As an artist, activist and children’s author Faith Ringgold (b. 1930, Harlem, New York) has challenged perceptions of African American identity and gender inequality for over five decades. Growing up in the creative and intellectual context of the Harlem Renaissance and inspired by her contemporaries including writers James Baldwin and Amiri Baraka she is widely recognised for her painted story quilts combining personal narratives, history and politics ‘to tell my story, or, more to the point, my side of the story’, as an African American woman.

This survey exhibition, Ringgold’s first in a European institution, is chronological and includes paintings, political posters and story quilts. It begins with American People (1963–67), a series that exposes social inequalities and racial tensions she witnessed during the Civil Rights era and culminates in her response to the Black Power movement. In the 1970s, her work and politics embraced feminism as she led protests outside New York museums...
demanding equal gender and racial representation in exhibitions, designed political posters and co-organised the People’s Flag Show for which she was arrested.

Ringgold’s paintings shifted in the 1970s from traditional oils to her first unstretched works bordered with pieced fabric and inspired by Tibetan tanka paintings. The exhibition includes tankas from the Feminist, Slave Rape and abstract Windows of the Wedding Series Ringgold made in collaboration with her mother Willi Posey, a fashion designer. This led in the 1980s to Ringgold’s first story quilts where she was able to finally ‘publish’ her writings. She said ‘there’s so much freedom in “Freedom of Speech”, I could write whatever I wanted on my art – no one could stop me’. These works weave image and text in the tradition of quilting passed on through the female line of her family from her great-great grandmother who was born into slavery. From Harlem rooftops and jazz clubs, to a graffiti-filled New York subway and a radical biography of Aunt Jemima, Ringgold’s affirmative quilts celebrate the myriad of life, culture and aspiration. Her later quilt series Coming to Jones Road and the American Collection return to voice African American histories, including the journey of escaped slaves from the south to the north via the Underground Railroad. As cultural assumptions and prejudices persist, Ringgold’s work retains its contemporary resonance.
In the summer of 1967, Ringgold used the Spectrum Gallery in New York as her studio to paint on a large scale for the first time ahead of her inaugural solo exhibition there later that year.

She completed the final three mural-sized works from the American People series: The Flag is Bleeding; Die and US Postage Stamp Commemorating the Advent of Black Power. In this latter work, Ringgold depicts a hundred sets of eyes and noses in a grid-like structure that is framed within a postage stamp. The concept of over-sizing a commonplace object and the repetition of faces acknowledges the strategies of Pop art, in particular those of Andy Warhol. Ten percent of the US population was black in 1967 and Ringgold visualises this statistic by painting a line of ten African American faces diagonally across the composition. She crosses this with the words BLACK POWER to form an 'X'. As a counterpoint, she encrypts the words WHITE POWER in white paint horizontally within the composition, showing how white supremacy remains the underlying foundation of society. Black Power was a term coined by Stokely Carmichael in 1966 and signified a new movement that encompassed racial pride and demanded greater force against white power than the Civil Rights movement.

Ringgold has said: 'This was probably the most difficult picture I’ve ever painted. I needed to resolve the problem of a composition of a hundred faces that could be read as a single image and as separate ones ... It was difficult to paint the hundred faces, but equally it was difficult to visualise the subject itself because, in many ways, I had no idea what Black Power meant. My own need to feel a sense of personal as well as public power was in direct contrast to the world that ignored women of all races. For me, the concept of Black Power carried with it a big question mark. Was it intended only for the black men or would black women have power too?'
AMERICAN PEOPLE SERIES #4: MR CHARLIE, 1964

Mr Charlie was a generic expression used by African Americans to refer to slave owners. It became a phrase adopted by the Civil Rights movement for a white man of imperious power, characterised in this painting by Mr Charlie’s suit and insincere smile. In 1964, Ringgold saw James Baldwin’s play Blues for Mister Charlie, which was written in response to the murder of Medgar Evers, the leader of the NAACP (the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) in Mississippi in 1963.

AMERICAN PEOPLE SERIES #9: THE AMERICAN DREAM, 1964

A red arrow arching across the top of the painting points towards a large diamond ring on the finger of a wealthy woman whose face appears to be half white and half black. The title, The American Dream, suggests that the artist aspires in this work to racial integration and harmony while simultaneously highlighting the role of wealth in establishing social class and segregation.
AMERICAN SPECTRUM, 1969

Ringgold has said of this work: ‘In American Spectrum six mask faces, each occupying its own rectangular space, are horizontally linked together, combining African design with modern art serial concepts... [It is] a subtle statement about black people’s multiethnic heritage.’

THE PEOPLE'S FLAG AND JUDSON 3, 1970 – 71

In 1970, Ringgold co-organised a group exhibition called the People’s Flag Show at the Judson Memorial Church in Greenwich Village, New York, as a ‘challenge to the repressive laws governing the so-called flag desecration’ and to protest against ‘American oppression and repression at home and abroad.’ The exhibition featured the work of over 200 artists, including Yvonne Rainer, Jasper Johns and Carl Andre. Ringgold made this poster, the words were written by her daughter Michele Wallace, then aged eighteen. Together with artists and co-organisers of the exhibition, Jon Hendricks and Jean Tuche, Ringgold was arrested for flag desecration. Detained, convicted and ordered to pay a $100 fine, they became known as The Judson Three. It was not until 1989 that the US Supreme Court decriminalised flag burning and desecration on the grounds of the First Amendment.
**TAR BEACH, 1988**

*Tar Beach* is the first story quilt in Ringgold’s *Women on a Bridge* series, which features the George Washington Bridge connecting Harlem to New Jersey. It is based on the artist's childhood memories of going to 'tar beach', the tarmacked rooftop of her building in Harlem during hot summers. Her parents and their friends would chat and play cards, while Ringgold and her siblings would lie on blankets looking up at the stars and skyline of New York. The story tells of eight-year-old Cassie Lightfoot’s night flights over the city. An editor spotted a poster of this quilt and invited Ringgold to transform it into a children's book, the first of many.

**MOTHER’S QUILT, 1983**

Ringgold collaborated with her mother Willi Posey, a fashion designer, on only one quilt: her first one, *Echoes of Harlem, 1980*. She made *Mother’s Quilt* when in mourning for her mother, who died in 1981, with the cut fabric pieces that they had planned to use for their second quilt. The composition comprises nine dolls, a mother and eight daughters.

**THE AMERICAN COLLECTION #1: WE CAME TO AMERICA, 1997**

The first quilt in the series *We Came To America* addresses the forced migration of Africans to America, the slave trade and the broken promises of American democracy. Michele Wallace has written, 'It features a black Statue of Liberty, her hair in dreadlocks, holding a black baby in one hand and a lit torch in the other. All around her are the waters of the Atlantic, filled with writhing black bodies. In the background is an image of a burning slave ship, reminiscent of JMW Turner’s masterpiece *The Slave Ship* (1840), which was formally titled *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying – Typhoon Coming On*. According to the narrative that was written for this painting, although not published, Marlena [Ringgold’s fictional artist of the series] has a dream while crossing the Atlantic with her brother of the slaves walking on water back to Africa, joyfully celebrating their escape.'
THE AMERICAN COLLECTION #6:
THE FLAG IS BLEEDING, 1997 (Cover)

This is one of many works where Ringgold has depicted the American flag to contextualise the problems she sees facing American society. This is the second painting with the title Flag is Bleeding. In the first, created as part of the American People Series in 1967, Ringgold depicted a black man armed with a knife, a white woman and a white armed man peering through the bleeding flag, a confrontation of violence and racial tension. In contrast, this work depicts a black woman protecting her two children. She appears to be bleeding from her heart, while the flag is also dripping blood.

When Ringgold made the first painting, she excluded black women, since they played no part in Black Power. Thirty years later, she credits them with their important domestic role.

LIVE PROGRAMMES & EVENTS

SATURDAY TALKS
Saturday 22 June, 3pm
Natalia Grabowska, Assistant Curator

Saturday 7 September, 3pm
Melissa Blanchflower, Curator, Exhibitions and Public Art

BSL interpretation is available upon prior request for all our Saturday Talks. For more information visit: serpentinegalleries.org/bsl

PUBLIC TALK
An Evening with Faith Ringgold
Conway Hall, Thursday 6 June, 7pm
Tickets £10/8 via serpentinegalleries.org

Artist, activist, educator and author Faith Ringgold will be in conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist, Artistic Director, Serpentine Galleries, to discuss her practice and the different series of works she created over the past 50 years that are included in her exhibition at Serpentine Gallery, her first solo exhibition in a European public institution.
DIGITAL GUIDES

sgtours.org

Discover more about the artists and exhibitions with a free guide. Inviting visitors to explore the Serpentine Galleries in a new way, the digital guide offers an interactive gallery experience by providing access to additional content, audio, video and curator tours. Supported by Bloomberg Philanthropies.
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Artistic Director
Melissa Blanchflower
Curator, Exhibitions and Public Art
Natalia Grabowska
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