
AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL FANTASY: TAR BEACH

New Museum Kids Menu provides families with activities to learn about contemporary art and ideas at home.



Faith Ringgold's solo exhibition **"Faith Ringgold: American People,"** (on view through June 5 at the New Museum) features nearly sixty years of art in the mediums of painting, story quilts, soft sculptures, and performance objects. Ringgold's diverse influences—growing up in Harlem during the Harlem Renaissance, the protest culture of the civil rights movement, Tibetan *thangka* paintings, African textile patterns and masks, and matrilineal African American textile traditions—are evident in her famed story quilts, in which she combines both semi-autobiographical writing with fantasy, and painting with quilting.

Ringgold's story quilts are a self-publishing mechanism that she uses to create a space for her voice as an African American woman, artist, and mother—especially in the contexts of the Black Power Movement, which centered the voices and stories of men; and the women's liberation movement, which largely excluded women of color. Ringgold's story quilts were the springboard that led her to author and illustrate more than a dozen children's books, including the beloved *Tar Beach* (1991).

One of the best-known images from *Tar Beach* first appeared in Ringgold's 1988 story quilt, *Woman on a Bridge #1 of 5: Tar Beach*. The book tells the story of a family in Harlem in the late 1930s through the voice and eyes of a young girl. Ringgold also grew up in Harlem during this time, and the main characters are patterned after people Ringgold knew as a child. **According to Ringgold**, "BeBe was a little boy who was just adorable, and Cassie was a young woman that I went to City College with." In addition to these semi-

autobiographical aspects, the book has elements of fantasy, including the main character taking flight, saying, “I can fly, yes fly. Me, Cassie Louise Lightfoot, only eight years old and in the third grade and I can fly. That means I am free to go wherever I want to for the rest of my life.”

Watch Faith Ringgold read *Tar Beach* and learn more about Ringgold's life and art in the video below.



KEY WORDS

- **quilting:** a method for piecing together fabric to create a quilt, which is often used for warmth and sometimes also for decoration
- **story quilt:** a unique form of mixed-media art created by Faith Ringgold as a way to share narratives and her point of view. Story quilts include a central painting on fabric with quilted borders that often contain written stories.
- **autobiography:** a story of one person's life written from their own perspective
- **fantasy:** a type of writing where imaginary, fantastical things happen (e.g. a human child flying in the sky). Fantasy writing can include writing one's dreams and wishes.
- **pattern:** a design where colors, shapes, and/or elements repeat to create a rhythm or repetition. Printed fabrics often use patterns.

START WITH ART: FAITH RINGGOLD



- How would you describe what is happening in this story quilt? What are the people in the foreground doing? What are the people in the background doing?
- What colors and patterns do you notice in the fabric squares around the central image? How do they relate to the painting in the center?
- Without reading the words on this story quilt, what story can you tell just from looking at Ringgold's painting?
- How would you tell your own story through a drawing or painting?

Ringgold combined **autobiography** and **fantasy** to tell stories that have meaning to her and countless adults and children around the world. How can you combine drawing, painting, color, and **pattern** to share your **autobiography** and/or **fantasy**?

MAKE ART

Let's create a story about ourselves through drawing or painting, colors, and patterns.

Materials

- Plain paper
- Lined paper to write out story ideas
- Pencil and eraser
- Coloring tools you have available: markers, watercolor, tempera or acrylic paint, colored pencils, crayons, or oil pastels

- Optional: brushes and a small cup of water if painting
- Optional: a mirror or photograph if you include a self-portrait
- Optional: fabric scraps, patterned papers, magazines, or catalogs you can cut
- Optional: scissors and glue to add patterned papers or fabrics

Making

1. Start journaling by writing on lined paper or sketching on plain paper to develop your story. If you're creating an autobiography, what do you want people to know about yourself? If you're creating a fantasy, what events or experiences can you imagine that you'd like to share? You can also combine autobiography and fantasy, similar to *Tar Beach*.
2. Once you've written a few story ideas, select one main scene to draw. Start by sketching your scene in pencil on paper, making sure to draw the location or environment where it takes place. Include any objects, buildings, trees, animals, or people that contribute to the story. If you're making a self-portrait, you can use a mirror or a photograph as a reference for your drawing.
3. After drawing, add color to your story using your chosen materials.
4. Think about the way Ringgold added colors and patterns to her story through quilting. Look at the materials you gathered and select patterns or parts of images that work well with your drawing.
5. Cut your materials into shapes and arrange them around the border of your drawing.
6. Refine your arrangement of shapes and patterns as you glue items down. If you used paint for your image in the center, make sure that it is fully dry before gluing your materials to the surface.
7. Show your finished creation to a family member or friend. Can they tell what it says about you?

Reflection

- How did you choose colors for your palette? Do they reflect a country of birth, heritage or affiliation, or mood, time of day, or other personal meaning?
- Did you use color in a new or unexpected way?
- How did patterning show up in your portrait? What do your choices of colors and shapes symbolize or represent?
- If you were to make another portrait with a limited palette, which colors would you choose? Were there any colors missing from this palette that changed the way you depicted the face?

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Images (top to bottom): "Faith Ringgold: American People," 2022. Exhibition view: New Museum, New York. Photo: Dario Lasagni; Faith Ringgold, *Woman on a Bridge #1 of 5: Tar Beach*, 1988. Acrylic paint, canvas, printed fabric, ink, and thread. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. Gift, Mr. and Mrs. Gus and Judith Leiber, 88.3620

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