

## Exploring Form, Context and Content with Faith Ringgold's Tar Beach 2

### FORM

1) An understanding of the formal elements of visual design is critical to our ability to appreciate and/or read an image. Formal elements include the use of color, line, shape, texture, spaces, text and symbol, pattern and composition. Which of these formal design elements most attracts your attention in Tar Beach 2 and why?

2) Texture is often an important component of construction of picture frames. Notice how artist Faith Ringgold has used the patterning of the silk material and the practice of quilting to construct a highly textured and imaginative picture frame to set off her narrative. Why do you think Ringgold used four different patterns of silk material to form the four borders of the frame? (Notice that even the corners of the frame are different patterns.) Which of the four sides seems most highly textured to you and why? Do you find one pattern strip to be more effective as a framing piece than another? Why or why not?

3) How does the use of color in the quilted strips of the picture frame relate to and or enhance the use of color in the main image? Which of the colors used in Tar Beach 2 first attracted your attention when you began to explore the image? Was it in the main picture or in one of the border strips? How does color contribute to the story of Tar Beach 2? What emotions does color create or contribute to or suggest in this image? What other elements of the image contribute to those same emotions?

4) Examine the use of line in the image. Notice that most of the vertical lines create the New York City skyline and the furniture on the roof while diagonal lines create the shape of the roof and the outline of the George Washington Bridge. How do these contrasting lines interact to create a sense of motion and action in the image? What else in the image contributes to this dynamic sense? The foreshortening of the bridge (shortening the lines to make it appear to project three dimensionally out into space) from the middle ground into the foreground is one such element.

5) Notice how Ringgold's use of contrasting vertical and diagonal lines creates an interlocking three part structural division in the image: the background (the city), middle ground (the bridge) and foreground (the roof). Notice also how certain colors echo throughout the entire image to integrate all of its parts. Ringgold's use of quilting throughout the image echoes the interplay of vertical and diagonal lines and reinforces the dynamic quality of the image. What other elements of color, line, texture, shape and scale contribute to this dynamic quality? The use of scale in the depiction of the buildings, bridge and people is obviously not realistic. How does this sense of scale function in the image?

6) How and where are the figures placed in the image? What is their relationship to one another and to the other objects? What are they doing? How do the figures or other objects in the picture help you to read the time of day? The season? Do any of their activities or actions (playing cards, eating etc.) remind you of any personal experiences?

What human emotions do you sense from the figures? What details in the image support your understanding of their emotions? Is there a dominant figure in the image? If so, how do you know? If you have not already done so, read what Faith Ringgold wrote about the story of Tar Beach and see if her description resonates with your reading: <http://www.faithringgold.com/ringgold/book01.htm>

## CONTEXT

??) Questions of context about images require that we know something about the sources for the image. You can learn more about the context of Ringgold's art on her web site. A good beginning is with her biographical statement: <http://www.faithringgold.com/ringgold/bio.htm>. You might also check out her answers to frequently asked questions at <http://www.faithringgold.com/ringgold/faq.htm>. As we learn about context, we can ask ourselves what we think the purpose of an image is and for what audiences the image was created. How would you answer these questions about Tar Beach 2?

7) Who do you think Ringgold had in mind as an audience when she created Tar Beach 2? Imagine five different people you know who would enjoy seeing Tar Beach 2. What would you tell them was your favorite aspect of this image? What do you think would draw their attention first in the image? Would all of these different people understand the image in similar ways? Why or why not?

8) As you may have discovered from her website, Ringgold is a very successful and accomplished artist. However, Tar Beach 2 is not a traditional sculpture or painting on canvas. Why do you think Ringgold created this image in the medium of silkscreen on silk? Can you imagine the object being displayed in a traditional museum setting? Why or why not?

## CONTENT

9) The narrator of the story of Tar Beach 2 is the young girl lying on the blanket on the roof. What other role does she play in the image? What is her relationship in the image to the text? What formal design elements (such as color, shape, line etc.) link them together? Why do you think Ringgold incorporated the text into the image? A word that is often used about Tar Beach 2 is its magical realism. What visual elements in the image contribute to its magical realism? How do these elements tell the story differently than if they were not there?

10) What do you think the rooftop or the view of the city from the rooftop would look and feel like if it were daylight instead of night? How would the mood of the image be changed? What activities would the figures be engaged in during the daytime? Would any of them take place on the rooftop? Mood is created in an image by a combination of visual design elements. Which elements do you find to be most important in creating the mood of Tar Beach 2?

11) The buildings of the city can be appreciated for their formal elements (shape, line, color etc.) as well as for their importance in telling the story. If you did not know what this image looked like, would you imagine there would be an urban landscape with city buildings in an image with a name like Tar Beach 2? What sociological or cultural meanings and attitudes are referenced or created by giving a city rooftop a name like Tar Beach? What experiences or ideas do you suppose gave Ringgold this idea for her story and quilt?

12) Tar Beach 2 tells Cassie's particular story, one which Ringgold describes on her web site: <http://www.faitringgold.com/ringgold/book01.htm>. The theme of an image is not always the same as the story it tells, however. What do you think is the most important theme of Tar Beach 2? Why do you think so?

13) Cursor rolls over the man standing on the tallest building:  
This figure is obviously imagined rather than actually standing where he is placed. His purpose in the image is clearly not merely a part of the overall design. He has a symbolic function in the image. What do you think he symbolizes? What elements of the text or narrative in the image help you to know this? What other elements in the image appear to you to be symbolic?