



Bio: **Faith Ringgold** began her artistic career more than thirty-five years ago as a painter. Today, she is best known for her painted story quilts – art that combines painting, quilted fabric and storytelling. She has exhibited in major museums in the USA, Europe, South America, Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. She is in the permanent collection of many museums including the Studio Museum in Harlem, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, and The Museum of Modern Art. Her first book, *Tar Beach* was a Caldecott Honor Book and winner of the Coretta Scott King Award for Illustration, among numerous other honors. She has written and illustrated eleven children's books. She has received more than seventy-five awards,

fellowships, citations and honors, including the Solomon R. Guggenheim Fellowship for painting, two National Endowment for the Arts Awards and seventeen honorary doctorates, one of which is from her alma mater The City College of New York.

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An Interview with Faith Ringgold

Conducted by Leadership Scholar Karin Zahavi, Class of 2010

Edited by Pilar Timpane

**Karin Zahavi:** Can you describe growing up in Harlem in the 1930s? Who were your influences?

**Faith Ringgold:** I think it's nice to come up in a period where great changes are being made and that was my period — the thirties to the sixties — radical changes being made.

I have to say I didn't know any of the artists, even though they lived all around me. And that was because they were not in books. They did not teach us about them in school. They were not hanging in the museums. They were nowhere to be seen. Except, they were walking up and down the street — same streets I was walking down. But I didn't know who they were and I think they didn't even know who they were. You know, part of knowing who you are is not just coming from you. It's coming from other people's relationship to you and art is just not a popular thing. It's not popular. It probably never will be and we're not really that upset about that.

Who I saw that shaped me as a young person were the musicians. And Thurgood Marshall and W.E.B. Dubois — those people lived on my street. Aaron Douglas did also. Although, I didn't know he was a great artist. And I would say, I don't think he knew either. He taught in a university in the South, and he came back and forth 'cause the South was hard to be in. I imagine he relieved himself in summers and all — he would stay up North.

There was a tremendous cultural activity going on in Harlem from the twenties on, thirties, forties, through the sixties, I would say. I did not find out about Jacob Lawrence and [Romare] Bearden and all those people until the sixties and I found them on my own. I didn't find them in school.

In school, I was taught to copy the great masters of European art — Picasso, Matisse, Degas. I think it really crippled a lot of people. In a way, I have a conflict about that.

**KZ: In what ways did you experience the Harlem Renaissance?**

**FR:** You had a period there — the first time when black people felt comfortable about showing their own image — painting themselves black. They had been told black is ugly, it's invisible, you know — when you look at it, it's a bad thing. You've got to tell people that you've enslaved that they're nobody — they're nobody. You can't build up feelings of identity in the mind of the slave — that's going to lead to nothing but trouble. So, they had had generations of this — black is awful, it's the wrong thing to be and you're the wrong thing to be — you are nothing.

Now, here comes the Harlem Renaissance and the idea that black is beautiful — well, we hadn't gotten to that until the sixties. The sixties came with “black is beautiful,” but it was just before that when “Okay, paint yourself black because that's what you are.” And Aaron Douglas did those first black paintings and artists had to deal with it — a lot of them were opposed.

**KZ: What were some obstacles you faced as a black female artist in that period?**

**FR:** Well, the obstacles had to do with the same racism that black people face in every field. The sixties were rough. It was a cultural period. It was a period during which a lot of doors had opened, a lot of things happened, a lot of changes were made.

In the visual art world, there still has not been a lot done in terms of equity for different groups of people — African Americans, in particular — to show their work and have it seen in the venues that are set aside for the visual arts like museums. Museums have not, up to now, created galleries to show the work of African-American artists and that is why — one of the reasons why — it's important to deny the existence of such a form, such a genre because if you accept it — well, then, where is it? Why is it not here? It's the same thing with women — they don't have galleries of women's art. Well, you do have some women's museums.

I can't do anything outside of my experience. I am black and I am a woman. There it is! Right there. And I can't be one without the other because it just can't happen. You look at me and you don't see a black man. You see a black woman, right? So, what can I say? It's right there. Of course, you cannot, you should not — ever — make something as an artist, or, even as a writer, that is outside of your experience. I mean, I cannot begin to tell a story about someone's life who's lived it and I haven't. So, any story, any painting I do, has to be within my experience. So, no, I don't do anything that's alien to me. It may be my reaction to that thing but it isn't

something that's foreign to me. No. Everything is quite — not necessarily my autobiography, not necessarily my complete story, but I'm all over it.

**KZ: What has been the relationship between your social activism and your art? Is there an audience you think your work might resonate with more than others?**

**FR:** The activism is there in the work. But I'm not going to change anything to impress somebody who may be looking. I'm going to do what's in my heart and do what I think I should be doing and risk not having a viewer.

You're not guaranteed a viewer. Most artists will not have a viewer. People will look and look away. People will look and not see. That's your job, really, as an artist — is to hold them for a while. But, not to give them any message that they want, necessarily. It's what I want to say.

I have a pretty good idea of the story they've already heard, whoever they are. But here's my story — this is my take on it. So, what do you think about that? I don't concern myself too much about the viewer. I'll tell you another thing, too. I've been so surprised over the years at what people actually see in the work. They often see things that I never thought of. That's why it's so important to show your work. And so it's imperative that artists — especially young artists — show their work because as they show their work, they're going to get comments and ideas from what it is they're doing that they never thought of.

So your viewer is very instrumental in your ability to develop as an artist. But I don't think that should be your first concern, no. Because you're not guaranteed a viewer — no, not at all.

**KZ: When did you begin to develop a mature style of your own? How did you overcome and earn your rightful place in the art scene?**

**FR:** After I graduated from college in 1959 — all this time before, I was going back and forward between all these different artists who I had copied, you know. It's hard to pull yourself away from that.

Well, let me tell you a little story. This was in my still-life period. I took my still lifes and my landscape pictures and went shopping for a gallery. We're talking early 1960s — I'd say maybe 1960 or 1961. I was looking for a gallery to show my work. I went to a gallery on 57th Street. In this gallery [the owner] had lots of images of still life and landscape pictures. And see, I didn't take just pictures, I took the real art. So, they couldn't tell me, "I'm not sure what this looks like." I'm going to take the picture — okay? So, here, I come in with my husband and he's carrying the pictures and we're looking around and he says to me, "She's got landscapes and still lifes like yours — maybe we're in the right place." So, she looked at what I had to show her, and she said to me, "You can't do this." Now, I was so bowled over when she said that — I don't recall the rest of the exchange. The most powerful thing I heard her say was "YOU — can't do that." And I was trying to figure out now what was she trying to say.

I think it was hostile, but you can learn from hostility. I like to take hostility and turn it into something sweet for me — you know, like the blues? I think that's the story of black people in America: taking that bad stuff and making it into something good — sing the blues over it. So that's what I did.

I said to myself, what she's really saying is there's an experience, a black experience going on in America. You're part of it. You need to be putting your voice to that. You don't wait for somebody else. She opened that door for me.

We decided that she meant that here we are in the 1960s — all hell is breaking out all over America. We are in a revolutionary phase! Things will never ever be the same in America. And here you are making still life — and landscapes? YOU? YOU, who are in the middle of all this? You can't do that! So, I said, "She's right! I can't. I'm not going to. This is my experience. It's my culture. I have an opportunity here to have a voice about what is going on in this country — my country — right now to me. She's right." And that's when I decided to do my "*American People*" series.

That next summer of 1963, I took my daughters and we went up to Martha's Vineyard for the summer and I started painting the "*American People*" series. The "*American People*" series are images of what I saw as I looked around in a racist America. From 1963 to 1967, I painted a series of twenty paintings. By 1967, I had a gallery. I painted myself into a gallery. In 1967, [the owner of the gallery] said, "Okay, you're having your first show."

At that time in America, let me tell you what was going on. Modern art was about huge canvases of just abstraction. Don't say anything in your work — I mean it was very uncool to just be giving out messages and talking trash. Nothing. Don't say anything. Just have colors and no meaning. People are not going to jump up and start buying political art. Make something that everybody's going to like and what are everybody going to like? They're going to like this abstract thing. I'm not saying they weren't beautiful; there was a lot of wonderful, wonderful work shown, and made. They painted these huge canvases of colors and I was painting these small canvases of all hell breaking out [laughs].

Galleries in the summer close down in New York and they all went to Provincetown or somewhere. "So," [the gallery owner] says, "While I'm gone, I'm giving you the keys so that you can paint big. You're going to have the whole gallery to yourself, no work on the walls except yours, and I want you to paint some big images and I want you to just say what's going on in America right now, just say it, do it, put everything together and let it roll."

I'd go down to the gallery everyday and paint, and I had the whole place to myself. That's when I painted "*The Flag is Bleeding*." I did three large paintings that summer: "*The Flag is Bleeding*," "*The Black Power Postage Stamp*," and "*Die*." And I had a show and it was wonderful. It got great reviews in *The [New York] Times*, in *Art News*.

Flying means that you can do the impossible. What they say you can't do — ignore that, just do it anyway. Here you are, you say. Because women's voices don't get to be heard. People don't ask their opinions of things that are happening in the world. It's the men that get asked. But as an artist I don't have to wait for anybody to ask me anything — I can paint what I want. Now they can decide not to look, but it's there and I did it. And so that's where I turned [rejection] around to say — you have a voice, use it! You can do it. THIS is not your voice. Let's hear what your voice is.