

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Hemdon, Lara Kristin, "Wangechi Mutu", Art Papers, 2011



WANGECHE MUTU NEW YORK

The brilliant thing about collage has always been its unique ability to put forth distressingly immediate juxtapositions. Kenyan-born, Brooklyn-based artist Wangechi Mutu brings an uncanny freshness to this time-honored shock. Choosing images from fashion magazines, pornography, and ethnographic photography, she builds works that point up the fetishization of the female form—by way of threatened or powerless situations as well as dismemberment, scarring, and mutilation.

When it comes to content, these works scintillate only a little less brightly. Mutu's concerns include the body, gender, and race. More specifically, she investigates the way in which culture is written, burned, scarred or otherwise marked on the female body. It's well-trod territory, but that's hardly Mutu's fault—indeed, to mention such explorations in an artist's statement is tantamount to declaring seriousness of purpose in contemporary art practice these days.

It's Mutu's meticulously tended aesthetic and inventiveness that set her work apart. She augments her compositions with a variety of materials that, in less unsettlingly skilled hands, could feel like a jumble. But somehow, Mutu combines incompatible elements into a seamless whole. She also uses paint and ink on Mylar to give her compositions a garish, unsettling brightness and depth of texture, which she expertly manipulates for disturbing effects. Glitter, jewels, beads, fur, and feathers make appearances as well, subtly disrupting the glossy surface that can render collage merely superficial.

In past works, she explored the female body as a site for illness and decay. Here, in the exhibition *Hunt Bury Flee*, her figures fall prey to more active, and thus more intentional, processes—as well as more destructive, be they self-destructive or other-imposed [Gladstone Gallery; October 30—December 18, 2010]. All this is to say that it's personal. This aspect of the show can lead to a certain mental fatigue. After all, many have convincingly argued that Surrealist images of mutilated, disfigured women are still sexualized and thus misogynist. How can a sexualized image of a woman's mouth spattered with blood and dirt—when shown in a contempo-

rary art context—not be exploitative? How can it proffer a high-minded "challenge" to the "question of difference"—to quote the Gladstone press release?

Placing such fruitless questions aside, the viewer will have many distressingly sexualized images of decay, abasement, and mutilation to contemplate. In *Oh, Madonna*, 2010, a figure with exotic or tribal accoutrements strikes a sexualized pose on a chair. *Humming*, 2010, features two female figures surrounded by flies, including one very large tentacled bug—or fly-octopus-aggregate—that seems to bear malicious intent toward one or both of them. *Nobody loves me. It's true*, 2010, shows a despondent figure with pendulous breasts and truncated animal legs, whose bloated, spotted skin is bound by uncomfortable cords. *Sprout*, 2010, presents an upside-down figure with arms buried in muck, whose disfigured head is pushed against the ground at an ugly angle, with a tangle of leaves and twigs sprouting from its anus and its severed legs. Birds peck at its decaying skin; its eyes are gone. The image could be redemptive, suggesting regrowth. But the foliage isn't lush, the birds don't appear particularly inspired. Like many others in the show, this image simply dwells on decay for its potential to distress, unsettle, and disturb.

Indeed, it almost feels as though Mutu herself were fired of her chosen discourse. But the difficulties of her practice are neatly solved in the installation *Moths*, 2010, the show's dark anchor and best success. The work entails a wall of tiny ceramic women whose shapely, naked legs are topped by dark leather wings and silky feather antennae. Their poses could evoke dancing, struggling or sex. Despite the suggestion that these winged creatures have been captured and pinned in rows like so many bugs on a card, they gleam with subtle menace, suggesting, if not a hopeful fate, at least a vengeful one.

—Lara Kristin Herndon

LEFT TO RIGHT: Wangechi Mutu, *Before Punk Came Funk*, 2010, mixed media ink, paint, collage on Mylar, 52.25 x 50.375 inches; Wangechi Mutu, *Moth Girls*, 2010, mixed media in, leather, paint, feathers, and chalk, 173 x 283 x 262 inches (images © Wangechi Mutu; courtesy of Gladstone Gallery, New York)