



Faith
Ringgold
Die

FAITH RINGGOLD DIE

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THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK





Faith Ringgold (American, born 1930). *American People Series #20: Die*. 1967. Oil on canvas, two panels. 6 x 12' (182.9 x 365.8 cm). THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK. ACQUIRED THROUGH THE GENEROSITY OF THE MODERN WOMEN'S FUND, RONNIE F. HEYMAN, EVA AND GLENN DUBIN, LONTI EBERS, MICHAEL S. OVITZ, DANIEL AND BRETT SUNDHEIM, AND GARY AND KAREN WINNICK

FAITH RINGGOLD SPENT THE SUMMER OF 1967 WORKING IN AN EMPTY ART GALLERY

in New York City a few blocks north of The Museum of Modern Art on three murals conceived to address, as she recalled in her memoir, “everything that was happening in America.”¹ That capacious category encompassed progressive efforts to advance racial equality, peace, and women’s liberation, and countervailing pressures to preserve the status quo. Meanwhile, across the Hudson in Newark, New Jersey, police brutality touched off four days of chaos that killed twenty-six people, wounded hundreds more, and laid waste to the city’s black neighborhoods [FIG. 1]. That uprising—problematically labeled a race riot—was one of more than a hundred across the United States in what became known as the Long Hot Summer of 1967. Similar unrest, typically provoked by police violence, had convulsed Harlem in 1964, Watts in 1965, Chicago in 1966, and many smaller communities over the same period.

Although New York was spared in 1967, anxiety was rampant that “the disorder was the beginning of a ‘black revolution,’” as one reporter put it.² His comment was grounded in a rhetorical tradition that included Malcolm X, who spoke of revolution in 1963 and 1964; LeRoi Jones (soon to change his name to Amiri Baraka), a profound influence on Ringgold and leading light of the Black Arts Movement, who asserted in 1965 that “a Black Artist’s role in America is to aid in the destruction of America as he knows it”; and H. Rap Brown, who announced during the Long Hot Summer that “Black folks built America. If America don’t come around, we’re going to burn America down, brother.”³ Even the famously nonviolent Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. observed in 1967 that “all our cities are potentially powder kegs. . . . Many in moments of anger, many in moments of deep bitterness engage in riots.”⁴

In this fraught climate, Ringgold devised the last and largest of her murals, *American People Series #20: Die* (hereafter *Die*, as it was known at the time).⁵ Over its twelve-foot span, the painting envisions the collapse of the contemporary social order in the form of ten more or less life-size, well-dressed adults—almost evenly divided between black and white—who fight, flee, or die as an



LIFE

Shooting war in the streets

NEWARK: THE PREDICTABLE INSURRECTION

Wounded by gunshot,
Joe Bass Jr., 12, lies in
a Newark street

JULY 28 • 1967 • 35¢

FIG. 1. Cover of *Life* magazine, July 28, 1967. Photo: Bud Lee

interracial pair of children cowers unnoticed in their midst. Red spots resembling blood at a crime scene unify the composition and register as more “real” than the stylized figures, who are racial types, either brown-eyed, curly-haired brunettes or blue-eyed, straight-haired blonds. The exception is the precariously held, bloody baby at left, whose light skin, brown eyes, and curly, light brown hair combine elements of both types. Pointedly, Ringgold identifies neither the instigators of the violence nor the causes of their animus, emphasizing instead the adults’ collective blindness to the needs of the next generation—a lesson that presumably fit her priorities as a mother and schoolteacher.⁶

That moral is somewhat overwhelmed, as are the children who embody it, by the canvas’s depiction of spectacular bloodshed at cinematic scale, which encourages viewers to fixate on the conjunction of race and violence. Ringgold’s implication that such mayhem can strike whites and blacks alike undercut widespread preconceptions about riots, which were then identified with the black and, to a lesser extent, Latinx communities that bore the brunt of the casualties and devastation.⁷ Somewhat contradictorily, the bloodshed also resonates with the language of the nascent Black Power movement and its more established creative arm, the Black Arts Movement, which invoked racial violence as a form of retributive justice. To the extent that she devised *Die* to address a segmented audience at frequencies each would hear, Ringgold’s project represents a canny negotiation of her position as a black woman in an art world then still largely segregated by race and gender.

Ringgold structures *Die*’s chaos by superimposing brightly dressed, panic-stricken women atop a middle ground of male combatants and a background of gray blocks that evoke urban concrete, contemporary abstract paintings, and a chessboard full of pawns. Notably, the layering scheme breaks down around the gun, where the man’s hand overlaps the woman’s arm [FIG. 2]. Local applications of yellow, orange, and red paint draw the eye around the composition and unify the violent vignettes, while warm browns bridge the gap between that fiery palette and the cool neutrals.

Die’s formal discipline imparts a clarity that can be deceptive. The figures’ consistency—both their uniform clothing and depiction as racial types—makes it difficult to tell whether they represent one giant melee or sequential views of a few, repeating characters. At the same time, their matching, bourgeois outfits imply that some class commonality has ruptured for unknown reasons.

The neutral ground compounds the confusion. Because Ringgold omits cast shadows, it is difficult to gauge whether the figures are standing (alive) or supine (dead or dying) or even to judge their relative depth in the pictorial field. Those ambiguities amplify the chaos, even as they obscure the import of racial difference in the narrative. The uncertainty is plain in the group at upper right: is the knife-wielding man protecting the woman from the gunman’s intraracial attack,



FIG. 2. Faith Ringgold (American, born 1930). *American People Series #20: Die* (detail). 1967.

or launching his own attack motivated by self-interest, group psychosis, or inter-racial hostility?

The title is equally open-ended. Grammatically speaking, “Die” is an imperative that implies both commander and commanded, an unstated “you.” Yet Ringgold offers no clue to the identity of either party. Certainly, “die” can be understood as something the painting’s figures say to one another, or, to extend the chessboard metaphor, as an order to them from an invisible hand. Taking a different tack, the title can also represent the artist’s address to viewers, in which case *Die* qualifies as a kind of prophesy or premonition—wishful or cautionary—of the dimensions and dynamics of the promised revolution.

Die was the capstone to Ringgold’s upcoming *American People* exhibition that December at Spectrum, the cooperative gallery where she had produced the murals. It would be the first solo show for the thirty-seven-year-old artist and her first outside Harlem, where she lived with her teenage daughters and worked as an art teacher at P.S. 100. Up to that point, her most significant exposure had been in group exhibitions focused on contemporary black artists: a summer arts caravan organized by the Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School (BARTS), which Baraka had recently founded, and *Contemporary Art of the*



FIG. 3. Faith Ringgold (American, born 1930). *American People Series #1: Between Friends*. 1963. Oil on canvas. 40 x 24" (101.6 x 61 cm). COURTESY ACA GALLERIES, NEW YORK



FIG. 4. Faith Ringgold (American, born 1930). *American People Series #3: Neighbors*. 1963. Oil on canvas. 42 x 24" (106.7 x 61 cm). COURTESY ACA GALLERIES, NEW YORK

American Negro, organized by the painter Romare Bearden in the space that would become the Studio Museum in Harlem.

Spectrum, by contrast, was located in midtown Manhattan, then a hub of the contemporary art market. Befitting that mainstream location, the house style was New York School abstraction, which was then ubiquitous. The membership, who shared expenses for the gallery, voted Ringgold in as the only black artist and maybe the only figurative painter on the basis of the work she began in 1963 "to create an art relevant to black people," as she later recalled.⁸ The relationship would be mutually beneficial, since the gallery was apparently keen to shake up its staid reputation, and Ringgold was eager for more recognition than

the gatekeepers of black modernism had granted her. (Bearden had included her in the contemporary survey, but he and his friend and fellow painter Hale Woodruff also rebuffed her bids to join their other prestigious ventures, adding unwelcome critiques of her work for good measure.⁹)

As Ringgold later explained, her influences at the outset—“more than any artists or any other individuals at that time”—were James Baldwin and Baraka, whose influential texts of 1963 traced race’s defining role in American society and culture from the U.S.’s early days of slavery.¹⁰ The resulting *American People* paintings, made over five years, mostly depict contemporary interracial engagements that range from awkward to hostile in a form of Pop-inflected social realism that she dubbed “super realism.” Through them, Ringgold registers her evolving perspective in real time as the integrationist ethos of the Civil Rights movement morphed into the separatist one of Black Power.

American People Series #1: Between Friends [FIG. 3] represents the social set she found in Oak Bluffs on Martha’s Vineyard, a longtime getaway for the black elite, where she sensed among her hosts’ “interracial group of high powered friends . . . a lot of distance between friendship and what these [white] women were sharing.”¹¹ While she frames that encounter from a distance, *American People Series #3: Neighbors* [FIG. 4] pictures residential desegregation through the eyes of a black newcomer facing a cool reception, which Ringgold emphasizes in the icy palette. Later installments move from the documentary to the symbolic, as in *American People Series #15: Hide Little Children* [FIG. 5], which anticipates *Die*’s attention to the next generation. The painting camouflages a racially diverse set of children as flowers, perhaps to safeguard them from an unidentified threat.



FIG. 5. Faith Ringgold (American, born 1930). *American People Series #15: Hide Little Children*. 1964. Oil on canvas. 26 x 48" (66 x 121.9 cm). PRIVATE COLLECTION



FIG. 6. Willi Posey (center), her daughters Faith (standing, right of center) and Barbara (seated, far right), and models at Posey's home in New York, 1955. Photo: D'Laigle

While Ringgold began the *American People* series on vacation, she could easily find subjects closer to home. During her youth and young adulthood, New York enacted anti-bias laws banning discrimination in employment, restaurants, and other public accommodations, but violations were common into the 1960s.¹² Likewise, segregated housing persisted well after the Fair Housing Act of 1968 outlawed racist lending and zoning practices.¹³ Ringgold, who was reared in Harlem's Sugar Hill when it was home to celebrities and working class alike, watched her mother, Willi Posey, parlay talent, skill, and a family tradition of dressmaking into a career as a local fashion designer [FIG. 6].

As Ringgold charted her own course in the fine arts, she seems to have channeled her mother's creativity, entrepreneurialism, and sensitivity to the moment. Her path was also conditioned by her somewhat unconventional preparation. Thanks to a postwar boom in fine arts education, many artists of her generation pursued BFA and MFA degrees, but Ringgold trained to become an art teacher because City College's fine arts degree program was then closed to women.¹⁴ Early on, she studied with the painter and activist Robert Gwathmey. In the 1930s and 1940s, Gwathmey, who was white, had made his reputation as a social



FIG. 7. Robert Gwathmey (American, 1903–1988). *Street Scene*. 1938. Oil on canvas. 36 ³/₁₆ x 30 ¹/₁₆" (91.9 x 76.4 cm). PENNSYLVANIA ACADEMY OF THE FINE ARTS, PHILADELPHIA. JOSEPH E. TEMPLE FUND

realist specializing in black subjects [FIG. 7], buoyed by faith in art's potential as an instrument of social change. By the 1950s, his brand of politically engaged figuration was already waning in the face of Abstract Expressionism, federal campaigns against leftist politics in art and culture, and an obsession with universality that undermined representations of difference, racial or otherwise. His influence is evident in Ringgold's interest in narrative, stylized figuration, and social critique.

Ringgold's training as an art teacher provided limited mentorship beyond the classroom: "My teachers . . . didn't teach me anything about being a black artist;

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