Adeleine DAYSOR

Mythic Realities

ROSA AND SUB ROSA

The whole world is offered to us, but by way of a look. We are no longer burdened by events, as soon as we behold their images with an interested, then simply curious, then empty but fascinated look. —MAURICE BLANCHOT[1]

There is never a direct access to life—language, culture and the psyche are always inextricably interwoven in our every effort. —NIKOS PAPASTERGIADIS[2]

EVERYBODY KNOWS THAT "ROSES ARE RED AND VIOLETS ARE blue."[3] Writer Gertrude Stein famously insisted that a "Rose is a rose is a rose,"[4] and the question "What's in a name? That which we call a rose / By any other name would smell as sweet"[5] is widely known as the words of Shakespeare's famous romantic heroine Juliet. The rose is possibly the most recognizable of all flowers in contemporary society, an everyday myth, exploited in the interplay of communication and cultural difference worldwide.

The rose is extensively utilized in human practices including religion, art, and alternative medicine. As an attractive thing of nature it is frequently invested with meaning, creatively appropriated in different forms, and laden with multiple histories. The rose as sign, symbol, and object is a cultural phenomenon that has been formulated, articulated, and communicated through diverse means. It is a motif in many oral, literary, and visual traditions, from ethnic folklores to rock-and-roll tattoos, reflecting levels of mythic realities or representations that characterize the everyday.

Our knowledge and perception of roses and their representations echo our encounters and understanding of the quotidian, which we normally experience in both conspicuous and nuanced ways. The phrase "Rosa and sub rosa" or rose and beneath the rose aptly describes our relationship with everyday myths as familiar representa-

tions with significances that are usually hidden, unknown or overlooked. The meaning of roses is intrinsically tied to social perceptions and their everyday use; by the same token, aspects of the everyday can be objectified and understood through the exchange and appropriation of roses and their cultural significance.

The rose as a rich historical and global phenomenon is comparable to the work and reputation of internationally renowned Brazilian artist Beatriz Milhazes who paints roses as well as broader abstract floral themes and motifs. Her paintings, constructed through a technique of layering, are often interpreted in art history to have a hybrid and globalized aesthetic. Exploring a prevalent but inconclusive history of the rose and Milhazes's visual practice in context, together with theories of myths, representation, and the everyday, we will uncover facets of daily life and common knowledge as mythic realities that have been made visible through suitable forms and varied human practices as culture.

In *The Critique of Everyday Life,* French philosopher Henri Lefebvre refers to the everyday as a "level." He defines it as "a mixture of nature and culture, the historical and the lived, the individual and the social, the real and the unreal, a place of transitions, of meetings, interactions and conflicts, in short a level of reality."[6] The everyday is embodied by objects—such as roses and art—that represent significant human interactions and their underlying narratives in material form. The everyday and its objects are interpreted based on how, when, and where they occur. As a mode of being, the everyday is built upon many general and contradictory notions. Our day-to-day experiences and consumption of such objects is complicated and can be conscious, oblivious, or even nonexistent; their veiled meanings are by turns seen, used, or unnoticed.

Roland Barthes has identified mythologizing as a mode of representing and conveying meaning, characterizing myth as "a system of communication, that it is a message . . . it is a mode of signification, a form."[7] As myth, the everyday consists of multiple forms of human expression and a social consciousness known through a system of signs in which we are immersed. Mythic realities are states of being and platforms where creative ideas and human motivations are presented and conveyed through objects made by people.

Lefebvre states, "Everyday life can be defined as a level of social practice within totality. Or, in less attractive and poetic words, as a somewhat neglected fragment of it."[8] Qualities of the everyday are similar to those of myth: they can be known but ignored; visible yet unobserved; or they can take the form of symbolic expressions or gestures that represent latent meanings, making them perceivable. Lefebvre's idea of what a level characterizes can be applied to the representation of things. He proposes:

> *A* level *designates an aspect of reality, but it is not just the equivalent of a camera shot of that reality. It allows for it to be seen from a certain point of view or perspective; it guarantees it an objective content. In a reality where successive implications can be seen, it represents a degree or a stage, but with more consistency and "reality" than symbols or models, for example.*
>
> *Taken in its widest sense, the idea of* level *encompasses the idea of* differences between levels. *We could even say that the actual or possible difference between levels is the criterion by which levels are determined.*[9]

The everyday is made up of many different types of objects and levels of representation, which embody ideas. Such representations or mythic realities—combinations of multiple forms, modes, and authorities by which myths are communicated—reflect the material qualities of the everyday and its contexts. Differences in these repre-

sentations help us understand nuances in the world that we encounter each day.

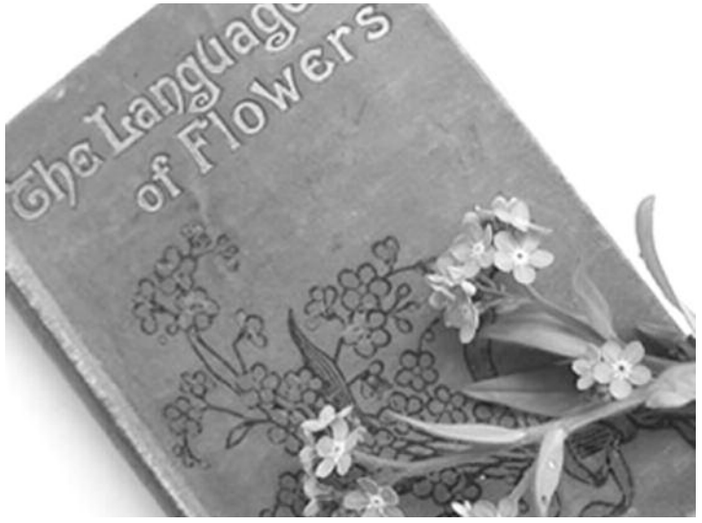
Our perception of the everyday is largely based on oral and visual mythologies. These narratives are embodied and reinforced in sensory experiences that have become part of a shared culture. Michael Sheringham has observed that "the everyday exists through practices that constitute it, the ways in which times and spaces are appropriated by human subjects and converted into physical traces of narratives and histories."[10] Myths and their objects are sustained and disseminated through social practices, media, and institutions that include art, television, and museums. Myth becomes a human social consciousness of ideas, established forms, and ideals. For example *The Language of Flowers*, an accumulative record of the established meanings of flowers based on their symbolic social exchange, and also art history, which is a framework and documentation of elite and popular myths about creative thinking and innovative form.

For significance to be communicated widely in the public sphere, myth needs to be constantly appropriated and reinforced through repetition. The constant reoccurrence of myth makes it common knowledge, providing a shared basis for human interaction. Barthes writes:

> *Mythical speech is made of a material which has already been worked on so as to make it suitable for communication: it is because all the materials of myth (whether pictorial or written) presuppose a signifying consciousness, that one can reason about them while discounting their substance.*[11]

As representation, myth provides us a platform to negotiate ideas, beliefs and values through established routines and creative practices; and the perception of myth through things either becomes knowledge that is taken for granted and assumed to be natural, or forms functional objects that facilitate individual and social ideals.

The Language of Flowers, *a guide to the symbolic exchange of flowers, first published by Charlotte de Latour in 1819*



The rose and Milhazes's artistic practice, as examples of eminent mythologies, illustrate that the everyday is made up of *mythic realities*—representations and objects that influence individual and social perceptions of truths and fictions.

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A ROSE IS A FLOWER KNOWN FOR ITS FRAGRANCE, WITH A thorny stem and a cup-like head of five or more symmetrically aligned and layered petals. The petals spiral to form a concentric design when viewed from above. Roses come in many species, sizes, and colors. They are appreciated as both closed buds and as wide, full blossoms. They grow as shrubs or climbers, and are normally harvested as single stems when sold or otherwise consumed. The first rose fossil was found in Austria in 1848, while the earliest known image of a rose dates back to the sixteenth century BC, depicted in a fresco found in the royal Minoan place at Knossa, Crete.[12] Roses are usually associated with concepts of beauty, love, and romance. The well-known act of giving roses as an offering to a love interest is supposedly founded on a Victorian custom of courtship that has since become a familiar Hollywood representation and driven the commercial success of flower sales on Valentine's Day.[13]

The value of roses is based on far more intriguing human motivations and takes multiple forms and adaptations. According to Greek mythology, Chloris (aka Flora), the deity of flowers, had come across a dead nymph in the woods and called upon other deities to help breathe new life into her. Those involved included Aphrodite (the goddess of love, beauty, and pleasure), the three Graces (Brilliance, Joy, and Charm), and Dionysius (the god of wine). These deities transformed the nymph into a stunning rose whose charms surpassed the characteristics of all other flowers.[14] Its brilliance has earned the rose the reputation as "the queen of flowers." Widely admired by devotees; it is a signifier of beauty and romance and has borne witness to the sensual rituals of love, conflict, and honor since ancient times.

The sails of Cleopatra's ship were reputedly drenched in rose oil so that this exquisite scent would always precede her arrival and grace her presence.[15] The Romans used the rose as a mark of glory and celebration, crowning victors of military conquest and games with wreaths of roses. The Roman emperor Nero is also believed to have started the custom of showering masses of fragrant rose petals onto palace guests at royal feasts, an act that may be the precursor to throwing confetti during parties.[16]

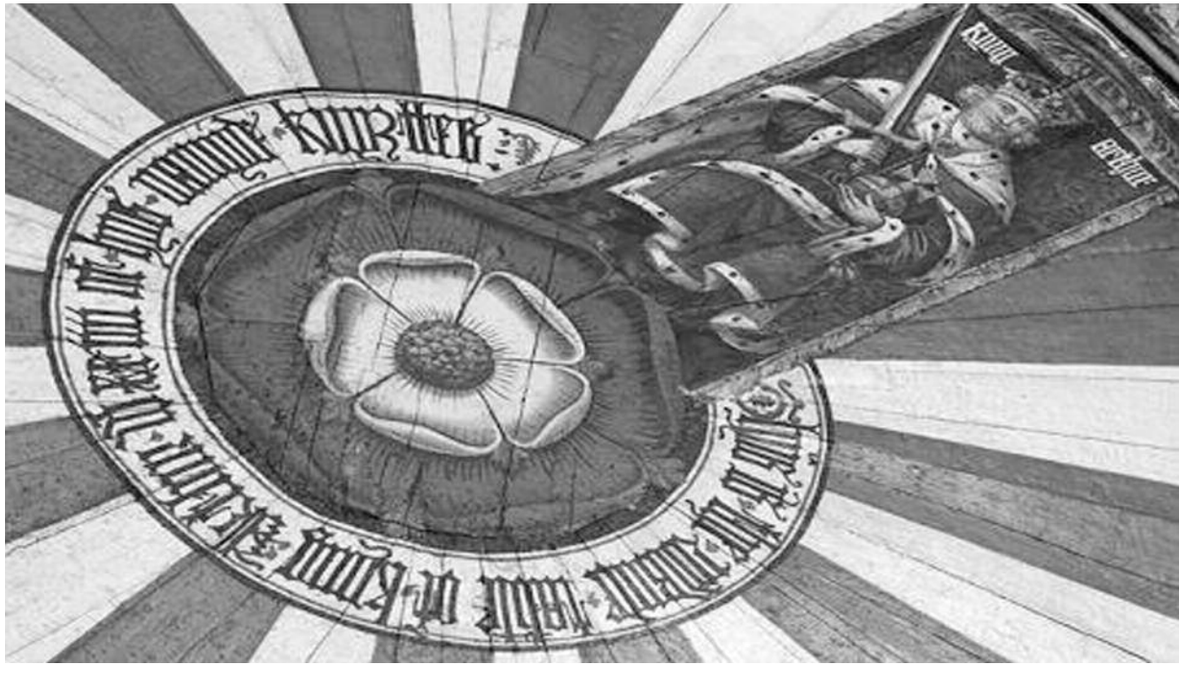
Examples like this make it clear why early Christians viewed the rose as the epitome of Roman decadence and why it was deemed excessive. However, the prominence and popularity of the queen of flowers persevered, and the Roman Catholic Church dedicated the rose to the Virgin Mary, calling her *Rosa Mystica* and thereby redeeming the flower as a paragon of virtue.[17]

The Latin term *sub rosa* or "under the rose," used to denote confidentiality, probably borrows its implications from a Greek myth. Aphrodite is said to have presented the rose to her son Eros, who used it to bribe Harpocrates, the deity of silence, into concealing the weakness of the gods. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries it was a European custom to paint rosettes onto the ceiling of council chambers or to hang roses from them as a reminder of the trust of confidence that those in the room should uphold.[18] Roses were also traditionally carved onto church confessionals for the same reason.

Modern day interpretations of sub rosa entail undercover surveillance, private investigations, and insider knowledge. Rosicrucianism was an underground movement of alchemists that flourished in the seventeenth century, producing many manuscripts called Rosariums.[19]

Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema, Antony and Cleopatra, *1883, oil on panel, 25 x 36 in. Private collection*

A Tudor Rose painted on a round-table used by England's King Henry VIII and his knights in the thirteenth century



In alchemy, the rose is a symbol of unity and life, and its apothecary properties have been tapped to treat headaches, hysteria, and other ailments.[20] The therapeutic use of the rose is still prevalent today, prominent in holistic medicine, which prescribes the consumption of rose products in the form of special tea concoctions and aromatherapy.

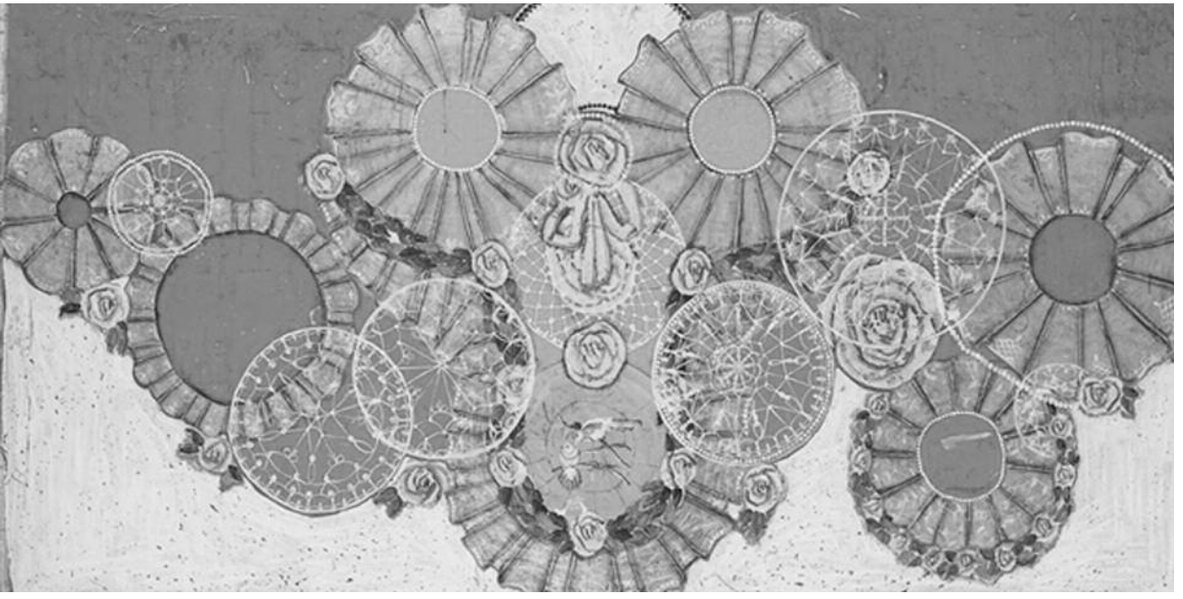
The everyday is created through commonplace myths—such as that of the rose. Daily life is encountered, lived, and experienced through representations with underlying implication. The everyday is never immaterial and involves a continual relationship with the material world. As Sheringham observes: "Everydayness lies in practices that weave contexts together; only practices make it visible."[21] Myth that constitutes the everyday is time- and site-specific yet reoccurs ubiquitously in multiple fashions. Yet many of the origins, practices, and significance behind myths gradually fade and become forgotten until revived by popular culture: ultimately, they evolve into new forms, in trend with the times.

Barthes claims that "Myth is a *value*: truth is no guarantee for it."[22] Although roses carry meaning according to how they are represented or juxtaposed, that is to say, contextually, their multiplicity in form and intention indicates there is no authenticity or fixity in what roses mean, just as there is none through myth. The varying and mercurial quality of myth can be applied to Blanchot's remark about the everyday; he observes, "Despite massive development of the means of communication, the everyday escapes. This is its definition."[23] The totality of lived reality can never be fully experienced or comprehended due to its multitudinousness. There are infinite iterations of the everyday that cannot *all* be accounted for. As meaning read in representations is perpetually evolving, it aligns with myth.

Myths are arbitrary and multifaceted. Barthes explains, "The signifier of myth presents itself in an ambiguous way: it is at the same

Stamp collection representing a currency of roses in various countries, values, and illustrated forms

FIGURE 1—*Beatriz Milhazes,* Machina, *1993–94, acrylic on canvas, 39½ x 76 in. Private collection*



time meaning and form." Barthes also highlights that myth has a double function, saying, "It points out and it notifies, it makes us understand something and it imposes it on us."[24] When flowers are used to convey meaning, it is the specifications of the flower and how it is presented that are read and interpreted. The color, quantity, style, and place of display in which flowers including roses are represented make up their myths. Barthes writes, "Myth is not defined by its object of message, but by the way in which it utters this message: there are formal limits to myth, there are no 'substantial ones.'"[25] White roses signify purity and worthiness, for example, and a bouquet of twenty-five roses is a form of congratulations. Because of the profound connotations already discussed, roses have been adopted as insignia used by state institutions and social collectives to foster communal identity, loyalty, and kinship. All this is made possible through mythic representation in form and association.

Barthes states, "The signification is the myth itself." A red rose depicts love and is conveyed with it.[26] The everyday is predominantly experienced through visual information and tactile sensations, which immediately spur associative memories. Myth is an embodiment of the everyday, known through direct and indirect communication facilitated by objects in the many mediums encountered and experienced habitually as our vernacular landscape.

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THE WORK OF BRAZILIAN ARTIST BEATRIZ MILHAZES, WHOSE practice is built on flower motifs and strategic compositional techniques, can be used as an example of how everyday myths are approached, received and remembered as visual information. *Machina* (Machine) (1993–94) depicts twenty-nine pink roses of different sizes, some of them linked as garlands *(fig. 1)*. The roses appear

among rosettes—flat, painted, circular shapes that look as though they are made of white lace and beige cotton fabrics. The visually textured surface of this painting gives it the effect of a weathered wall, suggesting the kind of mural that can be found in old towns where painted signs and expressive images on building facades are a common means of communication in the public sphere. The title *Machina* draws an immediate association to the word machine. The circles began to look like gears, and one's focus shifts to the bottom center of the painting where tiny figures of two birds can appear to look like a pair of guns.

The title of this piece might have been inspired by the Latin phrase *deus ex machina*, which literally translates as "a god from a machine," and refers to a device or thing that unexpectedly appears and resolves difficult situations. Deus ex machina is also the name of the contraption used to suspend actors playing the role of gods in Greek theatre. And it is a literary tool for changing a helpless situation in a plot with a miraculous intervention. Deus ex machina also implies a form of mechanical manipulation, which can be read as a human approach to situations through apparatus. *Machina* is thus an apt description of Milhazes's meticulous and indirect painting process, which I will discuss later.

The blue and white in the background of this painting are colors associated with the Virgin Mary, an important figure in the Catholic faith, the most widely practiced religion in Milhazes's hometown of Rio de Janeiro. If this painting were a holy image or altar piece, a figure of Mary would appear in the center of the composition, where a rose is attached to a ribbon tied in a bow. Directly above this rose there is a white arc that suggests Mary's halo. Additionally, the symbolism of the roses and garlands (rosaries) in the painting as well as the Catholic faith support this interpretation.

Barthes observes, "It is the motivation which causes myth to be uttered."[27] He highlights that the substance of myth (e.g., pictures and writing) matters, but he claims that these elements do not have constitutive differences. The different mediums of myth may not affect its motivation, but such factors distinguish the success, popularity, and scope of its public exposure. As a painting, *Machina* is best encountered in specific ways and places. Being an original and thus a unique object, *Machina* requires first-hand viewing for full appreciation, because photographs of paintings (like those in this essay), do not convey their physical presence and resonance—the effects of their materiality, color, and scale. Unfortunately, the chance to view this painting is rare and limited compared to its availability on the Internet, as most of Milhazes's paintings exist in inaccessible private collections or distant museums.

The medium or substance that constitutes myths contributes to how they exist and are received and sustained in form. Barthes claims that receiving written and oral myths takes time, as narratives tend to unfold in a linear fashion. Pictures, in comparison, are instantly perceived and can impose meaning as quickly as a glance.[28] For instance, the meaning behind *Machina* may not be immediately apparent, but the rosettes and garlands might suggest the idea and mood of a cultural or religious festival. In the same manner as all art, a reading or understanding of *Machina* ensues through supplemental text such as its title or information derived from an exhibition review or an interview with the artist. *Machina*, as an object of myth, is subject to medium-specific reception, dissemination, and historicization.

Lefebvre's idea of level can describe the various forms of reality that myth embodies, as well as their implications. He proposes:

> *Realities rise to the surface, emerge, and take on substance momentarily at a certain level. At the same time, the concept implies an*

internal determination, a relatively stable situation overall. The fact that we can speak of a "level" makes it clear that everything is not in everything; there are not only differences, but also distinctions.[29]

Myth encompasses multiple modes of communication—including sensations, paintings, music, and gestures. The everyday as myth is experienced and understood through various levels of formal representations and social perceptions, which at the very least dictate an understanding of reality. For instance, giving somebody a rose may symbolize love, yet presenting an artificial rose made out of plastic might convey a very different message to the recipient, who would have preferred an oil painting of a rose or a rose-scented perfume instead.

Representations of myth and their reception are usually temporary and are continually evolving according to the situation in which they are created and received. Earlier I argued that visual myths conveyed through abstract paintings are dependent on written and oral myths for supporting information. The discourse of art history relies on the existence of this relationship between image and text to communicate meaning. We understand everyday myths through a combination of things—their motivation, the formal medium that myths adopt, and their significance or presence in specific contexts.

On the manifestation of myth, Barthes states, "Form has an immediate literal presence, moreover it is extended."[30] Mythical concepts almost always evoke a mental visual picture or are accompanied by a pictorial representation. Myth acts as the connector between forms and concepts. The taste of rose syrup can call to mind vivid childhood events, or a sniff of a rose's scent can conjure up the design of a perfume's packaging. Barthes describes visual myth as "multidimensional."[31] In contrast to written or oral myth that unfolds in a linear fashion, in visual myth, for example, a picture plane can be broken down and read as spaces that co-relate to each other (e.g., foreground and background, center and periphery, or laterally from one edge to the opposite edge). There is no specific order in which the parts of the image or object should be given attention, unlike with a book, which has a clear beginning and end.

According to Barthes, "The mode of presence of the form is spatial," related to place and proximity; while the conceptual elements of form, which Barthes refers to as depth, are linked by associative relationships. He claims, "its mode of presence is memorial," meaning that the perception of things remembered and recognized through various connotations and significations evolves over time.[32] Mythic forms are visual placeholders situated in the present (e.g., a cherished object like a book or a watch given by someone special). Mythical concepts, on the other hand, have a significance that extends beyond the present of situated objects. They are retained as memories that draw associations and sparks personal imagination. For example, Milhazes's painting *São Cinco* (It's Five) (1999) reminds me of a sea anemone *(fig. 2)*.

Milhazes's paintings reflect the multidimensional quality of visual or pictorial myths. Her bouquets of blooming designs are calculated and layered arrangements of intricately worked details, clearly the result of labor and time. The complexity of her rich colors lies in their isolation in individual shapes and sections, playing off each other when combined and viewed as a whole. Milhazes's practice negotiates the liminal terrain of local and global concepts and traditional and contemporary imagery, as well as representational and abstract approaches. Her paintings can be read like different species of colored roses, a bunch of mixed flowers, or a lush, well laid out garden. She favors concentric elements in her pictures, often working outward from a focal point on the canvas and overlaying individually painted flowers, lacy rosettes and circular shapes.

FIGURE 2—*Beatriz Milhazes,* São Cinco (It's Five), *1999, acrylic on canvas, 55 x 55 in. Private collection*

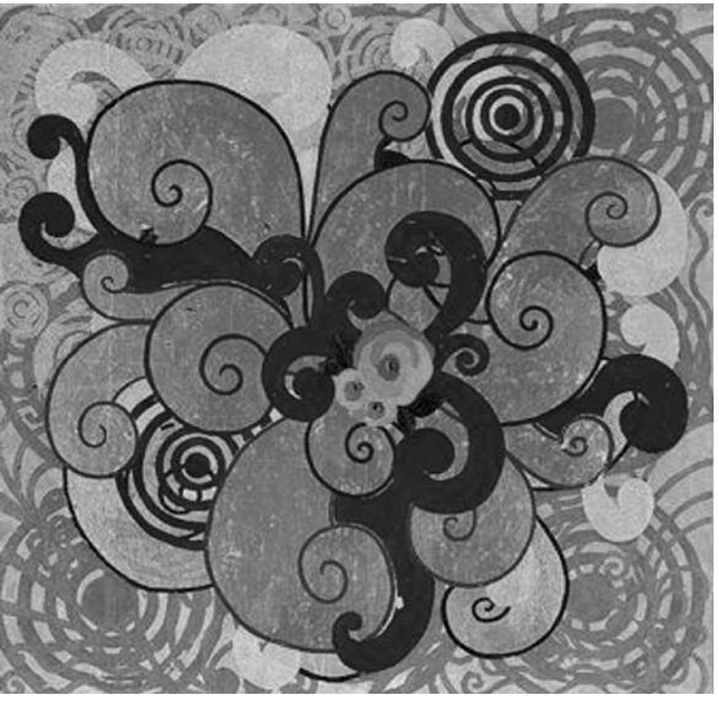


FIGURE 3—*Beatriz Milhazes,* Beleza Pura (Pure Beauty), *2005, acrylic on canvas, 78 x 158 in. Courtesy Galerie Max Hetzler*

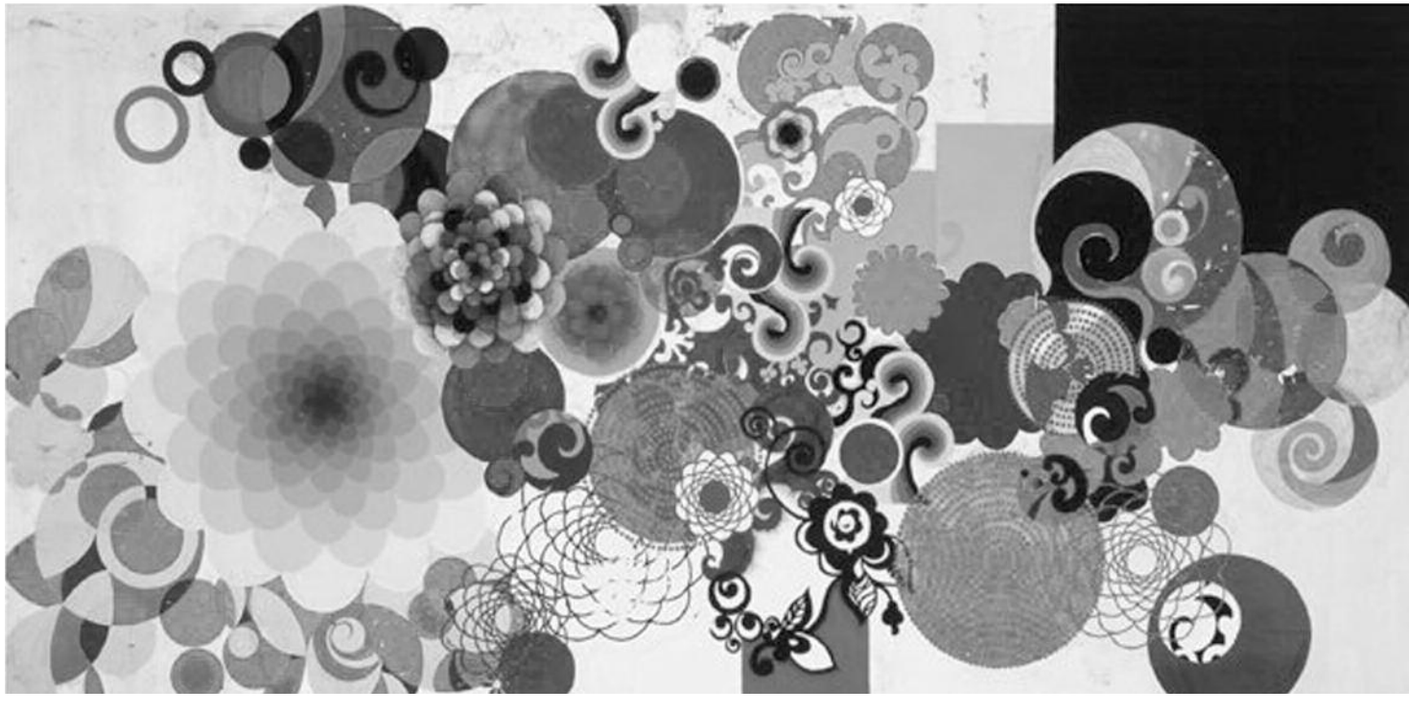
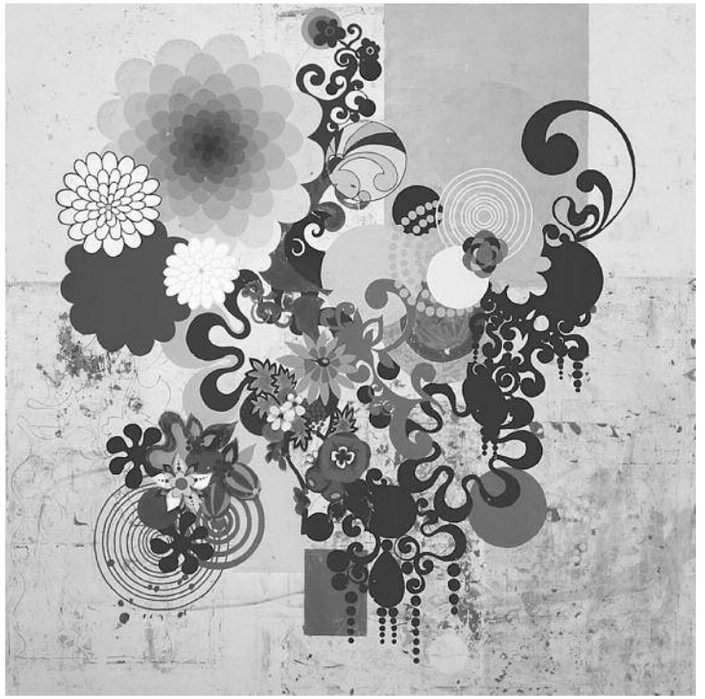


FIGURE 4—*Beatiz Milhazes,* Mariposa, *2004, acrylic on canvas, 98 x 98 in. Courtesy James Cohan Gallery*



In some paintings, such as *São Cinco*, Milhazes fills the whole canvas, creating images that suggest flowers laden with layers of petals. Others, like *Beleza Pura* (Pure Beauty) (2006), can look like bushes with multiple full blooms *(fig. 3)*. Patches of patterns linger above sections of background color, reminding the viewer of flowers that have sprung out of several different spaces.

Looking at Milhazes's paintings can evoke sensations reminiscent of experiencing music, gardens, and possibly even floral scents. Her abstract visual compositions portray the multidimensionality of visual myth that Barthes suggests. Milhazes's canvases do not rely on direct narrative the way certain representational paintings can. Myth is represented in her work by a juxtaposition of playfully positioned shapes that reveals depth.

Mariposa (2004), a work whose title means "butterfly" in Portuguese, stands three feet taller than me, spanning ninety-eight inches in both length and breadth *(fig. 4)*.[33] The painting displays a warm, earthy palette, while overlapping concentric floral designs invoke exploding moments of excitement and rhythmic surprise within an overall composition swirling with busy activity. Viewing it is not unlike listening to the peaks and transitions of an orchestral movement. *Mariposa* is inviting and mesmerizing, possessing the capacity to physically and mentally engulf its viewers as they stand in front of it. The complex collage of ornamental floral abstractions encourages viewers to linger on intricate painted details, guiding them to maneuver between positive and negative spaces that disclose depth in a flat picture plane. The gestalt of red, purple, orange, burgundy, green, yellow, white, and black floral elements on a pinkish-beige background swirls with a decorative charm, but can also overwhelm human senses. Looking at an image of *Mariposa*, I imagine it to smell like a blend of Masala chai made up of spices like cloves, nutmeg, and cardamom. If

this painting were edible, it would be an aerial view of a raspberry cheesecake topped with swirly chocolate sauce, fruit, and nuts.

At first glance, the bold edges and calculated precision of Milhazes's floral arrangements suggest the aid of stencils and mechanical means to create her work. Milhazes's paintings, however, are handcrafted with strategic and laborious procedures by which every part of the foreground is first painted separately on clear plastic sheets and then strategically positioned and transferred onto the larger painting support. Her practice of recycling / reusing these plastic sheets results in elements of past paintings being reprinted on new works during later transfers. This is apparent in the faint traces of paint that give the background of many of her works the appearance of a weathered wall.

The deliberateness of Milhazes's craft and her fusion of formal styles result collectively in paintings replete with evidence of the passage of time and regenerated visual histories that have long lost their origins—a quality that Barthes would attribute to myth. He states, "Naturally, not everything is expressed at the same time: some objects become prey of mythical speech for a while, then they disappear, others take their place and attain the status of myth." This process is suggested as well through Milhazes's layering of precise shapes. Some are partially hidden, while others sit on the surface in full view.

Nonetheless, Milhazes's subject matter and practice will tend to be read according to what Barthes refers to as a "signal of individual history."[34] Milhazes's work will always be understood in relation to her identity as a Brazilian woman artist operating in the Western art market; in the same way, Barthes can identify the qualities and motivation of a "Spanish Basque chalet" built and encountered in France.[35] Things in the everyday are particularly understood by their relationship to their place—their assumed origins and context—and are often noticed or made special when they are found, removed or placed in unexpected environments. This is applicable to how Milhazes's myth as an artist is marketed in the international art scene and how the distinctions between various perspectives and contexts inherent to the everyday are viewed.

Milhazes's "exotic" identity as a South American woman artist makes her paintings unique in contemporary Western art history. Her background also adds to the perceived diversity of the international art market. Milhazes's contemporary approach to painting is often discussed as embodying a hybrid aesthetic that reflects the growing globalizing trend in art and of our everyday. In describing her "polyrhythmic paintings," Simon Wallis states that they "…feature a hybridization of forms and histories that appear sometimes familiar and at others, extraordinary alien to European eyes."[36] Milhazes is played up in the international art market as a Brazilian artist who is influenced by the tropical culture of flowers inherent to Latin America.[37] Her colorful palette does suggest a tropical theme, however her flowers are often stylized and hold open ended readings.

The postmodern visual style of her paintings enables Milhazes to be in dialogue with the dominant discourse of Western painting, while her cultural perspective and identity add a special aura to her myth as an artist. In "Beatriz Milhazes: Towards a Tropical Syntax," Katya Garcia Anton highlights the importance of this, stating: "Milhazes's painting is embedded in a tradition of enquiry into tropical identity, one based on ideas of multivalency, heterogeneity and hybridity which is rooted in an understanding of Brazilian culture and what it means to be tropical."[38] The combination of her identity as a Brazilian woman, her formal influences from Western painting, and her place in Western—now international—art history, exemplifies Barthes's idea that myth is the fashionable appropriation of mythical concepts for particular functions in the everyday.[39]

Barthes asserts that myth first and foremost "transforms history into nature."[40] When things are consumed by myth "they are immediately frozen into something natural; it is not read as a motive but as a reason."[41] The motivations behind things and representations found in the day-to-day are no longer questioned and become known as a reality. Myths as a form of communication turn into stereotypes that are seen as true or become unquestioned, routine facts of life fading into the overlooked visual and social landscape. Blanchot claims, "One can say that in this attempt to recapture it at its own level, the everyday loses any power to reach us. It is no longer what is lived, but what can be seen or what shows itself, spectacle and description, without any active relation whatsoever."[42] The everyday is encountered as our lived environment; its human practices and its objects are primarily known through visual cognition. It is typically reflected by representations at which we look. As with so much visual vernacular, scrutiny is supplanted by the default stance "seeing is believing." This understanding of the everyday fails to provide a complete picture of how situations in daily life can be interpreted.

Accepting pictorial representations and objects that signify actual events as equal alternatives encompasses a distorted view of daily life while also becoming another experience of it. When there is an attempt to represent an encounter in a realistic fashion or as true to the real as possible (through still photography or surveillance video footage, for example), daily events are put at a distance. Everyday surroundings and practices are no longer encountered and known from fresh experiences in a specific time, place, and dimension. Instead, the everyday freezes and is viewed passively and accepted as natural or permanent.

Abstracted images and representations become substitutions for lived experience and eventually form another level of mythic exis-

FIGURE 5—*Artificially dyed roses, a strange but increasingly common sight at florists'*

tence. When representation is allowed to stand for the "truth" or the "real," human motivations inherent to the construction of signifiers are smothered, or as Barthes describes, present only as "a perceptible absence."[43] Contexts of signification and modes of representation eventually slip into the invisibility of the everyday.

Indifference usually occurs when meanings behind appearances are assumed and received readily. Blanchot cautions that:

> *The means of communication—language, culture, imaginative power—by never being taken as more than a means, wear out and lose their mediation force. We believe we know things immediately, without images and without words, and in reality we are dealing with no more than an insistent prolixity that says and shows nothing.*[44]

Refined communication, especially when true to veristic representations (e.g., a photorealistic painting or TV commercial), makes myths effortlessly convincing and enables them to be instantly grasped as embodied fact. In middle-brow culture, a trompe l'oeil painting which closely mimics its subject is generally judged as good art, and sleek film editing makes a product look worthy of purchase. The myth's repetition fixes it.

A shared pleasure emerges in the communal reception of myth when roses are exchanged and accepted as sincere gifts. Likewise, paintings of flowers are usually expected to be colorful and beautiful blooms rather than wilted grey stalks. Myths are accepted as nature until the day they are seen as strange enough to be investigated and reconfigured against social norms.

When handmade, a painting effectively captures a level of reality yet renders it strange with tactile materials and the visible execution of techniques. A viewer of such a painting is always offered a human perspective, whether it is representational or abstract. The paint handling traces its circumstances and moment of production, as evident in Milhazes's work—tangible, tactile, and experienced in place. Thus a painting portrays an image of an everyday—a pictorial fiction—but it is also experienced as a tangible and physical thing discovered in real time through materials. Barthes claims that "the reader lives the myth as a story at once true and unreal." The perceptual shift that occurs between how the everyday is represented and how it is experienced affirms or challenges our knowledge of things. The everyday, filtered through objects, signs and symbols, is made peculiar as myth and when noticed can provoke fascination and notions of absurdity. When strangeness occurs, a need to address it arises and the everyday becomes noticeable, just as unusual "rainbow roses," artificially dyed, attract attention and appeal to human curiosity *(fig. 5)*, denying our tacit understanding that "roses are red, violets are blue."

Notes

1 Maurice Blanchot, "Everyday Speech," in *The Everyday*, ed. Stephen Johnstone (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2008), 37.

2 Nikos Papastergiadis, "'Everything that Surrounds': Art Politics and Theories of the Everyday," in *The Everyday*, ed. Johnstone, 69.

3 This phrase is from a common love poem traced as far back as 1590 when it appeared in Sir Edmund Spenser's epic *The Faerie Queen*. See *Museumofstuff.com*, accessed January 28, 2011, http://www.museumstuff.com/learn/topics/Roses_are_red::sub::Origins.

4 This is a line from Gertrude Stein's poem "Sacred Emily," which was written in 1913 and published in 1922 in *Geography and Plays*. Stein was fond of the line and used variants of it in several of her works. It is often interpreted to mean: things are what they are. The Phrase Finder, accessed January 28, 2011, http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/15900.html.

5 In Shakespeare's play, Juliet discovers that Romeo is from a rival family. Her monologue questions the assignment of names to things. Juliet's statement implies that what matters is not the name of something but what it is. The Phrase Finder, accessed January 28, 2011, http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/305250.html.

6 Henri Lefebvre, "Clearing the Ground," in *Critique of Everyday Life: Foundations For a Sociology of the Everyday* (New York: Verso, 2008), 47.

7 Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 109.
8 Henri Lefebvre, "Clearing the Ground," 31.
9 Henri Lefebvre, "The Idea of Level," in *Critique of Everyday Life: Foundations For a Sociology of the Everyday* (New York: Verso, 2008), 119.
10 Michael Sheringham, "Configuring the Everyday" in *The Everyday*, ed. Johnstone, 142.
11 Barthes, *Mythologies*, 110.
12 Peter Harkness, *The Rose: An Illustrated History* (London: Firefly Books, 2003), 11–31
13 This Victorian custom refers to the popular practice of The Language of Flowers.
14 Ernest and Johanna Lehner, *Folklore and Symbolism of Flowers, Plants and Trees* (New York: Tudor Publishing Company, 1960), 78.
15 Peter Harkness, *The Rose: An Illustrated History*, 15.
16 Ibid.
17 Marina Heilmeyer, *The Language of Flowers: Symbols and Myths* (New York: Prestel, 2001), 74.
18 Lehner and Lehner, *Folklore and Symbolism of Flowers, Plants and Trees*, 78–79.
19 The contemporary following of Rosicrucianism encompasses several organizations that embrace vastly different ideologies and practices but share common beliefs in brotherhood and esoteric wisdom that is based on inherited ancient knowledge. *Encyclopedia Britannica*, "Rosicrucian," accessed May 3, 2011, http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/510019/Rosicrucian.
20 Alchemy Guild, "Symbolism of the Rose," accessed May 3, 2011, http://www.alchemyguild.memberlodge.org/Default.aspx?pageId=311919. See also Harkness, *The Rose*, 15.
21 Sheringham, "Configuring the Everyday," 141.
22 Barthes, *Mythologies*, 123.
23 Blanchot, "Everyday Speech," 37.
24 Barthes, *Mythologies*, 117.
25 Ibid., 109.
26 Ibid., 121.
27 Ibid., 118.
28 Ibid., 110.
29 Lefebvre, "The Idea of Level," 120.
30 Barthes, *Mythologies*, 121.
31 Ibid., 122.
32 Ibid.
33 Mariposa is also a type of lily, the name of a place in California, and a Spanish swear word when directed to males, thus illustrating how myths can embody multiple readings.
34 Barthes, *Mythologies*, 125.
35 Ibid.
36 Simon Wallis, "Beatriz Milhazes: Polyrhythmic Painting," in *Beatriz Milhazes*, ed. Christian Lacroix (Bignan: Domaine de Kerguéhennec, 2004), 21.
37 That Milhazes's studio is located next to a botanic garden and that flowers are abundant in Brazilian Carnivals are details usually mentioned in many writings about her.
38 Katya Garcia Anton, "Beatriz Milhazes: Towards a Tropical Syntax," in *Critical Perspectives on Contemporary Painting: Hybridity, Hegemony, Historicism*, ed. Jonathan Harris (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2003), 171.
39 Barthes, *Mythologies*, 119.
40 Ibid., 129.
41 Ibid., 122.
42 Blanchot, "Everyday Speech," 37.
43 Barthes, *Mythologies*, 143.
44 Blanchot, "Everyday Speech," 37.