

Art Review

“Wangechi Mutu: Solo Exhibition at Brooklyn Museum”

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From October 2013 until March 2014, the Brooklyn Museum in New York City sponsored a solo exhibition entitled *Wangechi Mutu: A Fantastic Journey*. The 50 artworks filled the feminist art section on the 4th floor of the Museum. These artworks were created by Wangechi Mutu, a female Kenyan artist, between 2002 and 2013. The exhibition was coordinated by Saisha Grayson, Assistant Curator at Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art in the Brooklyn Museum. Visitors could appreciate mixed-media large-scale collages, sculptures, site-specific wall paintings, installations, and three videos. Small sketchbook drawings in two glass cases provided an unusual opportunity to examine Mutu’s process of developing her ideas and imagination to complete impressive artworks. Wangechi Mutu was born in 1972 in Nairobi, Kenya; attended boarding school in Wales, UK; and moved to New York City in 1992. She graduated from Cooper Union in 1996 and Yale University in 2000 and currently lives and works as an active artist in Brooklyn, NY.

Exhibition Highlights

At the entrance of her exhibition, two large scale diptychs (59 1/8 x 85 inches) mixed-media paintings welcomed visitors.



One painting entitled *Yo Mama* (2003) is dominated by a pink background with an eroticized African female wearing stiletto high heels and holding a decapitated pink snake with its body connecting dichotomous worlds. Oversized mushrooms and spores are floating in the painting with black palm trees sprouting on one surface. Mutu dedicated this work to Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, a female Nigerian political leader and an inspiration of the

women’s rights movement in Kenya. In Mutu’s African version of the Adam and Eve creation story, the woman cuts off the head of the serpent that tempted her, piercing it with her spiked heel. She did not bite the apple from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Mutu used ink, mica flakes, polymer sheeting, cut-and-pasted printed paper, and

polymer paint in this work, which is part of The Museum of Modern Art's permanent collection.

Other artworks were awaiting visitors, one of which was entitled *Riding Death in My Sleep* (2002). In this ink and collage on paper (60 x 44 inches), Mutu centered a squatting female body wearing two types of clothing.



She wears a Western style body suit with batik cheetah spots and stiletto heels. The woman's legs from the knees down have traditional African raffia grass pants overlaying the Western boots. The collaged lipstick-smear lips draw attention to the woman's light skinned attractive face and shaved head. The lower section is filled with clusters of mushrooms and an eagle's head popping out of the dark blue global surface. Above her head and on her shoulder are hybrid birds and insects flying and resting. The hybrid mixture of birds, insects, fungi, and clothing represents Mutu's life experiences in America as a displaced woman from a different culture, natural environment, and racial identity. Mushrooms lay their spores in damp places shielded from sunlight and spread like immigrants

across the world. Mutu considers herself one of the immigrants planting her roots in America.

Her large-scale mixed-media painting, entitled *Humming* (2010), contains a large flower on the left and a single female standing on the right. The figure portrays an African woman defined by her skin color and body with notably rounded protruding buttocks. She appears to be studying the large pink-colored flower. Mutu was exploring the comparative relationship between humans and nature. Both women and flowers have reproductive roles and fertility in life. She applied collage pieces with animal skin patterns to represent a female body suit. Numerous insects are flying around the woman's body as if she were a succulent flower blossom. Mutu applied cool grays and blues with a little bit of pink to contrast traditional Western colors for baby girls and boys.



In the center of the exhibition hall stood a collage of three figures perched on top of each other in acrobatic positions. Entitled *Misguided Little Unforgivable Hierarchies*



(2005), the work is an excellent example of collaged paper with very smooth natural-looking images. Mutu used ink, acrylic, collage, and contact paper on Mylar in a large size of 81 x 52 inches. The lower figure squatting in the elephant grass has multiple black breasts on her back and front and is supporting two more figures on one shoulder. The second figure is in an awkward acrobatic position arched over, and both heads are arguing with each other. Riding the belly of the second figures is a baby with the face of monkey. The status of all three figures represents irrational self-perceptions of social hierarchies within tribal groups. All three figures are well balanced and

beautifully positioned. These three figures show a hybrid body mixed with machine parts on the ground. At the first look, the grass appears painted, but it was collaged with thinly cut paper. In the background splashes of red color represent violence against women and tribal conflicts. This work is in the permanent collection of San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.



The Bride Who Married a Camel's Head (2009) is a mixed-media collage on Mylar, 42 x 30 inches, filled with writhing snakes and a transfigured African woman sitting on the ground.



Her Medusa bride's head is decorated with flowers and snakes. The tall thin green grass looks like a bird's nest, while two hybrid butterflies fly in the background. The bride is holding the bloody jaw of a sacrificed camel, part of a dowry, and expressing disdain that she is reduced to a possession purchased by the severed camel's head that reflects the wealth of her new spouse.

Mutu's *Once Upon a Time She Said, I'm not Afraid and Her Enemies Began to Fear Her The End* (2013) is a site-specific mixed-media installation (painting and collage) on a wall. In this work a

distorted large-scale Centaur-like female is climbing up a hill representing women's quest for social progress. She eroticizes the oversized thighs and buttocks in this half-human, half-animal figure. There is a societal struggle because the legs and feet are not equipped to climb the slope and flee the stinging wasps and biting flies.

The classic racist literary and anthropological theme of the noble savage is at the center of Mutu's work entitled *Le Noble Savage* (2006), a long (91¾ x 54) vertical collage on Mylar. A single female represents Africa with one arm serving as the nurturing trunk of a palm tree. Many birds are flying around her head and arm. Her body is covered with wild flowers; colorful talking birds and three thin green snakes are climbing her arms. Thinly-cut paper looking like tall elephant grass is pasted around her body. The woman proudly struggles to support and sustain all that is beautiful about Africa to disprove the stereotype that Africans are at heart merely noble savages.



People in Glass Powers Should Not Imagine Us (2003) makes a powerful political statement that other former colonial nations beset with problems should not believe they are automatically superior to African countries.



In the painting on the right, a fashionable African woman with enlarged pink lips--wearing high heels, leopard and cheetah skin clothing and long white dress gloves--is squatting in the grass under a tree. A traditional woodcarving is on her head and mushrooms indicating immigration are floating around her. On the left side, a naked white-skinned

woman is leaning against a tree with a snake curled on her head. The ground and sky contain a mixture of traditional sculptures, motorcycle parts, and floating mushrooms. Both paintings are unified by the same light blue sky and red blood blotches indicating anti-female violence. Is the African beautiful in her natural dress and appearance, or does she have to become a white woman stripped of her cultural heritage and seduced by Western materialism to embody beauty?

In one corner of gallery, Mutu's 8-minute video *The End of Eating Everything*



(2013) with a penetrating sound track was played continuously. The singer Santigold's (Santi White) Medusa-like head is attached to a floating spore stomach that devours everything including flocks of ravens flying around this entity. The message is about Mutu's journey; she explains that she never meant to leave Africa but just wanted to

escape the oppression, and now the separation has been too long. This powerful video slowly unfolds an all-consuming metaphor for mother Africa who eventually consumes its colonial occupiers and draws back its diaspora.

Conclusion

During the fall/winter of 2013-2014, the Brooklyn Museum exhibited over 50 artworks of this female Kenyan artist who proudly shows her vision and personal journal through life experiences as an African woman. Mutu emphasizes the themes of gender status, anti-colonialism, cultural imperialism, eroticism of Black females, consumerism, immigrant status, and intercultural experiences in Africa, America, and Europe. This exhibition was a wonderful opportunity to view, appreciate, and understand the influence of an African woman's perspective of a cultural, political, and psychological, feminist approach on contemporary art. This *Fantastic Journey* exhibition shows Mutu's artistic journey of 10 years to reach her present status in the art world. The exhibition offered viewers the opportunity to raise and answer questions about the Kenyan view of creation, women, culture, and life. Her creative process, conceptualization, and application of mixed-media collage were very effective.

The timing of this exhibition was perfect because it overlapped both Black History and Women's History month. It focused attention on a female African artist who represents the era of globalism and cultural diversity and the rising economic and political importance of Africa in the world. It was a taste of the future promising more tempting, exciting, and inviting works of art dealing with African issues in the Western art world.

Sources

Teacher packet to promote discussions of Mutu's artworks

www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/wangechi_mutu/uploads/Wangechi_Mutu_Teacher_Packet.pdf

Four-minute excerpt of Mutu's 2013 video *The End of eating Everything*

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wMZSCfqOxVs>

Mutu's works exhibited at the Nasher Museum of Art, Duke University

<http://nasher.duke.edu/mutu/art.php>

Wangechi Mutu's Biography

<http://www.vielmetter.com/artists/wangechi-mutu/biography.html>

Photo Credits

Yo Mama (2003). Ink, mica flakes, pressure-sensitive synthetic polymer sheeting, cut-and-pasted printed paper, painted paper, and synthetic polymer paint on paper; overall: (150.2 x 215.9 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. The Judith Rothschild Foundation Contemporary Drawings Collection Gift, 2511.2005.a-b. © Wangechi Mutu. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY. Photo by David Allison.

Riding Death in My Sleep (2002). Ink and collage on paper, 60 x 44 inches (152.4 x 111.76 cm). Collection of Peter Norton, New York. © Wangechi Mutu.

Humming, (2010). Mixed media ink, paint, collage on Mylar. 85 1/2 x 75 3/4 x 1 inches (217.2 x 192.4 x 2.5 cm). Gladstone Gallery New York and Brussels. Collection: Bert Kreuk. © Wangechi Mutu.

Misguided Little Unforgivable Hierarchies (2005). Ink, acrylic, collage, and contact paper on Mylar; 81 x 52 inches (205.74 x 132.08 cm). San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Purchase through a gift of The Buddy Taub Foundation, Jill and Dennis Roach, Directors, 2005.184. Image courtesy of Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects. © Wangechi Mutu. Photo by Joshua White.

The Bride Who Married a Camel's Head (2009). Mixed-media collage on Mylar, 42 x 30 inches (106.68 x 76.20 cm). Deutsche Bank Collection, Germany. Image courtesy of

Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects. © Wangechi Mutu. Photo by Mathias Schormann.

Once upon a Time She Said, I'm Not Afraid and Her Enemies Began to Fear Her The End (2013). Mixed media, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist. © Wangechi Mutu. Image courtesy of the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, Durham, North Carolina. Photo: Peter Paul Geoffrion.

Le Noble Savage (2006). Ink and collage on Mylar, 91¾ x 54 in. (233 x 137.2 cm). Collection of Martin and Rebecca Eisenberg, Scarsdale, New York. Image courtesy of the artist.

People in Glass Towers Should Not Imagine Us (2003). Mixed-media collage on paper, overall: 70 x 102 inches, Collection of Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn and Nicolas Rohatyn, New York. Image courtesy of Salon 94, New York. © Wangechi Mutu.

The End of Eating Everything (2013). Animated video (color, sound), 8- minute loop, edition of 6. Courtesy of the artist. Commissioned by the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University.