

New Work: Wangechi Mutu



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You do not stand in one place to watch a masquerade.

—Igbo saying¹

The history which bears and determines us has the form of a war rather than that of a language.

—Michel Foucault²

For several years now, Wangechi Mutu has made pictures of women. Her figures are crafted and mutated with mechanical appendages, insectlike bodies or animal heads, and mottled forms redolent of fabric or diseased skin. As such, they are as much creatures that she has conjured as they are depictions of women; indeed, their femaleness is largely a result of exploiting the indexical nature of one of her primary materials, magazines. Mutu leafs through mass-produced images of women, which she then cuts into fragments—eyes, lips, manicured hands—and arrays on the wall or floor of her studio like so many miniature specimens of femininity. Her sources range from fashion and pornography magazines—the latter, the artist has found, have the most realistic brown skin—to hunting and car publications.

This point of departure for Mutu's process ensures from the outset that she is consuming images of women that are positioned in mass culture precisely in order to be consumed. Not insignificantly, she sometimes lifts compositions directly from those she finds in magazines, which means that her figures are already *posing*. The images from which they derive call upon the female subject to aspire to, and thereby validate, certain ideals of femininity. Mutu appropriates one of the most effective forms of this call, the pose, but presents a violent image—one that has been cut up and unnaturally reassembled—in place of the image of beauty or pleasure that we would expect.

Born and raised in Nairobi, Kenya, Mutu moved to New York in the mid-1990s to study anthropology and, subsequently, sculpture. Her first collages were a group of small works on paper called the *Pin-Up* series (2001). "I wanted you to walk up to them assuming you were going to see these pretty, interestingly posed females," Mutu explains. "It takes people some time to see that every single one of them has some trauma or alteration that is severe and aggressive."³ These women are marked by extreme disfigurement or missing limbs—mutilations not uncommon in parts of Africa debilitated by civil strife driven by the diamond trade. Mutilation, as such, functions both literally and metaphorically in Mutu's work. "Refugees were in need of prosthetics," the artist says. "I began thinking: diamonds, decadence, civil war, scarring, reddened limbs—collages were a formal solution for how I viewed the world."⁴

Despite the violence perpetrated on the women in these and subsequent collages, the sheer visual pleasure of the work has ensured its ready consumption by a public inured to the long-naturalized grotesquerie of woman in the mass media. Mutu's collages have been reproduced on magazine covers with captions such as "Fashion and Art" or, worse, "Sex Sells." Countless critics have





Untitled, from the series *Pin-Up*, 2001. Mixed media, ink, and collage on paper.
Courtesy Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects

described her female figures as “gorgeously horrifying” or as eliciting some mixture of “attraction and repulsion.”⁵ The pervasiveness of such language points to how entrenched the myth of the gorgeously horrifying woman has become in the cultural imaginary, and, indeed, is evidence of it at work before us. What is lost in its circulation is a reading of woman in these collages that is more nuanced, broad, and volatile than a Madonna/whore or jolie/laide dichotomy would allow.

Myth, the philosopher Roland Barthes explains, is a language that both distorts and naturalizes: “What the world supplies to myth is an historical reality, defined . . . by the way in which men have produced or used it; and what myth gives in return is a *natural* image of this reality.”⁶ Mutu readily acknowledges that her work often deploys African myths that are deeply embedded in her psyche; these are exemplified in the collages by the appearance of creatures such as female trees or hyena-woman hybrids. Yet she uses this language as a strategy to expose and interrogate myths of the West that

are so deeply ingrained that they are sometimes no longer apparent to her American and European audiences. Woman—particularly a sexualized woman—as both horrifying and gorgeous is, Barthes would argue, a myth given to us as a natural image.⁷ Moreover, the connection between this woman and a collusive characterization of the black subject should not be overlooked. As the cultural theorist Stuart Hall points out, “Just as masculinity always constructs femininity as double—simultaneously Madonna and Whore—so racism constructs the black subject: noble savage and violent avenger. And in the doubling, fear and desire double for one another and play across the structure of otherness, complicating its politics.”⁸

Mutu begins each collage with a sheet of cut Mylar, a synthetic material whose nonabsorbent quality allows her to manipulate ink and acrylic into splotches and colliding pools across its surface. She accentuates these painted forms, which usually comprise the bodies of her figures, with elements from her trove of photographic fragments. The medium of collage, which by its very nature enacts both rupture and collision, functions metonymically in these compositions. In works such as *Misguided Little Unforgivable Hierarchies* (2005), moments of seamlessness and disjuncture are formal passages that stand in for the artist’s conscious position of navigating between, or, as she puts it, translating, spaces, cultures, and languages. Mutu views identity both as performative—she speaks of negotiating a space as an outsider as a “chameleon-like existence”—and as something that is imposed on her, often erroneously; in the United States, for example, she is often assumed to be African American.⁹ This constant friction between one who acts and one who is acted upon finds formal expression in the collages. Mutu makes preparatory drawings, fastidiously collects and sorts magazine fragments, and carefully constructs her compositions. Given the nature of her materials, however, she must ultimately

relinquish control to some degree, since paint behaves on the Mylar surface with a mind of its own.

At SFMOMA, Mutu has orchestrated a space that the viewer must navigate actively rather than passively. She calls the installation *The Chief's Lair's a Holy Mess*, and a large collage of a female figure, *Bloody Old Head Games* (2005), is undeniably the centerpiece. All around it the artist has gouged and dusted the white walls of the gallery with red pigment, which she then mottled with white paint to create the effect of bruising. Interrupting any easy traversal of the room are three sculptures that Mutu refers to as thrones: unadorned wooden chairs of American vintage whose legs appear to have sprouted—mutated, even—into stilts. Suspended from the



ceiling above each chair is a wine bottle that points downward and dispenses at even intervals drops of red wine, which fall onto the floor through a hole in the chair, creating splotches on the ground that resonate visually with those on the walls and in many of the collages. As when she proffers representations of violence where we would anticipate those of beauty, Mutu's disruption of the space is another way in which she frustrates our expectations.

In the context of this installation, the gallery walls—the blank “white cube” whose political implications have been mined by artists and critics alike for decades—and the sculptures clearly serve as surrogates for the body: a bleeding body, a wounded and pierced body, an unwell body, and a female body. The sculptures are also meant to symbolize a (Western) power structure that appears lofty and oppressive though it is actually weak and precarious. As the artist explains, “There is this tiny percentage of people who live like emperors because elsewhere blood is being shed. Women's bodies are particularly vulnerable to the whims of changing movements, governments, and social norms. They're like sensitive charts—they indicate how a society feels about itself.”¹⁰ The dripping wine is a libation, recalling African traditions of returning some part of what one consumes back to the ground, and back to one's ancestors. There are echoes of Catholicism throughout the installation as well, from the ritual pouring of wine to the positioning of the large collage as a kind of altarpiece.

The body here clearly suggests larger social and political implications. Mutation and transformation are themes Mutu explores at the level of the individual: She describes the main figure in *Bloody Old Head Games* not as emerging like a butterfly, but as having “come out frustrated, ravenous, beastly, a creature that's been kept down for so long.”¹¹ But she is equally interested in the mutations that occur

in broader strokes at a societal level—in how, for example, a generation of Kenyan farmers has been called upon to transform into businessmen. Her female figures also toy with the abject; each is an instance of a “body in revolt.”¹² Yet these bodies are revolting against what is expected of them in productive and necessary ways. If history has the form of a war; as Foucault tells us in this essay’s epigraph, then Mutu’s women are dressed for battle.

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Notes

- 1 Quoted in James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 15.
- 2 Michel Foucault, “Truth and Power,” in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977* (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 114.
- 3 Quoted in Merrily Kerr, “Extreme Makeovers,” *Art on Paper* 8, no. 6 (July–August 2004): 28.
- 4 Quoted in Aida Mashaka Croal, “The Africana QA: Artist Wangechi Mutu,” *AOL Black Voices*, March 5, 2003. <http://archive.blackvoices.com/articles/qa/ar20030305mutu.asp>.
- 5 See, respectively, David Pagel, “Harrowing, Hallucinatory Visions,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 24, 2003; and Soraya Murray, “Afrizine,” *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* 16–17 (Fall–Winter 2002): 93. The caption “Fashion and Art” accompanied Mutu’s *Hide ‘n Seek, Kill or Speak* (2004) on the cover of *ArtReview* 2, no. 6 (September 2004). The caption “Sex Sells” accompanied *Misguided Little Unforgivable Hierarchies* (2006) on the cover of *Beautiful Decay*, no. 1 (2006).
- 6 Roland Barthes, “Myth Today,” in *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (1957; repr., New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 142.
- 7 As Amelia Jones notes, “Seduction, sexuality, and corporeality, as male philosophers from Nietzsche to Baudrillard have consistently argued, are intimately connected to the threateningly sexualized feminine body.” See “Postfeminism, Feminist Pleasures, and Embodied Theories of Art,” in *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Donald Preziosi (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 393.
- 8 Stuart Hall, “New Ethnicities,” in *Black Film/ British Cinema*, ed. Kobena Mercer (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1988), 29.
- 9 Tara McDowell, conversation with Wangechi Mutu, October 2, 2005. The artist’s description of Americans’ mistaken perceptions of her ethnicity recalls Adrian Piper’s performances of the 1970s, which purposefully exposed and exploited assumptions about her own ethnicity (Piper, a light-skinned black woman, was often presumed to be white).
- 10 Quoted in Lauri Firstenberg, “Perverse Anthropology: The Photomontage of Wangechi Mutu,” in *Looking Both Ways: Art of the Contemporary African Diaspora* (New York: Museum for African Art, 2003), 142.
- 11 McDowell.
- 12 Elizabeth Grosz, *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1989), 74.

Born in Nairobi, Kenya, in 1972, Wangechi Mutu moved to New York in the mid-1990s to study anthropology and fine art at the Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art. She received an MFA in sculpture from Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut, in 2000. Her work has been included in such exhibitions as *Only Skin Deep: Changing Visions of the American Self*, organized by Coco Fusco and Brian Wallis for the International Center of Photography, New York; *Pin-Up: Contemporary Collage and Drawing* at the Tate Modern, London; *Fight or Flight* at the Whitney Museum of American Art at Altria, New York; and *Africa Remix* at the museum kunst palast, Düsseldorf, Germany, which traveled to the Centre Pompidou, Paris; the Hayward Gallery, London; and the Mori Art Museum, Tokyo. Her work resides in the collections of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; the Altoids Collection at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York; and SFMOMA.

Works in the Exhibition

Bloody Old Head Games, 2005

Ink, acrylic, and photocollage on Mylar

89 x 52 in. (226.1 x 132.1 cm)

High Chair and Strange Fruit, 2005

Wood, glass, and wine

Approximately 80 x 16 x 15 in. (203.2 x 40.6 x 38.1 cm), 84 x 28 x 22 in.

(213.4 x 71.1 x 55.9 cm), and 80 x 20 x 18 (203.2 x 50.8 x 45.7 cm)

Wall Wounds, 2005

Acrylic

Dimensions variable

All works courtesy the artist

and Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects.

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This side, left to right: photo by Jason Schmidt; photo courtesy Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects; photo by Ben Blackwell, courtesy SFMOMA

Reverse, left to right: installation view of the 2004 exhibition *Hangin' In at* the Whitney Museum of American Art, Altria, New York, photo by John Berens, courtesy Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York; *Bloody Old Head Games* (detail), 2005, courtesy the artist and Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects; study for *High Chair*, 2005, courtesy the artist and Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects; *Bloody Old Head Games* (detail), 2005, courtesy the artist and Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects



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