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Faith Ringgold’s Slave Rape Series

Thirty years ago, Faith Ringgold’s painting *The Flag Is Bleeding* (fig. 28) was exhibited for the first time. The American flag dripping blood etched itself into the memories of those who viewed it at New York’s Spectrum Gallery. Over the next several decades, Ringgold became a formidable artist and personality. She is one of very few women of color who helped to spearhead both the Black and Feminist Art Movements in New York in the early 1970s. A political and creative powerhouse, Ringgold has been credited with raising the tradition of quilt-making from the realm of craft to that of fine art. She has also pierced the near-impenetrable armor of the art world—no small accomplishment for an African American woman. Now, her “story quilts” (narrative paintings bordered with quilted fabric) hold honored places in the collections of many great repositories of art.\(^1\)

At a recent conference on African American culture, renowned art historian Robert Farris Thompson spoke enthusiastically about Ringgold’s paintings of the 1960s. Due to their stark political imagery, these works have received a great deal of art-historical attention, as have Ringgold’s “story quilts” of the 1980s and 1990s, well known for their unique format and engaging narratives.\(^2\) There are, however, works from the intervening period of the 1970s that have been examined only superficially. They consist of a group of *thangka* paintings known as the Slave Rape series.

A *thangka* (pronounced “ton-kah”) is a sacred Tibetan painting bordered in quilted fabric. In the summer of 1972, Ringgold saw her first *thangkas* at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam and was immediately inspired to “unstretch” her own canvases and replace their standard wooden stretchers with soft fabric borders. Ringgold found the portability of the *thangkas* irresistible. For years, the artist had been compelled to carry her large-scale paintings up and down the fourteen
football of stairs that led to her Harlem apartment because, as she recalls, "the elevator, damn it, was too small." In the thangkas, Ringgold discovered a solution to the problem: "I could do this. 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 daughter's clothes to camp." The thangkas prompted Ringgold (both a mother and an artist) to associate their fabric borders with her children's clothing—items that could be easily folded for shipping. Experimenting as she did throughout her career with the form and content of her art made it possible for Ringgold to reject the time-honored tradition of painting on canvas for a method that creatively and practically suited her needs.

Ringgold was, in fact, one of several women artists who were experimenting with fabric at the time. Artists such as Miriam Schapiro, Betye Saar, Judy Chicago, and Joyce Kozloff were engaged in deconstructing the modernist, minimalist tradition that had effectively marginalized decorative and fabric art. In the art of these women form
became content; their work granted so-called woman's art long-overdue precedence. Within a decade, Ringgold would be utilizing the fabric format as the basis for her story quilts.

The importance of the _thangkas_ lies in the fact that they form a vital link between the artist's earlier works on canvas and her later quilted paintings. Yet Ringgold's _thangkas_ remain her least-known works. The _Slave Rape thangkas_, like their Tibetan predecessors, have no stretchers. This feature makes them intimate and inviting, especially since the fabric must be handled as each _thangka_ is unfolded for viewing. The colors are incandescent and intense; the paintings depict playful images with an uncommon theme—nude Black women who frolic in lush foliage. Indeed, Ringgold's figures constitute one of the rare instances in Western art wherein the Black female nude is portrayed.

Unlike most of the traditional nudes that have proliferated since antiquity, the women in the _Slave Rape_ paintings are active and armed. They provide a stark contrast to classic Western female nude images, in which women are usually presented as passive and defenseless. Furthermore, Ringgold's enigmatic figures are rendered in a flat, two-dimensional fashion, and their facial expressions, disturbingly, allude to caricature. This chapter will examine the artist's highly idiosyncratic configuration, in the _Slave Rape_ series, of the female nude and the complex motivations that inspired Ringgold (and a number of her contemporaries) to appropriate images that, for decades, had been construed as negative—and even stereotypical (see fig. 29).

The nude figures in many of the _Slave Rape_ paintings are nonheroic in appearance. They seem vulnerable within the context of the narrative. Their faces stare out at us in surprise, and their lips form little "O" shapes, as if mouthing silent cries for help. The distressed expressions, however, do not communicate to the viewer a bona fide sense of the women's predicament. On the contrary, one finds little tension in these lyrical renderings. Ringgold's works seem almost playful—a fact that unmistakably contradicts their theme. The figures, like the landscapes that surround them, are lush and fecund. The sumptuous corporeality of these full-breasted women seems to mock the dire subject of the series, as does the artist's deliberately unsophisticated portrayal. Yet, as we will see, Ringgold's seemingly lighthearted rendering of the tragic subject of slave rape serves a critical purpose for both the artist and the viewer.

The _Slave Rape_ paintings constitute a visual and metaphorical reification of the history of the enslaved African. The desire to comprehend this past was the chief motivating factor in Ringgold's decision to paint the series. "_Slave Rape_ was . . . like going back and trying to understand
Faith Ringgold’s *Slave Rape* Series

Fig. 29. Faith Ringgold, *Help: Slave Rape Series #15*, 1973. Acrylic on canvas, 45 x 23 inches. (Courtesy of the artist’s collection.) © Faith Ringgold.

some of the roots of black women coming here,” explains Ringgold. “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.” Beyond this inquiry into Ringgold's African past is the
artist's expression of a 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 slavery and a deliberate refiguring of those facts. She empowers these women and transforms them from victims into victors within the context of a narrative. In doing so, Ringgold deconstructs a number of Black female stereotypes.

Most striking in this series is the ability of the figures to allude to and also subvert Black stereotypes. Derisive characters such as Mammy, Jezebel, Sambo, and the like were popularized at the turn of the twentieth century concurrently with the passing of “Jim Crow” legislation, which served to institutionalize segregation. Both phenomena functioned to recapture a lost social order—that of the master and the slave—wherein Blacks were subjected by law to white control. At the same time that Blacks were being legally isolated, they were being socially denigrated. African Americans were portrayed as shiftless, stupid, lazy, irresponsible, and dangerous. These false constructs quickly became part of the American consciousness and worked their dreadful magic by representing Blacks in subservient and powerless roles, often with grossly exaggerated features. In these negative portrayals, the complex American social dynamic between the majority and the minority was reinforced and perpetuated. Furthermore, Black women suffered an added burden—they had to deal with a second set of stereotypes that were grounded not in race but in gender.7

The abundant and elaborate mythology that has been assigned to African American women has been characterized by author and activist Frances Beale as “malicious.” Black women, Beale explains, have been molested and abused; they have suffered economic exploitation; they have been forced to serve as maid and wet nurse to white families, and as a result, their own children often have been neglected. These women have been socially manipulated, physically raped, and used to undermine their own households. Finally, Beale concludes, Black women have been powerless to reverse this syndrome.8 Yet are Black women truly powerless in this regard? Certainly in the case of the visual arts, the answer is no. Although for African American women racism and sexism have worked together to create “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 caregivers to white children and bad mothers to their own children, have all been challenged by Black artists.9 The efforts of women artists of color, in conjunction with those of Black male artists, have resulted in a partial dismantling of these myths. Black feminist author bell hooks and historian
Patricia Morton have argued that Black artists actively have appropriated and exploited their own negative stereotypes in order to assert control over them.\textsuperscript{10}

The three 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, Morton explains, serve to justify white fears and alleviate status anxieties by projecting what is feared onto others—a practice that both rationalizes and perpetuates oppression. The devastating consequences of these stereotypes have necessitated the creation of new images that counteract existing ones. Concerted efforts to accomplish this occurred first during the Harlem Renaissance and again at the time of the Civil Rights Movement. During these periods, Black artists were inspired to use visual imagery as a countermeasure to weaken the impact of negative Black stereotypes. In the 1950s and 1960s, Blacks offered alternative sets of cultural definitions and images that resulted in major structural changes—changes reflected in the decline of the acceptance of stereotypes in popular culture.\textsuperscript{11} One of the most ubiquitous and tenacious of these stereotypes was that of Aunt Jemima.

Jeff Donaldson and Joe Overstreet, two artists of the Black Art Movement, 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) (fig. 30) presents viewers with a physically commanding woman who is locked in violent conflict with a pot-bellied, club-wielding policeman. The pair are set against the background of an American flag whose stripes have been distorted to form chevron patterns reminiscent of African textiles (which perhaps serves as a metaphor for a reordered American state). Donaldson redefines Aunt Jemima as a “Superwoman”—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) (fig. 31), a “pop rendition of the pancake maker-turned-warrior” smiles cheerfully out at the viewer.\textsuperscript{12} Yet Jemima’s smile takes on an alternate 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 both to the stereotype of Aunt Jemima and to the violent and dangerous reaction to the stereotype that she embodies.
Fig. 30. Jeff Donaldson, *Aunt Jemima (and the Pillsbury Doughboy) ’64*, 1963–64. Oil on raw linen, 51 5/8 x 52 inches. (Courtesy of the artist’s collection.)

Perhaps the most arresting of the attacks on the Mammy stereotype is Betye Saar’s 1972 construction *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima* (fig. 32). Saar challenges the convention of the Black domestic 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 in 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, who is of course rotund, 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 as she holds a white infant in her left arm.

Upon careful examination, the viewer realizes that the dress worn
Fig. 31. Joe Overstreet, The New Jemima, 1964. Construction, 102 3/8 x 60 3/4 x 17 inches. (Courtesy of the Menil Collection, Houston.)
by this figure is in actuality a magnified black fist—the sign of “Black Power”—and that the infant she holds is 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 typically portray the Mammy as a helpful care-
Faith Ringgold’s *Slave Rape* Series
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 reenter the larger framework of the composition, he or she is made to acknowledge the broom that the stout, grimacing figure holds in her right hand. Almost as an afterthought, the viewer notes the small pistol held in the same hand and the larger rifle, potent with lethal energy, that is positioned at the left side of the figure and that balances the broom compositionally. Yolanda Lopez and Moira Roth describe this assemblage as psychologically and politically explosive. Saar's powerful Aunt Jemima, they argue, is reconfigured from an obsequious servant into a woman participating in her own liberation.13 Saar, like Overstreet, accomplishes this feat of empowerment by arming her figure and, consequently, negating her subservient and passive status.

Each of these three works is meant to portray a “benign matron turned urban guerrilla” who has awakened from her smiling passivity with a vengeance.14 Yet, by eradicating all evidence of passivity and complacency, these artists have, in fact, replaced Aunt Jemima with a new archetype—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, posing malevolent danger to man and child. Although empowering, the Superwoman is not necessarily more realistic than the Mammy. In this regard, Ringgold’s *Slave Rape* series differs from the works of her contemporaries in ways that at first may not be apparent.

Paralleling the works of Donaldson, Overstreet, and Saar, the *Slave Rape* paintings serve to reconfigure the Black stereotype and undermine its negative impact. Ringgold has armed her protagonists and likened them, visually, to Black caricatures through the subtle use of rounded eyes, widely opened mouths, brightly painted lips, animated postures, and cartoon-like expressions of surprise (see fig. 33). However, Ringgold’s appropriation of the stereotype differs from those mentioned earlier in several important ways. For instance, the feature of Ringgold’s figures are moderately, rather than grossly, exaggerated. In addition, while Ringgold’s women are armed to do battle, they also exhibit fear and surprise and are thus more sympathetic as characters than the invulnerable Superwoman, whose self-sufficiency garners her neither compassion nor support. By utilizing a subtler approach to the theme of the Black female stereotype, Ringgold is able to acknowledge the vulnerability of these African women while simultaneously asserting their active resistance to victimization.
Fig. 33. Faith Ringgold, *Fight: Slave Rape Series #13*, 1973. Acrylic on canvas, 45 x 28 inches. (Courtesy of the artist's collection.) © Faith Ringgold.

Several details further confound a straightforward reading of the *Slave Rape* paintings. First, the theme of 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. Yet the viewer does not sense any genuine distress on their parts. The scene is distinctly humorous, even satirical, due to the stiff, awkward, and even weak gestures of the figures and their animated expressions. The
artist purposely has fused a grim theme with a facetious rendering, and the use of humor is the key to the symbolism of the Slave Rape series.

Ringgold’s humor diminishes the horrors of the past. The artist, through exaggerated gestures and expressions, undermines the gravity of the drama by enhancing its comic nature. 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 palatable by the viewer and, in effect, become useless as communicative vehicles. Ringgold’s intention is first to draw the viewer into the image before revealing the true nature of the subject. Moira Roth explains that Ringgold’s formal techniques, while seemingly naive, are both deliberate and sophisticated. “If we read Ringgold carefully,” Roth asserts, “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 tone.” 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 body language of the women.¹⁵

Ringgold’s method of using humor to veil a more profound political or social statement serves not only to instruct her audiences but also to give the artist an outlet for the inevitable frustrations that come with living in an oppressive society. In a broader context, many who find themselves living in difficult situations use humor as a coping mechanism. For example, beyond the scope of the visual arts one can find a similar use of humor in African American folktales and fiction. Subjects such as lynching, unemployment, and poverty are routinely addressed with irony and satire. These jokes are often directed inward, upon Blacks themselves, and can be harsh to the point of cruelty. Yet making light of oppression helps African Americans to adjust to the intolerable aspects of their lives and history that cannot be altered. Joking serves as a safety valve, channeling off tensions and mitigating rage and frustration.¹⁶ In an insightful essay entitled “The Meaning of Laughter,” Philip Sterling notes that there has been no anguish in the lives of African Americans that could not be met with both laughter and tears. Tears are surrender. Laughter is consolation and, ultimately, triumph.¹⁷

Reforming both an oral and a written tradition into a pictorial language, Ringgold uses satire as a weapon of defense and exorcism. She has coined the phrase “wild art” to describe art by Black women that is designed to purge the painful emotions that are associated with living under oppression. For Ringgold, “wild art” is about rage; it is about the
things that we are powerless to change. In the artist’s own words, “It is an obsession we cannot escape. So we isolate it, picture it, and then we are free to let it go.” 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.” Through the painting process, the artist worked to reinterpret Black womanhood and counteract the many stereotypes that were a consequence of the ordeal of slavery.

One such stereotype was that of the “Jezebel.” Mistaken beliefs that African women were sexually promiscuous and, like animals, fit only for breeding formed the foundation for the “Jezebel” myth. This fiction began the moment African women were taken as prisoners—the very moment Ringgold has chosen to capture on canvas. The torment of rape was reserved primarily for enslaved women, who, during the Middle Passage, were nightly brought above decks for this ordeal. Refusal to submit often meant death, thus posing a terrible moral dilemma for the African women. Submission to the European sailors, however abhorrent, meant 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 labelled promiscuous and lacking in morals by the very Europeans who had repeatedly raped them.

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 her fertility for its dollar value. By closely associating the Black woman’s sexuality with money, the system of slavery presented her as a prostitute. Who else would “sell” her own body? Furthermore, slavery created a situation wherein the enslaved woman was sexually abused by her white master and simultaneously despised by her white mistress, who blamed the slave woman for her husband’s infidelities. The mistress often reacted to her own predicament by further mistreating the slave woman, and the latter found herself trapped in a relentless cycle of abuse.

The consequences of this painful history are eloquently addressed by Alice Walker in her book *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*, where the author refers to Black women of the past as “crazed Saints” who “stared out at the world wildly, like lunatics—or quietly, like suicides” and who
“without a doubt, were our mothers and grandmothers.” It is difficult to look at Ringgold’s painting Fight: To Save Your Life (fig. 34) without imagining the crazed saints to whom Walker refers. Ringgold’s monumental nude does indeed peer out at us “wildly.” She stands frozen and timeless, and the viewer is left either to stare at the figure’s improbable image or to turn away from the blank emptiness of her gaze, which is, to use Walker’s words, as “mute as a great stone.”

Identified by the artist as self-reflexive, the woman in Fight signifies both a universal and a personal experience. By 1972, when Ringgold painted this work, she had survived the deaths, from heroin abuse, of her first husband and of her older brother. For many years, the artist strove to overcome these tragedies, to raise her daughters alone, to support her family on a public school teacher’s salary, and, simultaneously, to become a successful artist. Often coping alone with the burdens of motherhood, with her losses as a wife and sister, and with the racial and gender-based discrimination of the art world, Ringgold incorporated these experiences into the “selfless abstraction”—again to use Walker’s phrase—of the stark, lone figure in Fight.
Skin Deep, Spirit Strong

Ringgold’s woman gently and 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 presented as a shrine of motherhood and future generations. Yet, despite this association, Ringgold’s figure remains 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 circumstances.

In the Slave Rape series, Ringgold consciously places herself in the time of her ancestors, those brave African women who survived the horror of being uprooted and carried off to slavery in America. By locating herself in the past, Ringgold is able to stand with her ancestors, put weapons in their hands, and aid them in avoiding capture. Symbolically, she has traveled back in time in order to alter the future. This technique of exploring the African past in order to alter or to reveal some aspect of the present has been utilized successfully by a number of African Americans in the visual arts as well as in literature.24

Walker, in another excerpt from In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens, describes her similar motivation, as a Black poet, to examine her own history:

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.25

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 documents a great tragedy—a circumstance of enslavement and degradation that these women nonetheless survived, leaving a legacy of endurance to their artist-daughters. Significantly, the Slave Rape series represents Ringgold’s first joint project with
her own mother, Willi Posey. Posey, a well-known Harlem clothing designer, fashioned the fabric borders for Slave Rape and continued until her death in 1981 to work with her daughter on much of her fabric art throughout the 1970s. 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. Ringgold’s method of metaphoric time travel constitutes a form of creative exploration that can be both enlightening and empowering, as it is in the Slave Rape series. However, it must be noted that life in Africa, as some have argued, has never been quite the idyll imagined by many African Americans.

How then do Ringgold’s nudes of the past specifically 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. The “nude” has been defined by writer-historian Kenneth Clark as an unclothed body that is comfortably “clothed in art,” whereas the “naked” body is one that is “deprived of clothes, huddled, and defenseless.” Art historian John Berger believes that rather than implying a state of discomfort or embarrassment, nakedness refers to a “real” woman whose prosaic form has been exalted by the artist. Both definitions, however, imply the objectification of the female body. Berger merely shifts 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.”

According to historians Carol Duncan and Gill Saunders, male artists “reenact, in hundreds of particular variations, a remarkably limited set of fantasies” that place the female nude in the role of victim. She must be passive, receptive, and available, and she must be controlled through assimilation to male desire, objectification, or degradation. In this way, the male artist/viewer is able to place himself in the role of conqueror, dominator, or savior. The nude female body is commonly presented as sexual spectacle—an invitation to voyeurism. Thus, female sexual experience is equated with surrender and victimization.

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 portrays them as “nudes”—in a state of dress to which they are accustomed (or that is “comfortable” for them); still, 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.
Skin Deep, Spirit Strong

Ringgold’s women are neither huddled nor defenseless; their fertile bodies and lush surroundings suggest their prosperity; the weapons they hold in their hands indicate their ability to defend themselves. The figures are neither anonymous (since they are portraits of the artist and her daughters) nor particularized (since they simultaneously symbolize all enslaved African women). Traits such as passivity and submission are eschewed in favor of the more traditionally masculine attributes of energy and cognition. In fact, these women cannot be defined as either nude or naked; they do not completely accommodate traditional definitions of the female 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 rewrites the history.30

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. If Duncan’s assessment—that male representations of the female nude are in large part about the assertion of the artist’s sexual domination—is correct, it would follow that when women paint themselves, they are asserting dominion over their own bodies.31 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 African women to triumph over slave catchers). 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. Within this context we can begin to understand how Ringgold’s images work to create new paradigms for the representation of Black women.

Audre Lorde believed that women’s fearless and open acceptance of their own bodies and sexuality—what she called the “erotic”—is vital for overcoming sexual oppression. In Sister Outsider, Lorde explains that she used the power of the erotic to battle debilitating states of being such as resignation, despair, self-effacement, depression, and self-denial.32 Within this framework, Ringgold, too, 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, asexual passivity) with one that acknowledges female sexuality. Ringgold's 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.

The Slave Rape portrayals also invert power relations. In traditional Western art, clothed figures, when juxtaposed with unclothed ones, are often associated with protection and domination. The unclothed figures are seen as either victimized or vulnerable. According to Saunders, images featuring clothed men and naked women show rescuer and rescued, hero and victim, as gendered divisions. Hero/victim portrayals, notes Saunders, seem to have been particularly popular during the nineteenth century, when artists such as Ingres, Burne-Jones, Prud'hon, and Millais used the demands of the narrative to excuse and validate the nudity of the female character. Such works “set up a range of opposites: the armored male figure active, hard, invulnerable . . . against the naked female soft, vulnerable, unprotected.” These images also reaffirmed the woman's subordinate role in society, much like post-Reconstruction stereotypes reaffirmed the subordinate role of Blacks in America.33

By juxtaposing nude women with a clothed man in several of the series's paintings, Ringgold has adhered to the hero/victim formula (see figs. 29 and 35). 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 at the left edge of the painting. Yet despite this work's affinity with nineteenth-century European paintings, Ringgold alters the conventional reading by introducing several unconventional elements. First, as has been noted, 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 decentered universe that strips man of his privilege.34 Traditional roles have been inverted. The nude figures are active and empowered by their weapons; the clothed male figure, while active, acts in a cowardly fashion and is powerless and unarmed.
Fig. 35. Faith Ringgold, *Help: Slave Rape Series #16*, 1973. Acrylic on canvas, 45 x 28 inches. (Courtesy of the artist's collection.) © Faith Ringgold.

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-
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Faith Ringgold’s Slave Rape Series

virgin.” These two concepts were articulated by the French impressionist Renoir and by the Russian expressionist Kandinsky, respectively. When asked how he painted after his hands had become crippled, the arthritic Renoir replied, “With my prick” (a comment that Renoir’s son, who is also his biographer, tellingly describes as a rare testimony “to the miracle of the transformation of matter into spirit”). Kandinsky, in likening the canvas to the virgin, and the act of painting to forcible intercourse (or rape), wrote, “I learned to battle with the canvas . . . to bend it forcibly to [my] 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.” For Kandinsky, painting becomes an act of force imposed upon the virgin canvas. Ironically, he equates it with the “rape” by European colonizers of lands such as Africa and, by extension, the women of those lands.35

In the Slave Rape series, a woman (the artist) now holds the “penis/paintbrush.” With this metaphorical weapon, Ringgold singularly empowers her female figures. In the narrative, the artist’s paintbrush is transformed into a weapon of castration—the axe. Within the 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 below the genitals.) Ringgold’s fragmentation (and, as such, objectification) of the once-empowered slave catcher renders him the sexual object. By mutilating the male rather than the female, Ringgold succeeds in conflating victim and victimizer.

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. Despite the existence of women warriors and hunters in Western iconography, mothers automatically have been exempted from violent activity. 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, embody the antithesis of motherhood. As virgins, their chastity is linked to their bravery and military prowess.36 Ringgold’s figures, because they are both pregnant and armed, challenge such manmade social constructs.

The way in which the Slave Rape series deals with concepts of beauty with regard to women of color adds a further dimension to the series. 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."37 Though this statement refers, in fact, to female genitalia, I would argue that the mark of "otherness" that Ringgold foregrounds in the Slave Rape series is one of ethnicity. 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 has been "loathed."

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 and have been perceived both sexually and racially as "other." Their bodies have been reduced to signs of sexual abnormality and difference. Furthermore, Black female sexuality, as conceived by white society, has been the object of 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." This being the case, the value of the Black woman artist's endeavor to represent her own body cannot be overstated. 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 effectively establishes, to use the words of Schapiro and Chicago, a "vehicle by which to state the truth and beauty of her identity."38

Ringgold's series mirrors the efforts of many women artists who in recent decades have attempted to reclaim the nude. Women are searching for ways to reform their own image as free of patriarchal influences. As Saunders explains, "Women artists who wish to challenge the existing stereotypes of the female nude as erotic spectacle are using a variety of techniques: the reworking of myths, the deconstruction of dominant visual codes, parody, [and] role-reversal."39 Ringgold takes advantage of virtually all of these strategies and depicts for us new women who exist outside of the limiting framework of the conventional, male-produced, white nude. Ringgold's series is the result of a woman artist reclaiming what has always been hers but had been usurped from her—control over her body and a voice with which to speak about it.40
NOTES


5. Norma Broude, “The Pattern and Decoration Movement,” in Broude and Garrard, The Power of Feminist Art, 208–25. Miriam Schapiro and Sherry Brody’s construction Seraglio was inspired by an Eastern motif—the word seraglio refers to the harem of a Turkish sultan. A component of the multimedia construction Dollhouse (and part of Womanhouse, an installation realized in a house in Hollywood, California, and designed by students and faculty of the Feminist Art Program at the California Institute of the Arts), the Seraglio comprised a miniature room decorated with richly patterned fabric curtains, wall coverings, and brocaded bedding.


10. hooks, Black Looks, 65; Morton, Disfigured Images, xiii.

11. Morton, Disfigured Images, xv, 10–11. See also Davis, Women, Race, and


24. Ringgold, *We Flew over the Bridge*, 197. In addition to artists as varied as Aaron Douglas, Alison Saar, Malcolm Bailey, Betye Saar, Jeff Donaldson, Lois
Faith Ringgold’s Slave Rape Series


29. Gill Saunders, The Nude: A New Perspective (London: Harper and Row, 1989), 23; Carol Duncan, “The Aesthetics of Power in Modern Erotic Art,” in Arlene Raven, Cassandra L. Langer, and Joanna Frueh, eds., Feminist Art Criticism (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 60. Traditional images of huntresses such as Diana and warriors such as Athena and the Amazons do not specifically conform to Duncan’s characterizations. The same holds true for allegorical figures that embody concepts such as Victory, Justice, Virtue, and Revolution. See Clark, The nude, 184–89, 220–23. Although there are nude female figures that do not conform to Duncan’s qualifications, there are a great many more that do.


