

Persistence a key in UCSD art professor's story, 'We Flew Over the Bridge--The Memoirs of Faith Ringgold'

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Persistence and perseverance are second nature to Faith Ringgold--artist, educator, and champion of equality for women and blacks.

"If you don't give up, you'll get there" is her credo. Imagination, talent, and pure grit have taken her from limited opportunities as a young girl growing up in New York's Harlem with a love of painting and drawing to a nationally acclaimed artist who has exhibited and performed throughout the country, received numerous honorary doctorate degrees in art, and whose works are in major museums and private collections.

A professor in the Visual Arts Department at the University of California, San Diego, Ringgold chronicles her life's challenges in the book, *We Flew Over the Bridge, The Memoirs of Faith Ringgold* (Little, Brown and Company, New York), an autobiography due out in November, 1995.

To Ringgold, "flying" is doing more than you ever thought you could, rising above each challenge and floating freely and weightlessly. And though soaring today, Ringgold's journey has had its share of turbulence.

Born in Harlem in 1930, Ringgold was asthmatic, often missed school as a child, and would stay home and draw and color, finding out early on that art was her calling. At the

City College of New York, she received her bachelor's and master's degrees in education and art, and while teaching art in New York city schools was one thing, exhibiting her art as a black woman artist, well, that was another.

Ringgold's autobiography tells of her struggles to find places to exhibit, of her participation in 1966 in Harlem's first black exhibition since the 1930s, and of her role in demonstrations. She demonstrated against New York's Museum of Modern Art, demanding a black artist wing for Martin Luther King Jr., and against the Whitney Museum for excluding blacks from exhibitions. She led demands for fifty percent women and blacks to be included in a Liberated Venice Biennale. She participated in numerous other art activists groups, and was even arrested once in conjunction with her activities.

Through it all, Ringgold's style was taking shape. From dabbling in oil paintings of trees and flowers in "French" colors following a trip to Europe in 1961, Ringgold tells of her venture into "super realism," commenting graphically on the uneasiness between blacks and whites and basic racial issues. She tells of the inspiration behind her soft sculpture and masks, her performance art, and perhaps most pivotal to her art, her collaboration with her mother, fashion designer Willi Posey, to create story quilts, for which she is well known today.

"All my work tell stories," Ringgold says. "Painting is the basis for everything I do. The painted quilts translate stories in a more human way. Where paintings on canvas sometimes intimidate people, quilts are comforting."

When Ringgold couldn't find a suitable venue in New York to show her work, she took her show on the road and toured universities throughout the country, exhibiting, performing and gaining exposure.

Today, Ringgold's works are in museum collections, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, the Guggenheim Museum, and the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston; in university collections and in private collections. Her awards include National Endowment for the Arts awards for painting and sculpture, a John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship, a New York Foundation for the Arts Award, a Creative Artists Public Service Award, and an Honor Award from the national chapter of the Women's Caucus for Art, to name a few. She has received seven honorary doctorate degrees in fine arts. She has written three children's books, and to this day claims that the openness, eagerness, and innocence of a child still inspire her art.

Ringgold divides her time between coasts, living in La Jolla and teaching at UCSD from January to June each year, and spending the balance of the year at her home in Englewood, NJ, "just over the George Washington Bridge, fifteen minutes from downtown New York City and just a stone's throw away from my beloved birthplace-- I'd never want to live too far from Harlem."

It was the George Washington Bridge, seen from "Tar Beach"-- New Yorkers' name for the roofs of Harlem apartment buildings, such as that of her childhood home--that inspired Ringgold's fancy of being lifted to flight by the stars and of soaring over that familiar bridge.

Currently on the East Coast, Ringgold is doing background work, writing and drawing for her next project, "The American Collection" of quilts, which she plans to begin when she returns to California the first week in January, 1996. In 1991, she completed "The French Collection," which is reproduced in color in the book and includes her interpretations of the life and work of Van Gogh, Picasso, Gertrude Stein, and Matisse.

Ringgold will be available for in-person interviews at UCSD in January. She is also available for telephone interviews at her New Jersey home. Review copies of *We Flew over the Bridge* are available. If you would like a review copy and/or to arrange a phone interview with Ringgold, please call Jan Jennings, 534-8687.

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