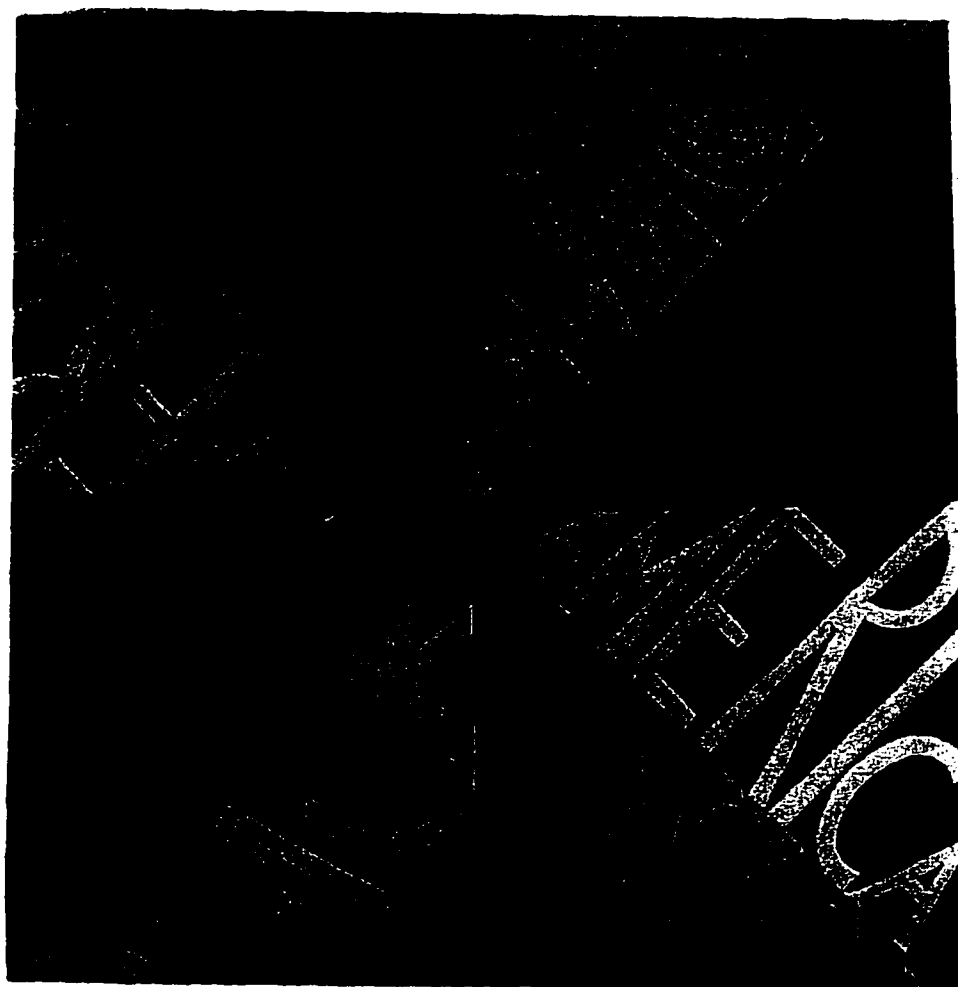


Figure 37 Faith Ringgold, *Ego Painting*, 1969, oil on canvas, 30 x 30". Reproduced with the permission of the artist.

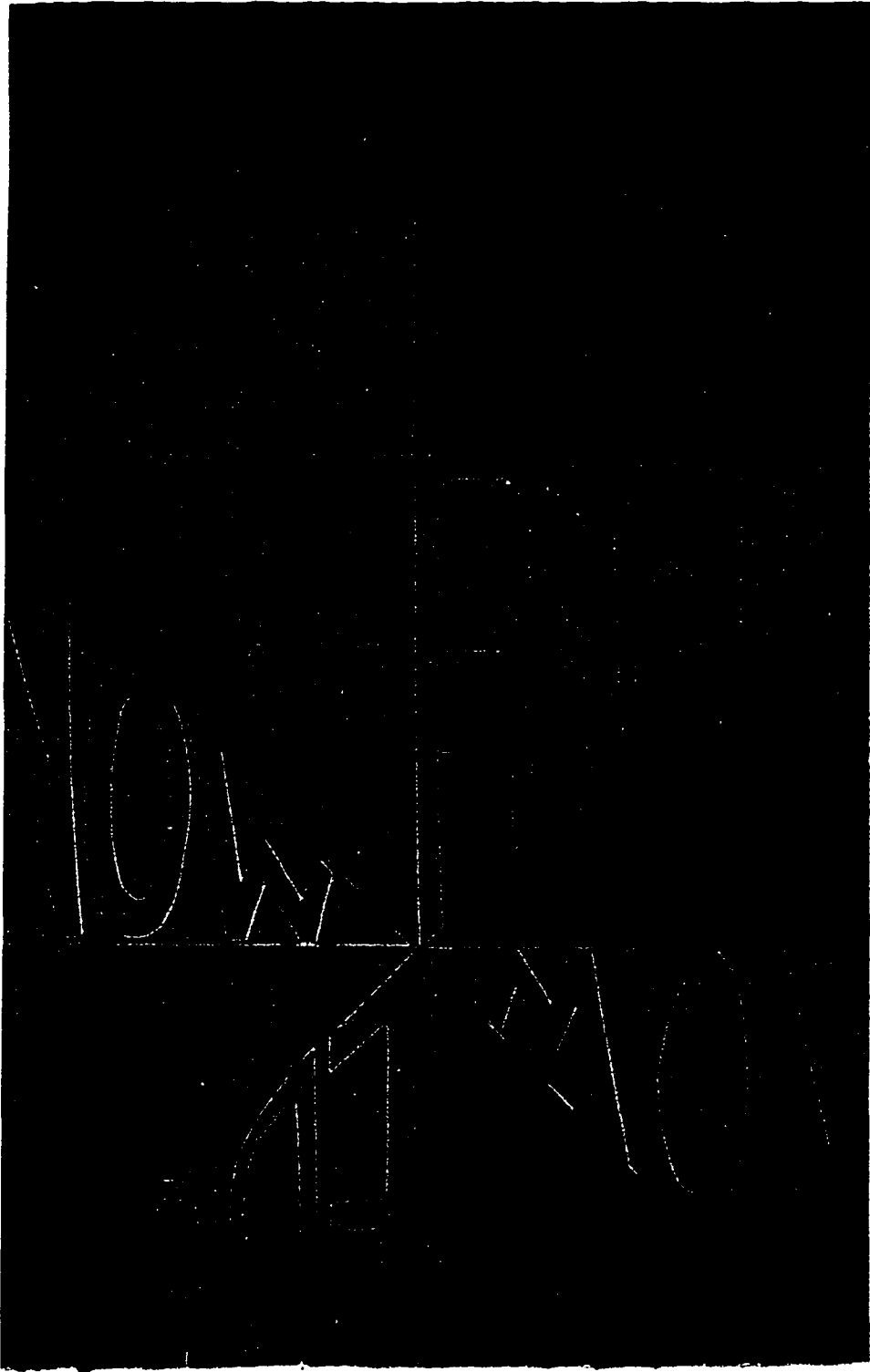


Figure 38 Faith Ringgold, *Woman Freedom Now*, 1971, printed offset, 19¼ x 28⅞".
Collection of the author.



Figure 39 Faith Ringgold, *The United States of Attica*, printed offset, 22 x 28". Collection of the author.



Figure 40 Faith Ringgold, *For the Women's House*, The Women's House of Detention, Riker's Island, New York, oil on canvas, 96 x 96". Reproduced with the permission of the artist.



Figure 41 Faith Ringgold, *We Are All Equal Political Landscape #15*, 1972, watercolor on paper, 24 x 18". Reproduced with the permission of the artist.

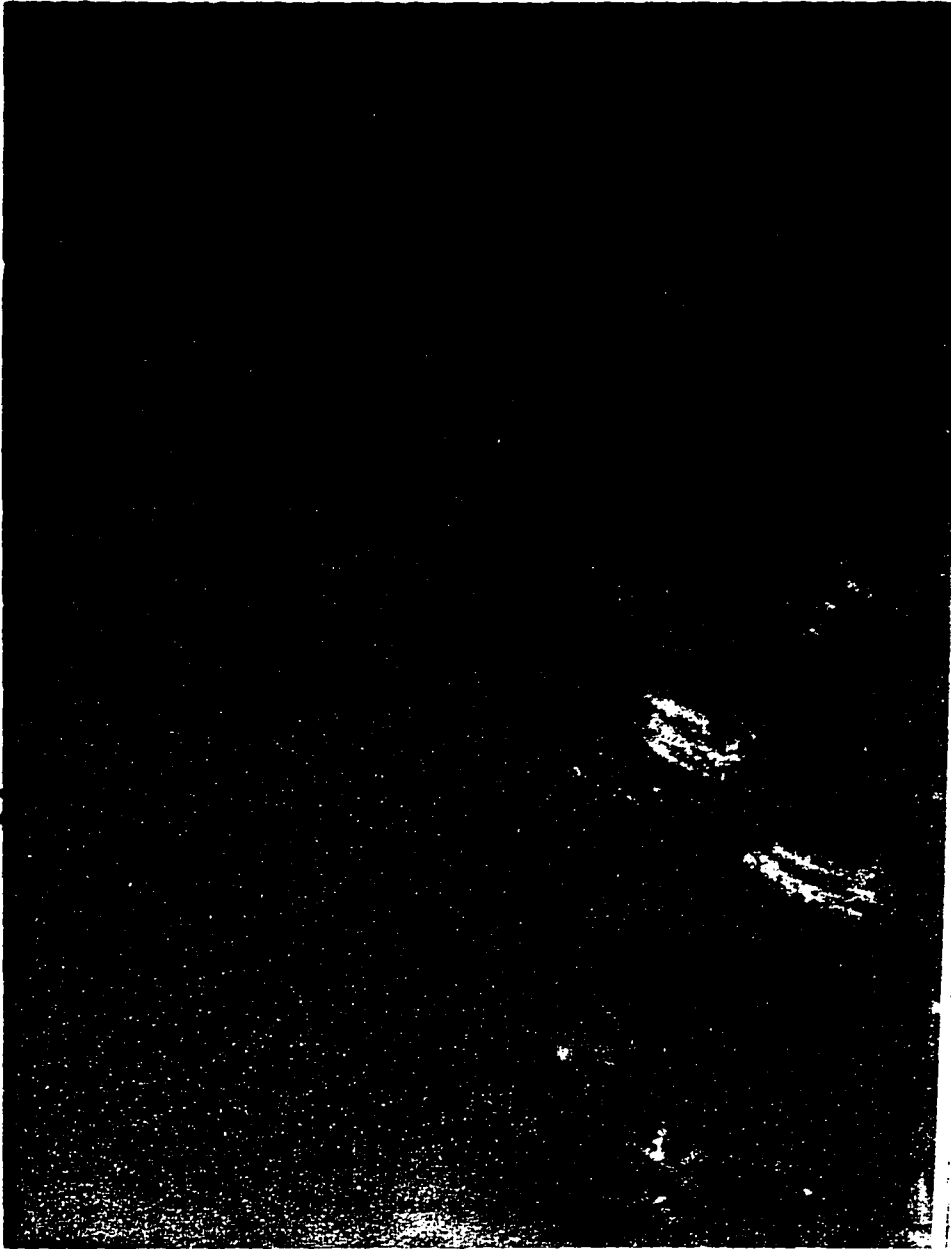


Figure 42 Faith Ringgold, *I Cannot Be Sure, Political Landscape #48*, 1972, watercolor on paper, approx. 24 x 18".
Reproduced with the permission of the artist.



Figure 43 Faith Ringgold, *Why Go To Documenta? Political Landscape #40*, 1972, watercolor on paper, 24 x 18". Reproduced with the permission of the artist.



Figure 44 Faith Ringgold, *What You Think, Political Landscape #43*, 1972, watercolor on paper, 24 x 18". Reproduced with the permission of the artist.



Figure 45 *Avalokitesvara (T. Spyan-ras-gzigs Phyag-bZhi-pa)*, 18th century, applied Chinese silk with embroidered details, applied glass beads, 54½ x 33½". Reproduced with the permission of The Newark Museum, purchase 1957, Mr. C. Suydam Cutting and Mrs. C. Suydam Cutting Endowment Funds.



Figure 46 Faith Ringgold. *Little Joe, Nat, Daddy, and Tina, Harlem '78 Series*, 1978, fabric, wig hair, and accessories, 43-49" high x 10 x 10". Reproduced with the permission of the artist.

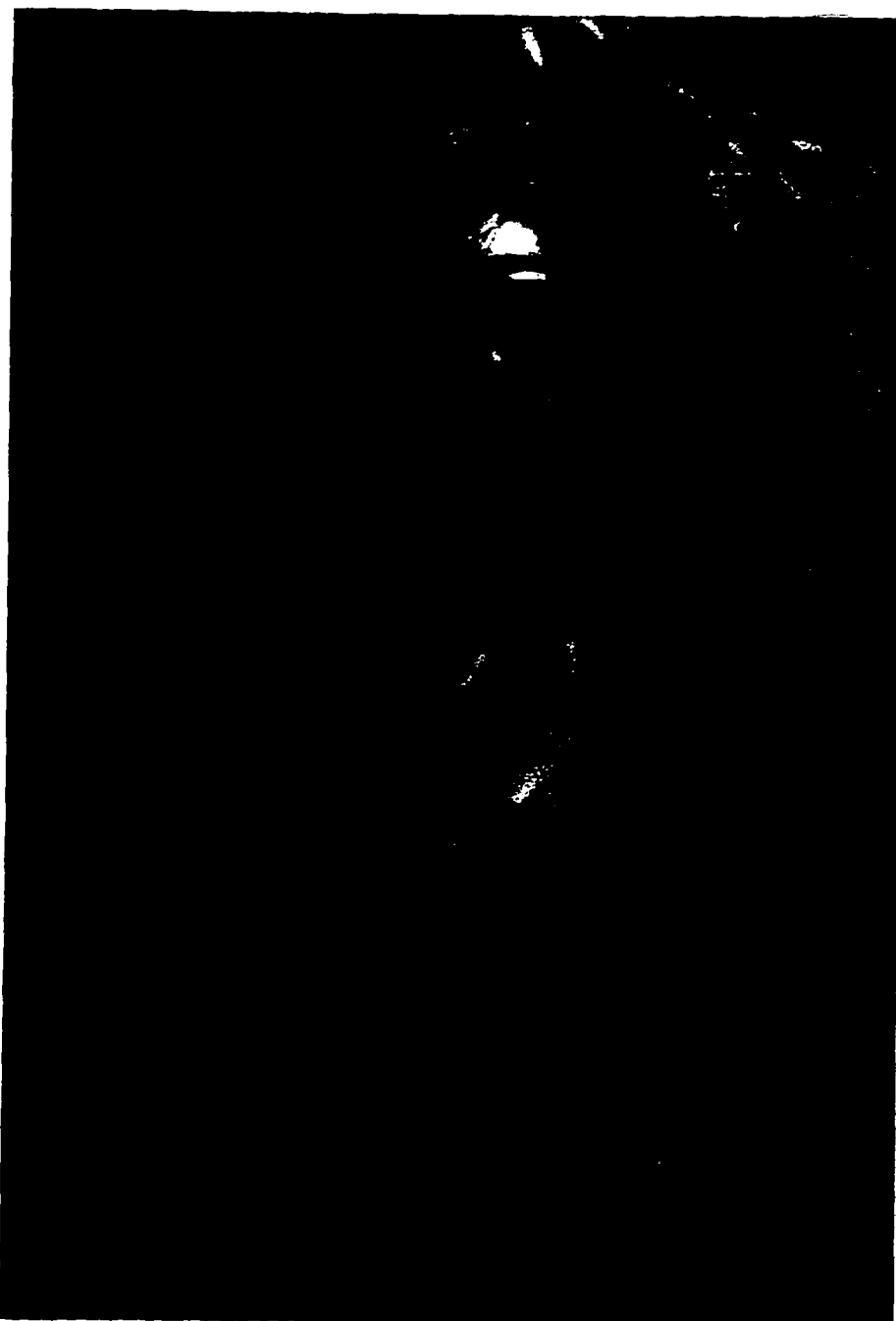


Figure 47 *Figure*, Songye, Zaire, undated, wood, metal, and feathers, 44¼" high.
Reproduced with the permission of the J. M. Mestach.

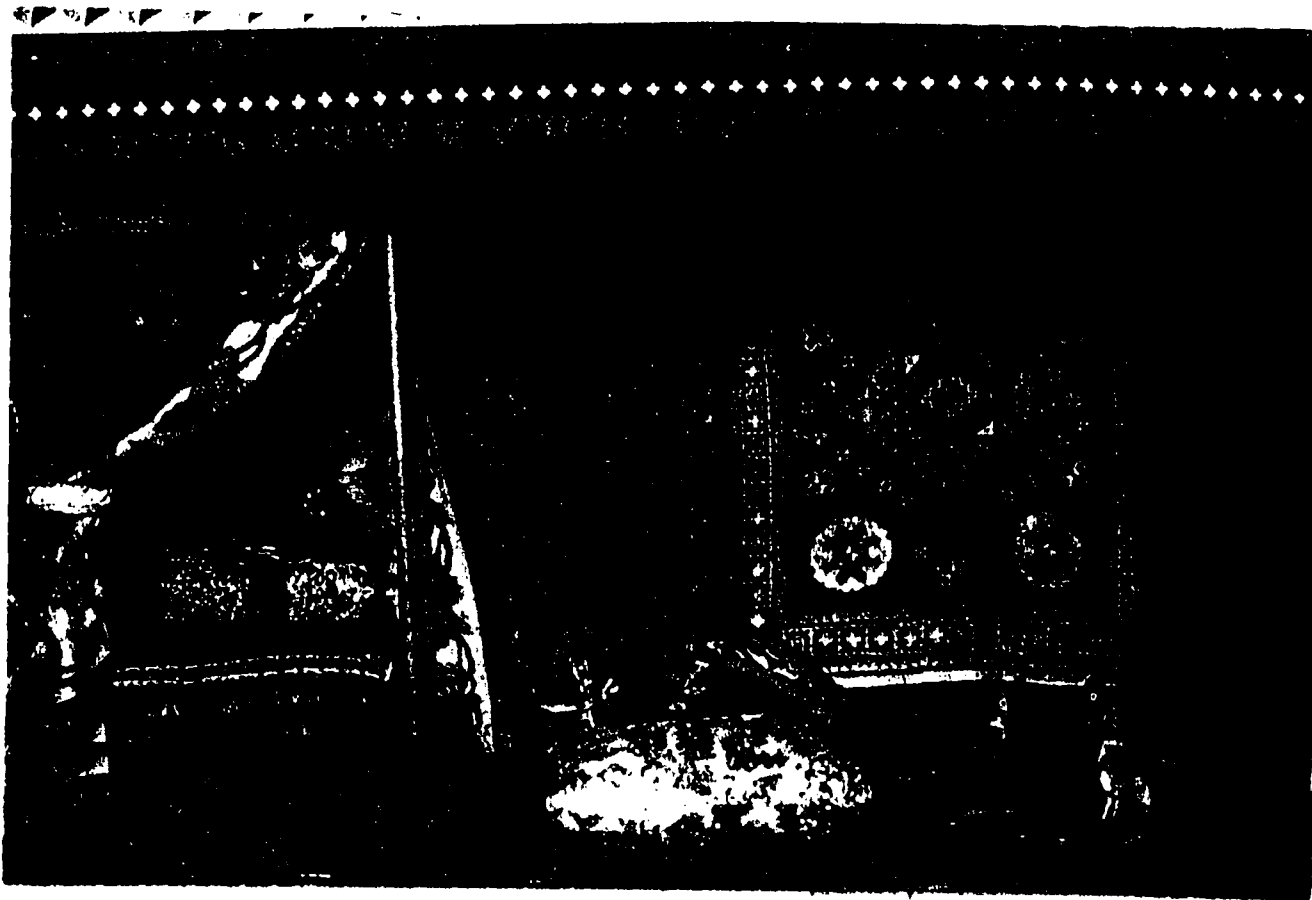


Figure 48 Miriam Schapiro in collaboration with Sherry Brody, *The Dollhouse from Womanhouse* (detail of *The Seraglio Room*), 1972, construction and mixed media. Reproduced with the permission of Miriam Schapiro.

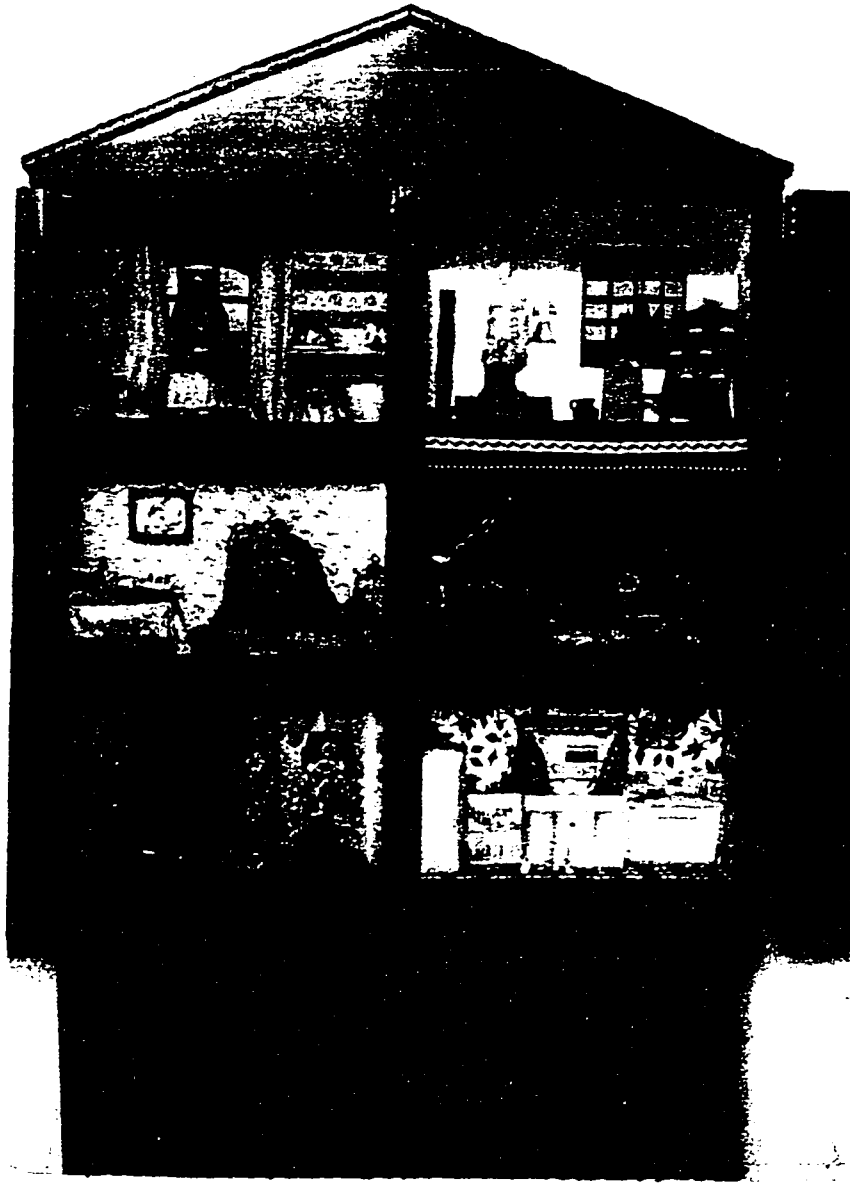


Figure 49 Miriam Schapiro in collaboration with Sherry Brody. *The Dollhouse*, from *Womanhouse*, 1972, construction and mixed media, 48 x 41 x 8". Reproduced with the permission of Miriam Schapiro.

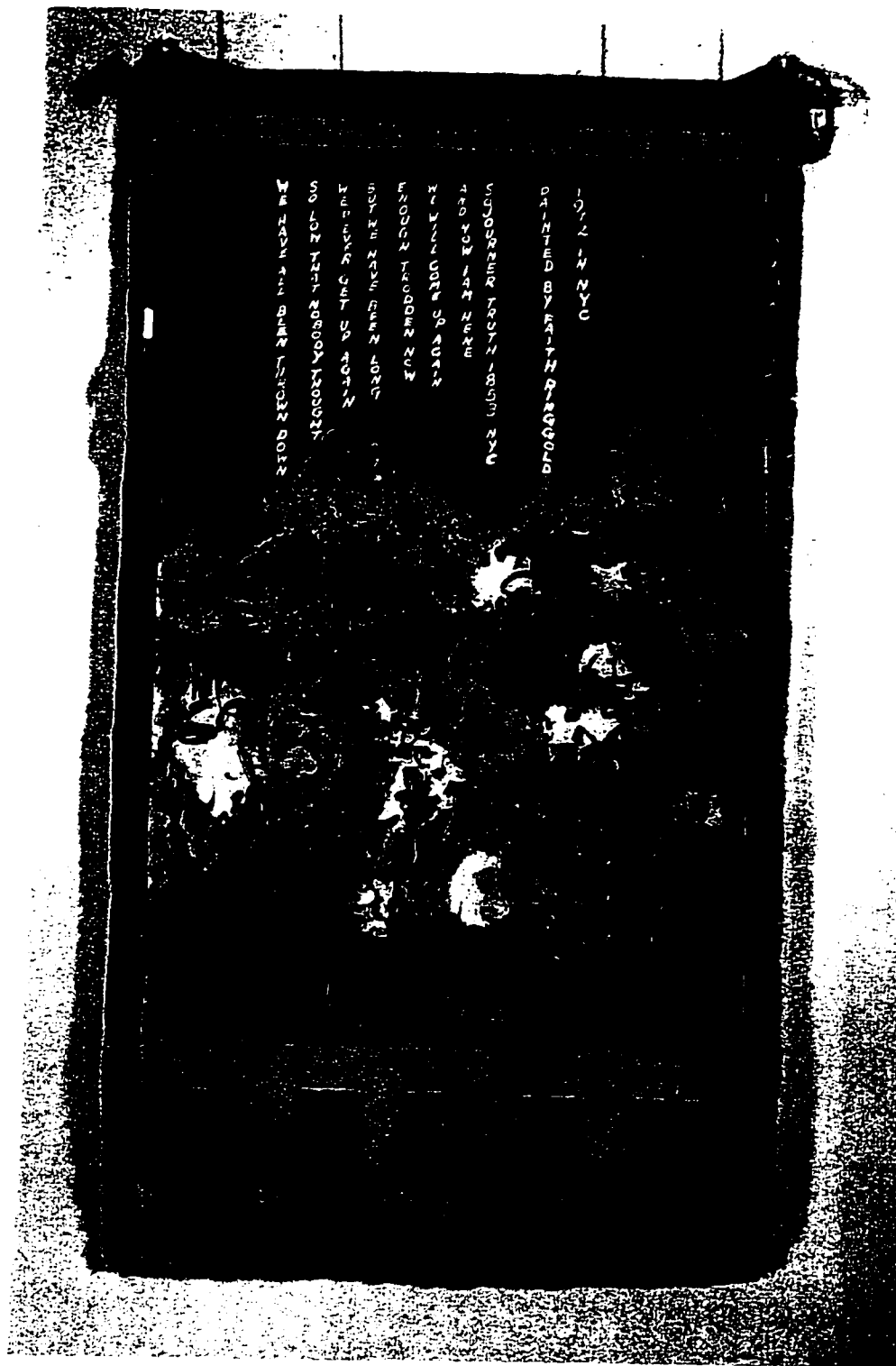


Figure 50 Faith Ringgold. *We Have All Been Thrown Down*, Feminist Series #9, 1972, acrylic on canvas 47 x 26". Reproduced with the permission of the artist.



Figure 51 Faith Ringgold. *What If I Am a Woman?*, *Feminist Series #2*, 1972, acrylic on canvas, 47 x 26". Reproduced with the permission of the artist.



Figure 52 Faith Ringgold. *There Was One of Two things*, *Feminist Series #6*, 1972, acrylic on canvas, 43 x 26½". Reproduced with the permission of the artist.

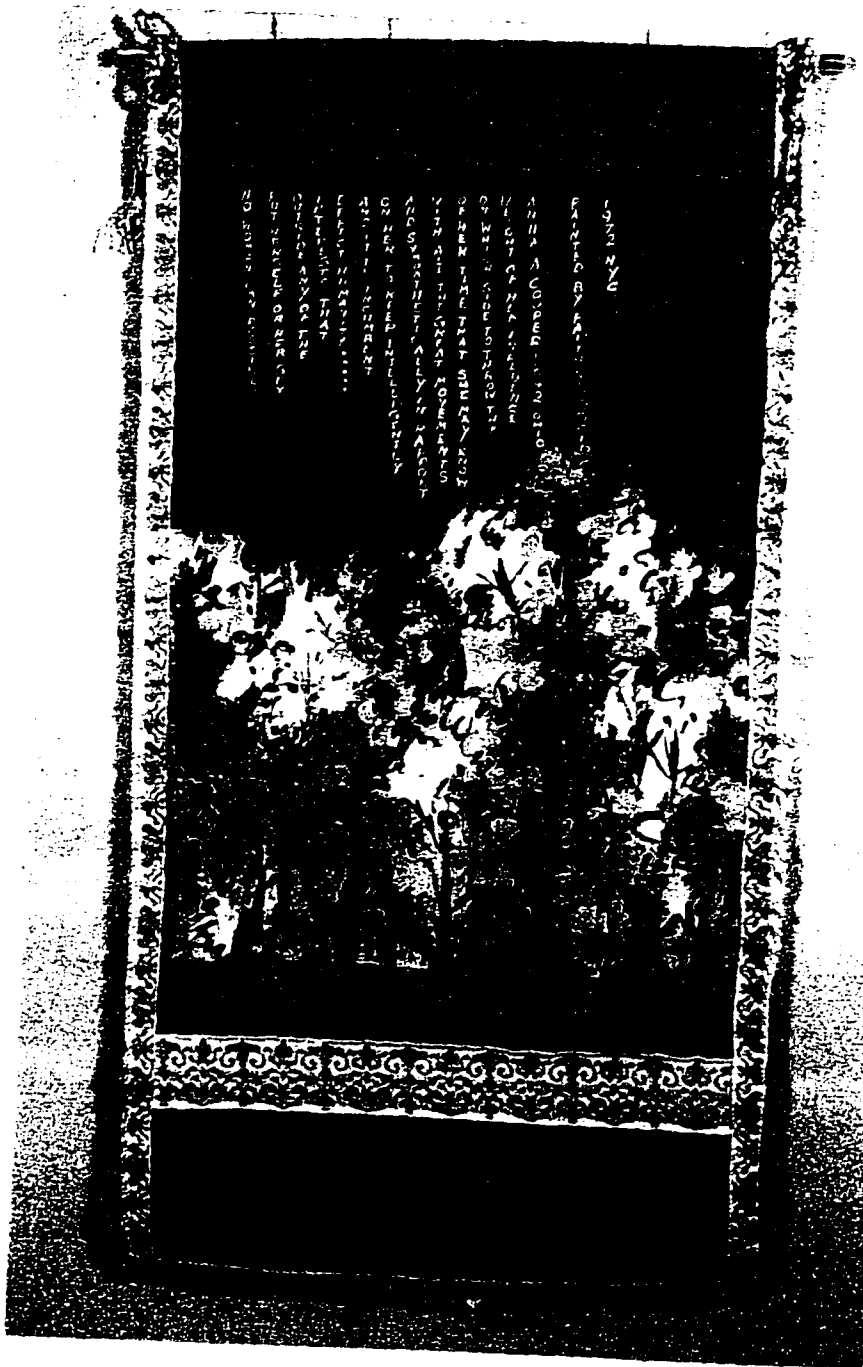


Figure 53 Faith Ringgold. *No Woman Can*, *Feminist Series #15*, 1972, acrylic on canvas, 51 x 26". Reproduced with the permission of the artist.



Figure 54 Faith Ringgold. *And Man Is So Selfish*, *Feminist Series #16*, 1972, acrylic on canvas, 43 x 26". Reproduced with the permission of the artist.

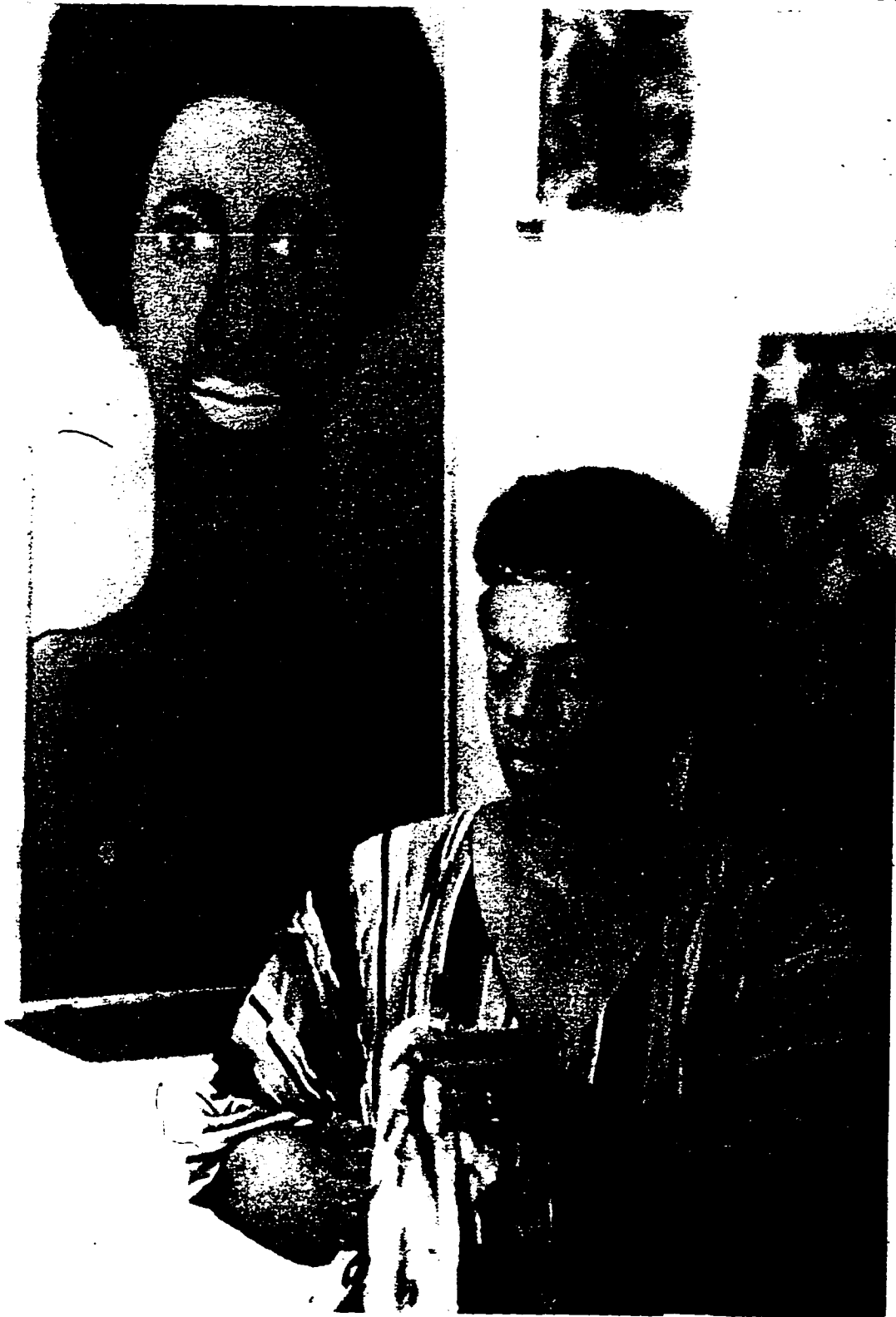


Figure 55 *Photograph of Faith Ringgold, 1969. Reproduced with the permission of the artist.*

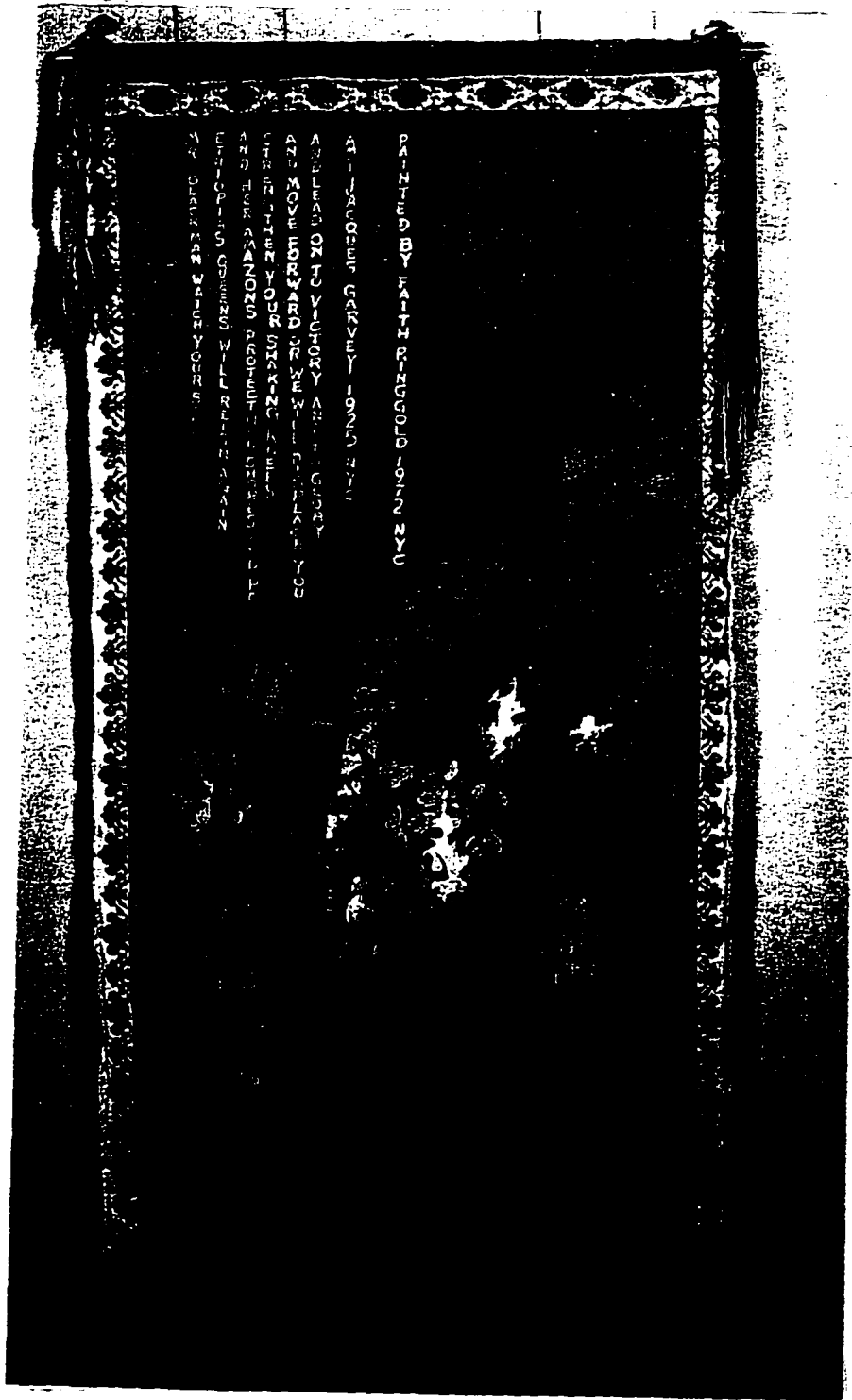


Figure 56 Faith Ringgold, *Mr. Black Man, Feminist Series #18*, 1972, acrylic on canvas, 56 x 26½". Reproduced with the permission of the artist.



Figure 57 Faith Ringgold, *Fight, Slave Rape Series #13*, 1973, acrylic on canvas, 42 x 28". Reproduced with the permission of the artist.

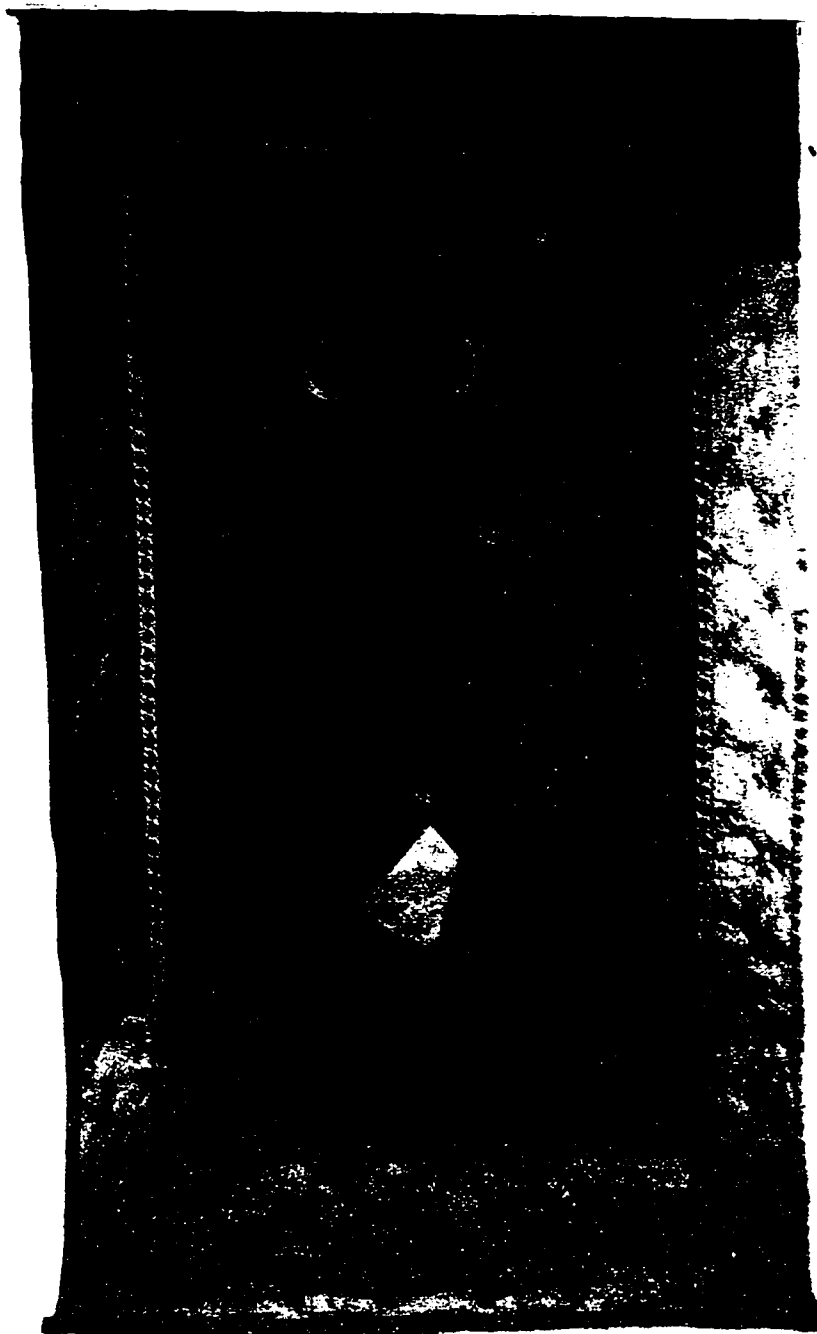


Figure 58 Faith Ringgold, *Fight, To Save Your Life*, 1972, oil on canvas, *thangka* by Willi Posey, 87 x 48". Reproduced with the permission of the artist.



Figure 59 Jeff Donaldson, *Aunt Jemima (and the Pillsbury Doughboy)* '64, 1963-64, oil on raw linen. Reproduced with the permission of the artist.

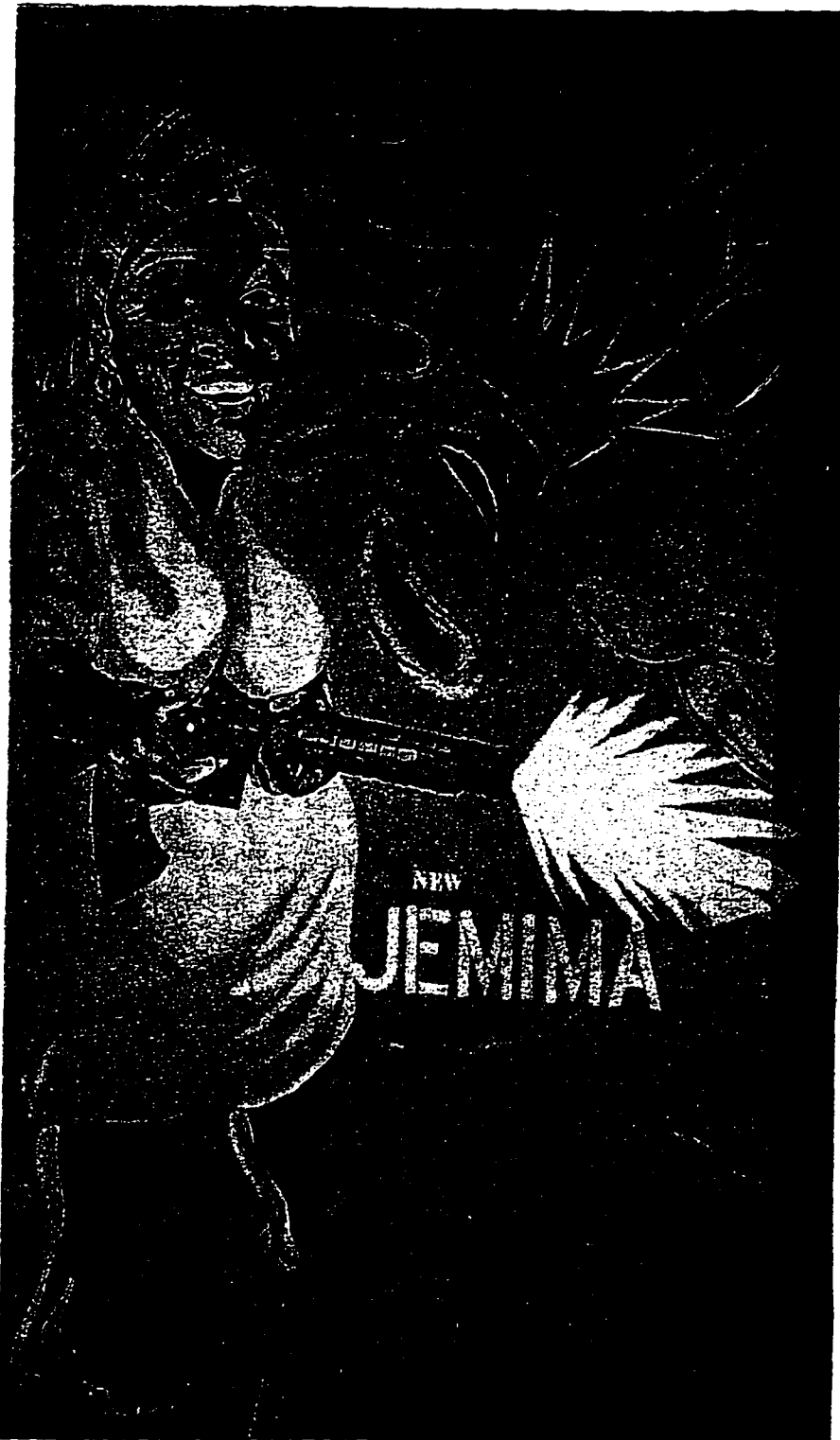


Figure 60 Joe Overstreet, *The New Jemima*, 1964, construction. Reproduced with the permission of The Menil Collection, Houston, Texas.



Figure 61 Betye Saar, *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima*, 1972, mixed media, 11 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 8 x 2 $\frac{3}{4}$. Reproduced with the permission of The University Art Museum, University of California, Berkeley.



Figure 62 Faith Ringgold, *Run, Slave Rape Series #7*, 1973, acrylic on canvas, 45 x 28.
Reproduced with the permission of the artist.



Figure 63 Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *Angeica Saved by Ruggiero*, 1830, oil on canvas, 18¾ x 15½". Reproduced with the permission of The National Gallery, London.



Figure 64 John Everett Millais, *The Knight Errant*, 1870, oil on canvas. Reproduced with the permission of The Tate Gallery, London.



Figure 65 Faith Ringgold, *Help, Slave Rape Series #15*, 1973, acrylic on canvas, 45 x 28". Reproduced with the permission of the artist.



Figure 66 Faith Ringgold, *Help, Slave Rape Series #16*, 1973, acrylic on canvas, 45 x 28". Reproduced with the permission of the artist.



Figure 67 Edouard Manet, *Masked Ball at the Opera*, 1873-74, oil on canvas, 23¼ x 28½". Reproduced with the permission of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., gift of Mrs. Horace Havemeyer in memory of her mother-in-law, Louisine W. Havemeyer.



Figure 68 Philip Pearlstein, *Standing Male, Sitting Female Nudes*, 1969, 74 x 62".
Reproduced with the permission of Edith Floro Carpenter (Mrs. Gilbert F. Carpenter),
Greensboro, N.C.



Figure 69 Alice Neel, *Nude-Self-Portrait*, 1980, oil on canvas, 50 x 40". Reproduced with the permission of the National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

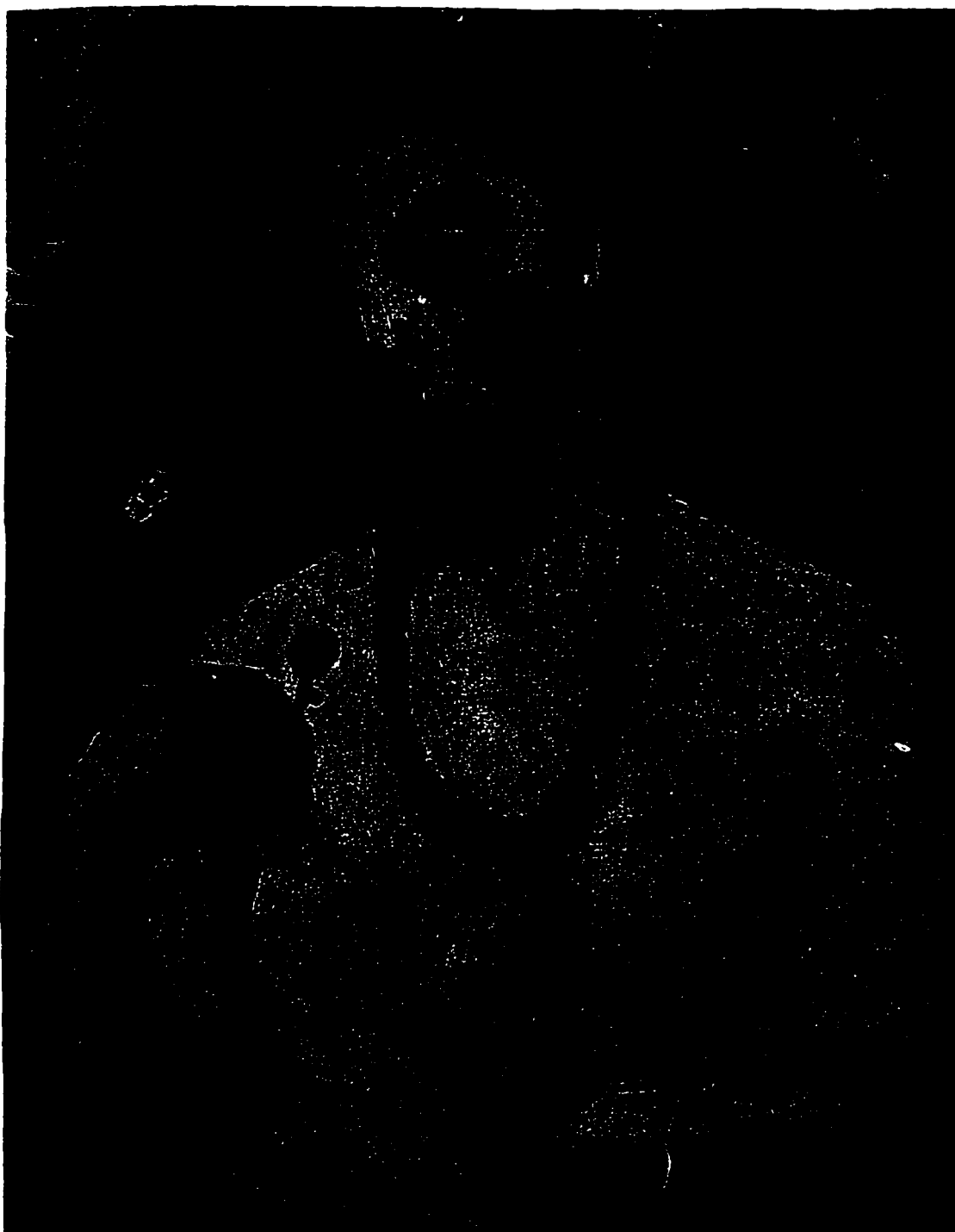


Figure 70 Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Self-Portrait with Amber Necklace*, 1906, oil on canvas, 24 x 19". Reproduced with the permission of the Stiftung Ludwig Roselius Museum, Bremen, Germany.

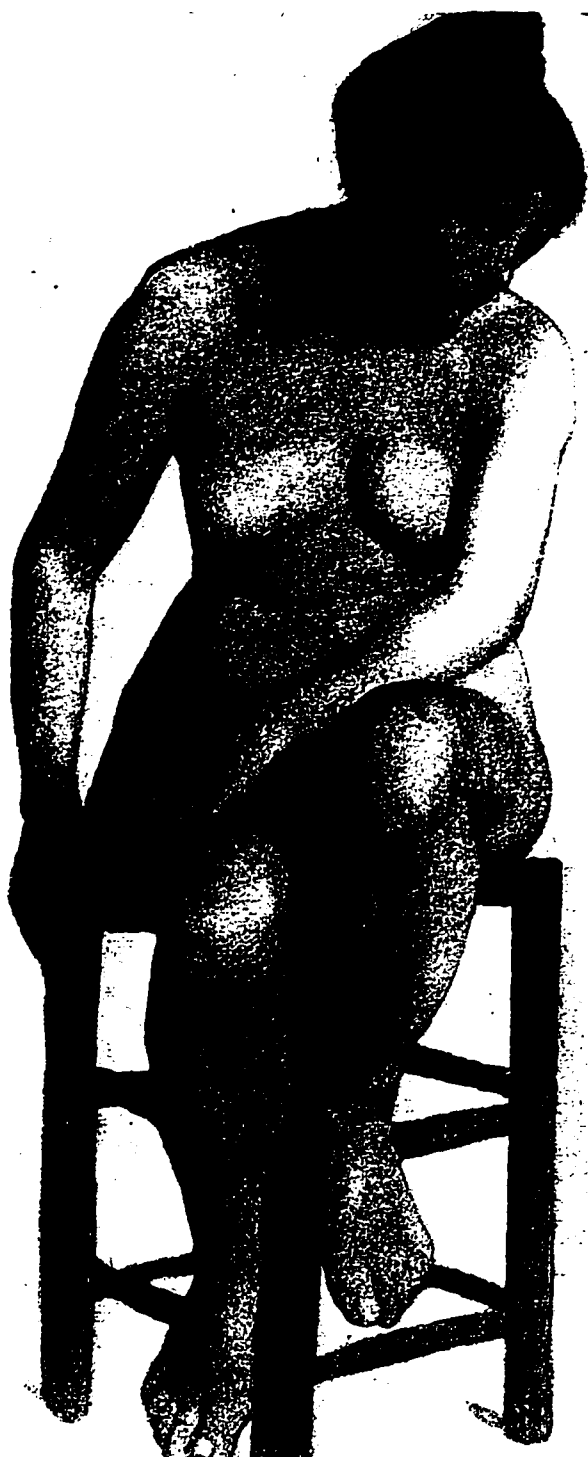


Figure 71 Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Woman on A Stool*, 1900, charcoal, 23.4 x 11.14".
Reproduced with the permission of the Kunstsammlingen Böttcherstrasse, Bremen,
Germany.



Figure 72 Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Self-Portrait on Her Sixth Wedding Day*, 1906, oil on board, 40 x 26½". Reproduced with the permission of the Kunstsammlingen Böttcherstrasse, Bremen, Germany.



Figure 73 Jan van Eyck, *Eve* from the *Ghent Altarpiece*, completed 1432, tempera and oil on panel, approx. 80 x 18". Reproduced with the permission of the Cathedral St. Bavo, Ghent, Belgium.



Figure 74 Erich Heckel, *Crystal Day*, 1913, oil on canvas, 47¼ x 37¾". Reproduced with the permission of the Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Staatsgalerie moderner Kunst, Munich, Germany.

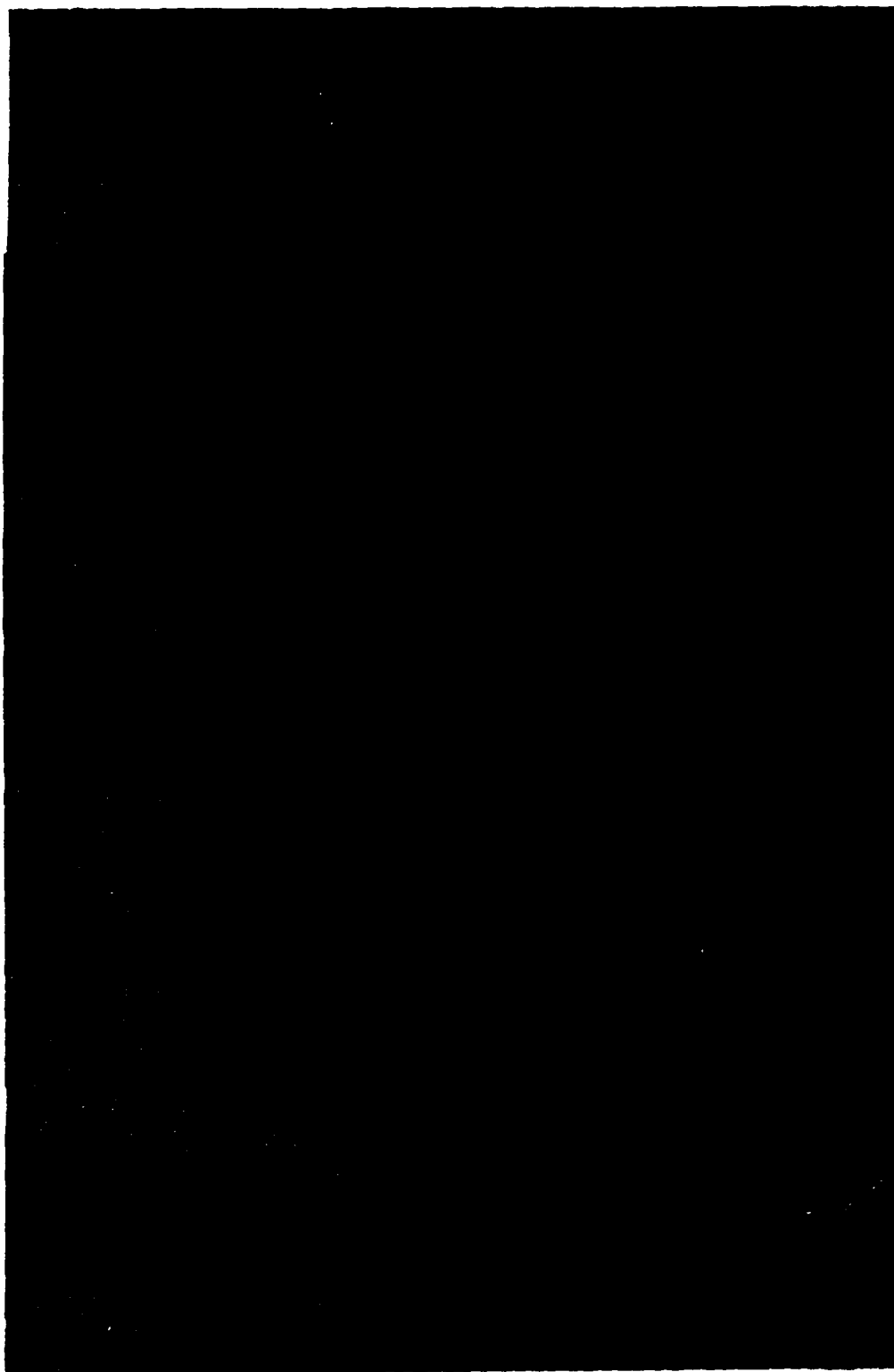


Figure 75 Paul Gauguin, *Day of the God*, 1894, oil on canvas, 26 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 35 $\frac{7}{8}$ ". Reproduced with the permission of the Art Institute of Chicago.



Figure 76 Gustav Courbet, *Bathers*, 1883, oil on canvas. Reproduced with the permission of the Musée Fabre, Montpellier, France.



Figure 77 Pierre-Auguste Renoir, *Bathers*, 1887, oil on canvas, 4' 3" x 5' 8". Reproduced with the permission of the Philadelphia Museum of Art.



Figure 78 Paul Cézanne, *Bathers (Les Grandes Baigneuses)*, 1895-1905, oil on canvas, 82 x 98". Reproduced with the permission of The Philadelphia Museum of Art.



Figure 79 Faith Ringgold, *Zora and Fish*, 1975, mixed media, 5' 4" high; with *Woman #1*, *Windows of the Wedding Series*, 1974, acrylic on canvas, 63 x 27".
Reproduced with the permission of the artist.

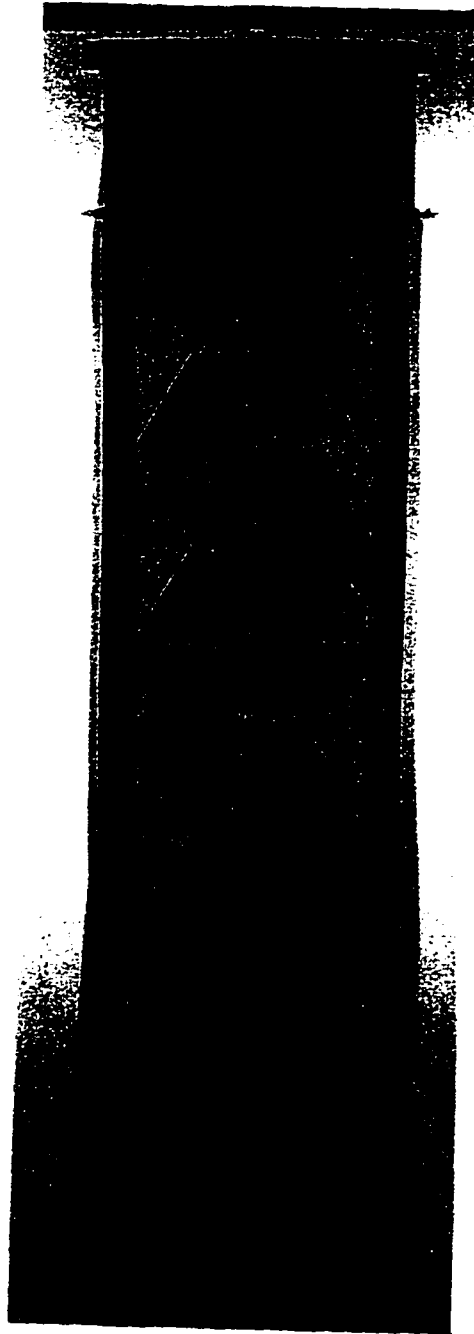


Figure 80 Faith Ringgold, *Children, Windows of the Wedding Series*, 1974, acrylic on canvas 84½ x 20½". Reproduced with the permission of the artist.



Figure 81 Faith Ringgold, *Peaceful Love*, *Windows of the Wedding Series*, 1974, acrylic on canvas, 74½ x 17¾". Reproduced with the permission of the artist.

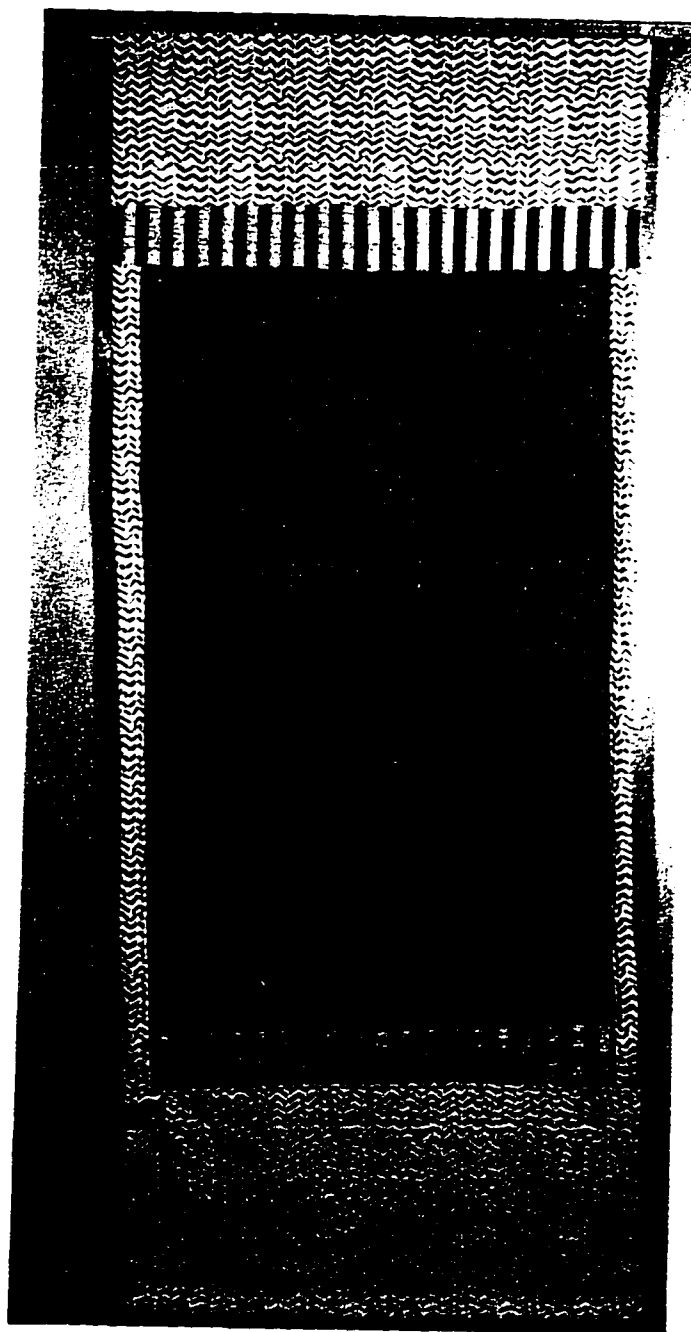


Figure 82 Faith Ringgold, *Mother, Windows of the Wedding Series*, 1974, acrylic on canvas, 86½ x 35½". Reproduced with the permission of the artist.

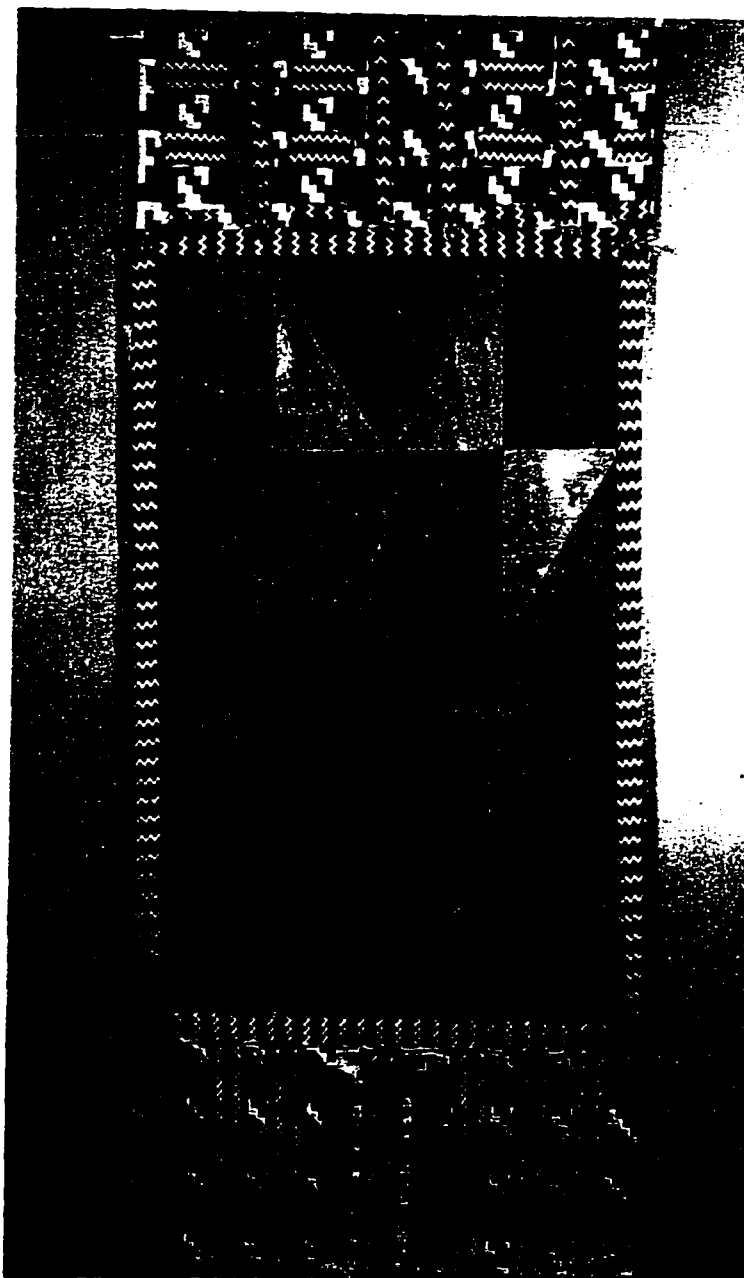


Figure 83 Faith Ringgold, *Man, Windows of the Wedding Series*, 1974, acrylic on canvas, 83 x 35". Reproduced with the permission of the artist.

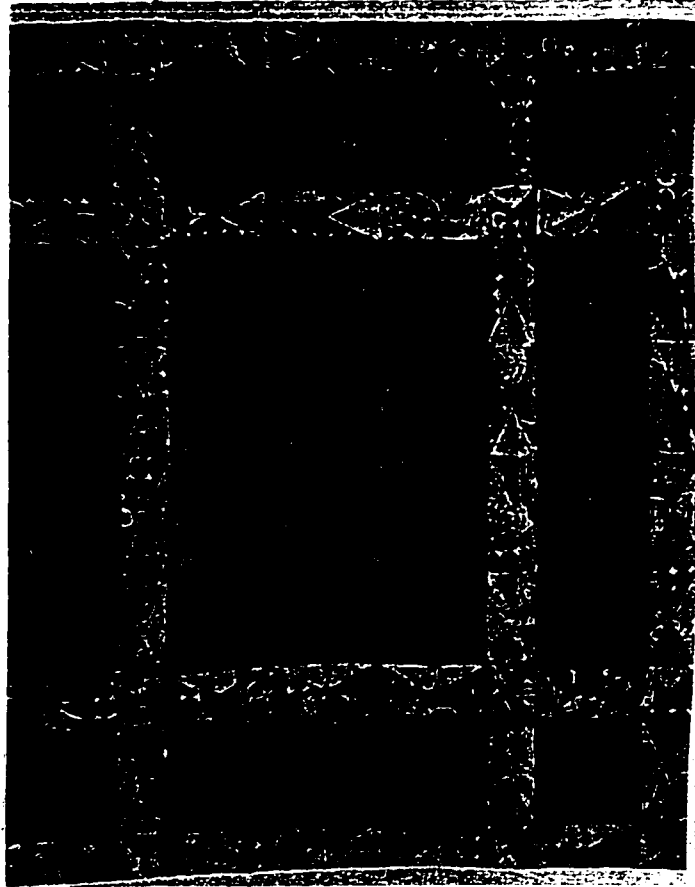


Figure 84 Faith Ringgold in collaboration with Willi Posey, *Echoes of Harlem*, 1980, acrylic on canvas; dyed and pieced fabric, 96 x 84". Reproduced with the permission of Philip Morris Companies, Inc.

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