

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Cash, Stephanie, "Wangechi Mutu: Terrible Beauty," *Art in America*, May 2010



## WANGECHI MUTU:

BY STEPHANIE CASH

Wangechi Mutu creates visually complex collage drawings that offer more than meets the eye.

THE WORK OF KENYAN-BORN Wangechi Mutu features gorgeously grotesque creatures that range from amusingly freakish to macabre. Using ink and collage on Mylar or paper, she combines humans, animals and machines in seamless and commanding compositions full of small moments of discovery and random elements that may betray only an oblique relation to the overall image.

Mutu received her BFA from Cooper Union in New York (1996) and her MFA from Yale University (2000). Since then she has enjoyed no lack of fans or exhibition

120 ART IN AMERICA MAY'10



# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Cash, Stephanie, "Wangechi Mutu: Terrible Beauty," *Art in America*, May 2010



View of Wangechi Mutu's "wounded wall" with *Sleeping Heads*, 2006, mixed-medium collage on Mylar, each approx. 17 by 22 inches. Courtesy Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York.

## TERRIBLE BEAUTY

opportunities in the U.S. and Europe. Her work is now the subject of two major exhibitions: one at the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) in Toronto, and the other at the Deutsche Guggenheim in Berlin. The Berlin show is a component of the Deutsche Bank Prize, of which Mutu is the inaugural recipient. The award also includes the acquisition of a number of her works for display in the bank's corporate offices.

When I visited her Brooklyn studio in February, with the AGO show about to open, Mutu was preparing work for

Berlin and for her first exhibition at Gladstone Gallery, slated for November. The studio walls were covered with pieces in various stages of completion and images cut from magazines, copied from books or downloaded from

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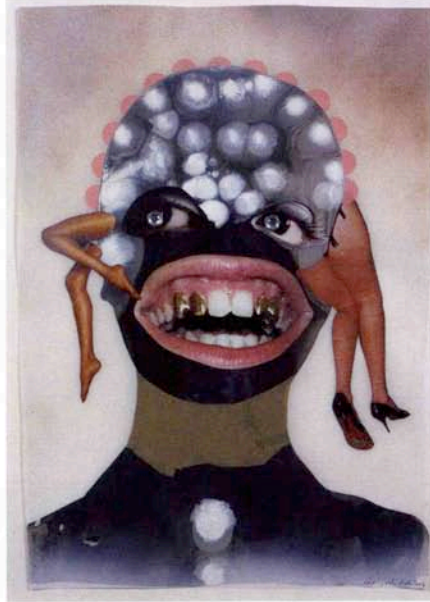
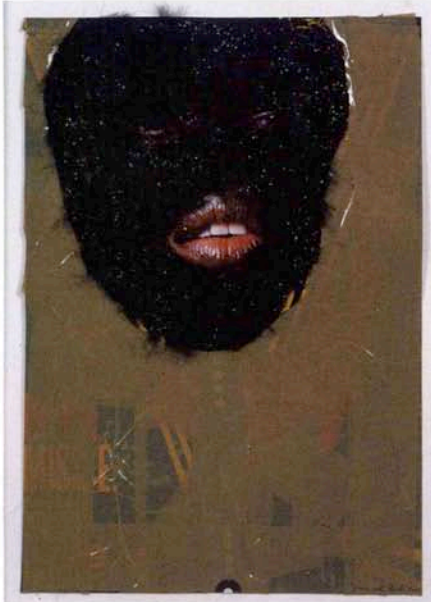
### CURRENTLY ON VIEW

"This You Call Civilization?" at the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, Feb. 24-May 23; "Wangechi Mutu" at Deutsche Guggenheim, Berlin, Apr. 30-June 13.

MAY '10 ART IN AMERICA 121

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Cash, Stephanie, "Wangechi Mutu: Terrible Beauty," *Art in America*, May 2010



Left, *Forensic Forms*, 2004, ink, acrylic, collage and contact paper on Mylar, two of 10, each 19½ by 13 inches. Courtesy Sikkema Jenkins.

Opposite, *This You Call Civilization?*, 2008, ink on Mylar, 90 by 60 inches. Courtesy Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects.

**SURPRISINGLY, MUTU'S WORKS BEGIN AS RATHER CLASSICAL DRAWINGS BEFORE THEY ARE REWORKED, MANIPULATED, AMPUTATED, ORNAMENTED AND OTHERWISE TRANSFORMED.**

the Internet: faces, eyes, mouths, animals, ethnographic studies and, her recent fascination, a particularly jowly Neapolitan mastiff. Because of her figures' ultimate otherworldly manifestations, it was most surprising to see that they begin as rather classical drawings before they are reworked, manipulated, amputated, ornamented and otherwise transformed.

Mutu's work is informed by important social and cultural issues, but leaves the ugly truths for the surrounding discourse, even though there are hints in the works, such as stereotypical depictions of "exotic" Africans. There are layers of meaning but never heavy-handed didacticism. She attracts us with her exacting skill and beautiful effects, from the marbled ink that often serves as the subjects' skin to the touches of glitter, shiny paper and baubles she attaches to the surfaces. Many viewers simply admire her fantastical compositions and never deduce the subtle critique at play. It's hard to deny the work's sheer visual delight.

As Hannah Höch once wrote: "Photomontage could be used not merely to produce things heavy with political meaning . . . but . . . one could also regard it as a means of self-expression and eventually arrive at purely aesthetic works."<sup>1</sup> A number of scholars have remarked on Mutu's kinship to Höch, and the pairing is apt, particularly when

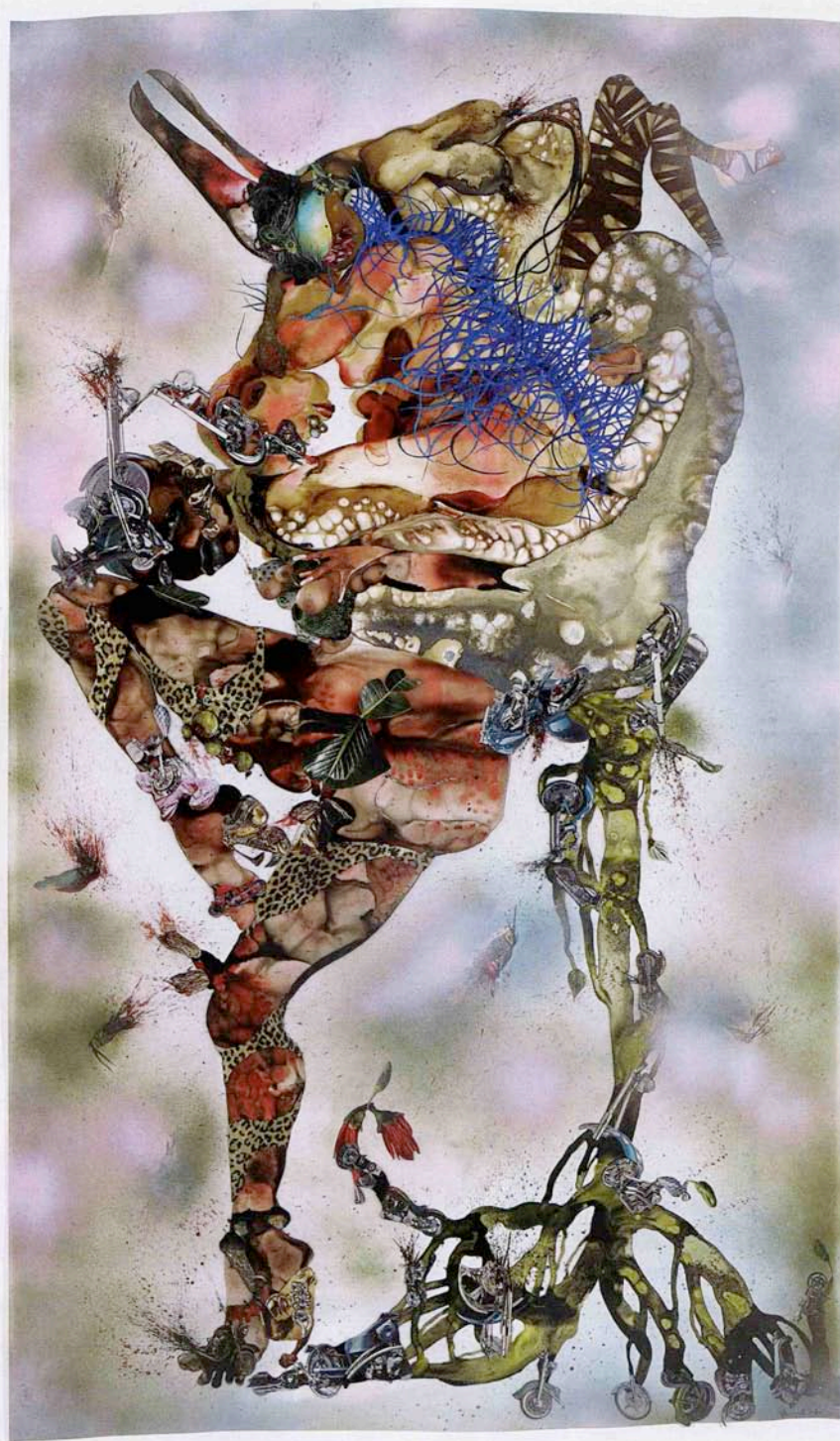
comparing Mutu's works incorporating African sculpture and people in ceremonial attire with Höch's 1930 series "From an Ethnographic Museum," in which, for example, an African sculptural head might be montaged onto a Western female body. Coming from imperialist, colonizing cultures, most modern artists who appropriated African elements might not have considered the racism underlying their formally daring but otherwise culturally acceptable gestures. Mutu often incorporates clichéd depictions of Africans, which admittedly add visual intrigue, as a way to subvert the persistent misrepresentation of Africa.

IN "THIS YOU CALL CIVILIZATION?," the compact six-year survey (2002-08) at the AGO, organized by contemporary art curator David Moos, Mutu ironically underscores the violence and oppression that "civilization" often entails. She introduces a sense of decline or disregard by replicating, along the bottom of several walls, the stain of a flood mark or the sooty grime that settles on decrepit buildings. The marks are partially inspired by the ghostly traces of Hurricane Katrina—a poignant reminder of inhuman neglect and ruin—that she encountered in 2008 as a participant in Prospect.1 in New Orleans, and they create a dramatic shading effect of the kind Mutu favors at the edges of many of her works.



# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Cash, Stephanie, "Wangechi Mutu: Terrible Beauty," *Art in America*, May 2010



MAY'10 ART IN AMERICA 123



# GLADSTONE GALLERY

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The first room of the AGO exhibition encapsulates Mutu's progression. The earliest work in the show hangs here, a quiet, small-scale drawing from 2002 of a reclining female figure, her ovoid alienlike head in profile on a blank ground, the collage elements minimal. The adjacent wall presents the titular *This You Call Civilization?* of 2008—a far more intricate composition featuring a leggy monstrosity that is actually four vertically conjoined figures. Whether the bottom one with the sturdy gams is burdened by the other three or the group is struggling to work together as one, the metaphor of a civilization in crisis is clear.

The main gallery is dominated by Mutu's cerulean-painted "wounded wall," as she calls it, which is pockmarked as if hit by bullets or mortar. The "wounds" are stained red, making the implicit violence seem almost bodily. Installed here is *Sleeping Heads* (2006), essentially a set of eight "portraits" turned on their sides as a comment on ineffectual leaders. In this context, however, their sleep seems to be eternal and to have been brought about brutally.

A *Shady Promise* (2006) is a large diptych that could be read as a present-day Annunciation scene and a

**IN "THIS YOU CALL CIVILIZATION?," HER COMPACT SIX-YEAR SURVEY, MUTU IRONICALLY UNDERSCORES THE VIOLENCE AND OPPRESSION THAT "CIVILIZATION" OFTEN ENTAILS.**



124 ART IN AMERICA MAY'10



# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Cash, Stephanie, "Wangechi Mutu: Terrible Beauty," *Art in America*, May 2010



Above, view of the exhibition "This You Call Civilization?," showing (left to right) *Pearl Teeth*, 2008, *A Shady Promise*, 2006, and an untitled site-specific installation; at the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.

Left, *Histology of the Different Classes of Uterine Tumors*, 2006, digital prints and mixed-medium collage, 12 parts, 23 by 17 inches each. Courtesy Sikkema Jenkins.

tongue-in-cheek critique of religion, though Mutu is never so specific in her associations. A cool, self-possessed woman wearing shades and a blingy lily-shaped bracelet straddles an arching tree trunk that is rooted in each panel as heavenly rays shine down from the upper left. An exquisite birdlike creature, emanating an angelic glow, alights on the tree as another (the Holy Spirit?) sits on the woman's head. Long thin blades of grass, their forms cut from images of diamonds, lend a dazzling effect, even as they call to mind the "blood diamonds" mined and sold in Africa to fund wars and insurgencies.

Two multipart works present a comical cast of char-



# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Cash, Stephanie, "Wangechi Mutu: Terrible Beauty," *Art in America*, May 2010



126 ART IN AMERICA MAY'10



# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Cash, Stephanie, "Wangechi Mutu: Terrible Beauty," *Art in America*, May 2010

Right, detail of *The Ark Collection*, 2006, collage on postcards displayed in four vitrines, each 40 by 62 by 23 inches.

Opposite, *The Bride who married the Camel Head*, 2009, mixed mediums on Mylar, 42 by 30 inches. Courtesy Susanne Vielmetter.



## THE ARK COLLECTION MELDS TWO OF MUTU'S CONCERNS: STEREOTYPICAL DEPICTIONS OF EXOTICIZED AFRICAN WOMEN AND HYPER-SEXUALIZED AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN.

acters. *Forensic Forms* (2004) comprises 10 medium-size depictions of bizarre creatures with such quirks as walleyes, gaping mouths, a blaze of black glittery hair and dangling legs like braids. Equally bizarre are the 12 figures in *Histology of the Different Classes of Uterine Tumors* (2006), collaged on vintage medical illustrations. Mutu incorporates elements of the anatomical diagrams into whimsical portraits—using a prolapsed uterus for a nose, for example—as if to bring some levity to these female afflictions.

*The Ark Collection* (2006), 32 postcard-size works displayed in vitrines in a somber black-painted room, is defiant and poignant, almost didactic—which is not necessarily a bad thing. The work is a perfect melding of two of Mutu's concerns: stereotypical depictions of exoticized African women and of hyper-sexualized African-American women. Eschewing paint and other embellishments, each work is pure collage, combining images from black porn magazines with postcards that reproduce photographs taken by Carol Beckwith, who, beginning in the 1970s, documented tribal ceremonies in Kenya and Tanzania. Her work has been serially published in book, calendar

and postcard form—including the volume *Women of the African Ark*. As Moos writes in the exhibition catalogue, "the quasi-scientific and stock ethnographic style of Beckwith's imagery . . . offers a template against which [Mutu launches] a critique of this highly constructed and fallacious stereotype of the African female."<sup>2</sup> Mutu addresses a similar issue in the large-scale *Le Noble Savage* (2006), which shows a grass-skirted, hairy-armed woman communing with nature—birds fluttering overhead, a snake encircling her body and a snarling lion incorporated into her shoulder.

In the Ark works, the pornographic poses are unmistakable—legs spread, hands reaching down, fingers positioned to part labia or buttocks—but Mutu has obliterated all the explicit parts. In one image, for example, an African woman's smiling face peeks through the parted, dazzlingly manicured fingers of an African-American woman. Another features a rear view of a porn subject whose hands reach back, landing not on her posterior but floating over a perpendicular image of a woman grinding grain in a hut. It is in this series that Mutu's critique is most sharply felt. In a related pair of new works using similar images, Mutu has

MAY'10 ART IN AMERICA 127



# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Cash, Stephanie, "Wangechi Mutu: Terrible Beauty," *Art in America*, May 2010



Left, *Cutting*, 2004, single-channel DVD, approx. 6 minutes. Courtesy Susanne Vielmetter and Sikkema Jenkins.

Opposite, *Fallen Heads*, 2010, ink, paint, collage, contact paper and plastic pearls on Mylar, 104 by 53¾ inches. Courtesy Susanne Vielmetter, and Victoria Miro Gallery, London.

grouped four pieces in a single frame and, in a striking departure, has added text to the bottom of each. The artist doesn't deny that there is a feminist quality to her work (she was included in the 2007 "Global Feminisms" show at the Brooklyn Museum), though she believes that the approach can be limiting when "there are so many political issues in other spheres of society," Mutu says. As she puts it, "The art world is not where true urgency exists."<sup>3</sup>

MUTU HAS PREVIOUSLY created installations using sheets of plastic or blankets shaped with packing tape into treelike forms. One column at the AGO is wrapped with coarse woolen blankets to form spreading roots at its base. Other blankets attached to a wall serve as a screen for the projection of *Cleaning Earth* (2006), a video in which Mutu futilely scrubs a dirt floor. (The artist appears in all her own videos, as an everywoman.) Mutu is drawn to the blankets as a signifier of economic contrasts between the West, where they're considered low-grade and often used for moving furniture, and Africa, where for many they serve the basic function of providing warmth. The other video in the show, *Cutting* (2004), shows Mutu approaching a log on a rise in a scrubby landscape. Shot against the sunset, the log at times resembles a body as Mutu hacks at it with a machete. The sound of metal on metal, an unintended result of the way she was miked, adds to the video's disconcerting effect.

Mutu undertook her first live performance during last November's Performa biennial in New York. The piece was titled *Stone Ihiga*, a

reference to executions by stoning; in it Mutu and the singer Imani Uzuri expressed—through body language, Uzuri's vocalizing and Mutu's speaking in her native Kikuyu tongue—deep anxiety regarding an unspecified event about to take place. As Mutu explains, "nothing happened," so gradually the audience's attention was directed to the minutiae of the women's actions. Mutu had hoped for a more interactive experience and a more in-the-round setup, as would be the case at a stoning. Though she considers her works in these other mediums to be an integral part of her oeuvre, they don't yet approach the resolution achieved in the collage drawings.

Among the works on view at the Deutsche Guggenheim is *Fallen Heads* (2010), a large-scale vertical collage drawing with a regular pattern of bloody, decapitated heads, inspired, she says, by the current "heads-will-roll" economic climate. The video *Mud Fountain* (2010), shot in a dungeonlike space, shows liquidy mud pouring down on Mutu, who eventually crumples to the ground in a fetal position. Considering the culminating image of defeat, the pouring mud sounds incongruously like a peacefully trickling fountain.

Mutu has begun work on a series of double-headed female images but their significance hasn't been quite formulated: as with much of her work, the references can be multiple. Aside from her interest in the conjoined twins Abigail and Brittany Hensel, two girls who share and cooperatively control one body, she suspects that the new figures might have something to do with the status of immigrants, who lead hybrid existences and have to be many things at once. For a multifaceted artist whose work can also be many things at once, that makes perfect sense. ○

"This You Call Civilization?," at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto [Feb. 24-May 23], is accompanied by a 127-page catalogue with essays by David Moos, Odill Donald Odita, Rinaldo Walcott, Carol Thompson, Raphael Rubinstein, Jennifer González and Michelle Jacques, and an interview by Rich Blint. "Wangechi Mutu" can be seen at Deutsche Guggenheim, Berlin [Apr. 30-June 13]. The artist will have a show of new work at Gladstone Gallery, New York [Oct. 29-Dec. 4].

<sup>1</sup> Letter from Höch to Walter Mehring, April 1959, quoted by Carolyn Lanchner in her contribution to *The Photomontages of Hannah Höch*, ed. by Peter Boswell, Minneapolis, Walker Art Center, 1996, p. 129. <sup>2</sup> David Moos, "The Ark Collection: Disjunctive Continuity," in *Wangechi Mutu: This You Call Civilization?*, Toronto, Art Gallery of Ontario, 2010, p. 11. <sup>3</sup> This and other Mutu quotes are from the author's interview with the artist in her studio on Feb. 18, 2010.



# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Cash, Stephanie, "Wangechi Mutu: Terrible Beauty," *Art in America*, May 2010



MAY'10 ART IN AMERICA 129