

Feminist Series, Slave Rape, and Soft Sculpture (1972 – 1981)

In the 1970s, Ringgold's interest in the feminist movement crescendoed, triggered in part by the 1970 Whitney Annual (now the Whitney Biennial), which had historically neglected female artists. Ringgold helped organize the Ad Hoc Women's Art Committee, which petitioned the Whitney to ensure fifty percent of the Annual artists would be women and half of those women would be Black. To the sit-ins and demonstrations Ringgold brought her sixteen-year-old daughter Michele Wallace, and together they were active participants in the group's actions, which spilled into the museum's galleries and stairwells, tripping fire alarms, blowing whistles, and disrupting operations. The 1970 Whitney Annual ultimately included the work of twenty women out of 100 featured artists.

Motivated in part by practical considerations, Ringgold began making paintings on fabric inspired by Tibetan tankas that could be easily rolled, transported, and stored. Although they represented a departure for Ringgold, an important thread from previous series remained: the use of hand-painted text. The Feminist Series includes quotations from nineteenth-century feminist icons such as Maria Stewart and Clarissa Lawrence that hold special resonance for Ringgold.

The Feminist Series marked the beginning of Ringgold's collaboration with her mother, Willi Posey, a fashion designer, who made the decorative fabric borders. In *Slave Rape*, Ringgold imagines herself and her daughters Michele and Barbara as women uprooted from Africa and subjected to short lives amidst the horrors of the transatlantic slave trade. The women portrayed in this series, depicted in moments of carefree innocence preceding capture, are set in lush landscapes framed

by intricate fabric borders sewn by the artist's mother.

Around this time, and inspired by her first trip to the African continent, Ringgold began gravitating toward sculpture and performance. Starting with African-inspired character masks designed to be worn by dancers in performance, Ringgold swiftly moved into three-dimensional sculptures crafted from textiles, including *Atlanta Children*, *Screaming Woman*, and *Save Our Children* (1981), which are both a memorial and an indictment of law enforcement's mishandling of a two-year murder spree targeting African American children, a still-unsolved case recently reopened by Atlanta police.