

1960s or after. Ringgold changed course again in the 1970s, shifting to paintings made on unstretched canvas that she called *thangkas*, after a type of Tibetan Buddhist painting that is usually on a scroll that can be rolled up and transported. The *thangkas* led Ringgold, in the early 1980s, to incorporate quilted fabric into her work, an innovation that simultaneously invoked American craft, women’s work (which was often communal), and Southern culture with African roots. (Her great-great-grandmother had, in fact, been a slave who made quilts for her plantation owners, giving Ringgold’s turn to quilting a strong biographical charge as well.¹⁹) Ringgold arranged fabric fragments around the edges of unstretched paintings and added narrative text, usually stories that she invented and sometimes elaborated across several related works, creating a new hybrid art form for which she remains best known.

Alongside her work, Ringgold joined other artists in protesting the inequitable conditions of the New York art world and became a prominent activist. In 1968 and 1970, she organized demonstrations at the Whitney Museum of American Art to protest the exclusion of women and people of color from their exhibitions. She also co-led a black coalition within the Art Workers Coalition, an organization founded in 1969 to advocate for artists’ rights; although the group included artists of all colors, they made it a top priority to advocate for greater inclusion of black artists in major institutions.²⁰ Over more than a decade, Ringgold participated in such demonstrations and designed posters to advertise their cause.

AMERICAN PEOPLE SERIES #20: DIE: ANALYSIS

Stretching across two panels, each six feet long and six feet tall, is a jumbled mess of figures, men and women, black and white. The scene is of a bloodbath, a race riot or rebellion like the more than 150 race riots and incidents of civil unrest that took place in the summer of 1967, when Ringgold made this painting as one of the final works in her “American People” series. The gore of the scene engulfs everyone, including the two tiny figures, presumably children, clutching each other in fear at the center. Ringgold’s male aggressors wear crisp business attire—white shirts and black slacks—while her female figures sport mod dresses in shades of yellow, pink, and peach with matching heels. Close attention to the work reveals that only two of the adult male figures (one white, one black) wield weapons, but everybody, even



The artist Faith Ringgold.

the terrified women and children, is implicated in racial violence, a reality with which many white and black people on the sidelines struggled to come to terms.

While clearly based in the contemporary political moment, Ringgold’s painting also strongly references a number of art-historical precedents, most notably Pablo Picasso’s monumental 1937 canvas [Guernica](#), which was on view at the Museum of Modern Art at the time that Ringgold was working on her paintings. *Guernica* memorialized the atrocities of the Spanish Civil War with a topsy-turvy composition of figures very similar to the structure of *Die*. Ringgold’s painting also reprised elements of the [race riot panel](#) in Jacob Lawrence’s well known Great Migration series, in which a number of figures float across the canvas, weapons drawn.

Ringgold invoked these precedents and made them her own, in search of what she has called a “black aesthetic,”²¹ as she did with the eighteenth work in the “American People” series, [The Flag is Bleeding](#), which would have invoked the work of Jasper Johns for the art-going public. Whereas Johns claimed to use the flag simply as an instantly recognizable symbol, Ringgold highlights its inherent political content and its controversial status as a sign of patriotism, democracy, and freedom in the 1960s. She was well aware that she was taking significant risks in creating work so explicitly

