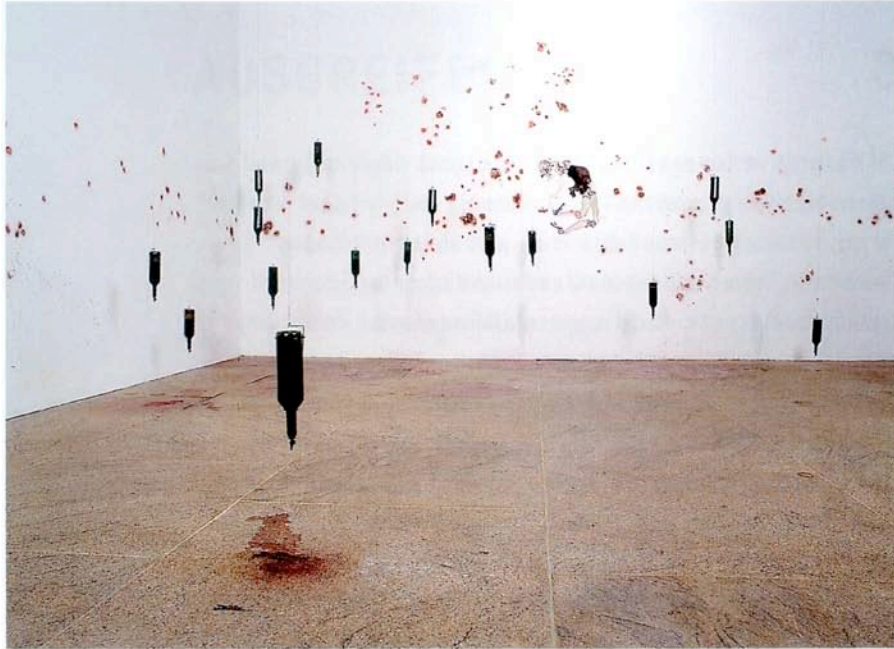


# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Brielmaier, Isolde, "Wangechi Mutu: Re-Imagining the World," Parkett, No.74, 2005



WANGECHI MUTU, *HANGIN' IN*, 2004, mixed media installation / *ÜBERLEBEN*, Installation, verschiedene Materialien. (ALL PHOTOS: BRENT SIKKEMA, NEW YORK)

## WANGECHI MUTU: *RE-IMAGINING THE WORLD*

ISOLDE BRIELMAIER

For her recent installation and wall piece entitled, *HANGING IN* (2004), artist Wangechi Mutu drew inspiration from the identity of Texas. She is fascinated by the state's history of carnage and execution and its mentality of frontier justice, which she sees in the historical relationship between Texas and Mexico, as well as in the broader world. This particular work combined her figurative paintings with collage elements—fur, magazine images, and glitter—and was shown alongside an installation of hanging wine bottles. The result was a large-scale wall piece that lingered behind a haunting "curtain" of glass bottles

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*ISOLDE BRIELMAIER* is a New York-based curator and writer and Visiting Assistant Professor of Art at Vassar College.

suspended at varying lengths from the ceiling. Each container slowly dripped a rich, burgundy-colored wine and emanated a stench of bitter berries and alcohol. Mutu showed her drawings of mutilated and distorted female forms on the walls directly facing the gallery entrance. In front of her wall-mounted works, her bottle installation hung like vines in a forest, beckoning viewers to carefully sift through and consider the significance of place, the gestures, poses, and actions of her figures, and the meaning of the circumstance woven into her artificial environment.

Mutu's *HANGING IN* was presented as a part of the group exhibition, "Fight or Flight," at the Whitney Museum at Altria in late 2004. The exhibition's

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theme was derived from society's fear and anxiety about the state of the world, and the idea that living beings often have involuntary physical and visceral reactions to sudden and impending threats. Mutu's art transformed the gallery space and it demanded visual and physical engagement. She created a setting aimed at heightening the viewer's sense of how humanity's fragility, mortality, and aggression are often inscribed upon the female body. *HANGING IN*, with its traumatized wall surface that resembled self-inflicted wounds, quite literally hung in the corner of the room where the gallery walls and Mutu's images converged to forge a crossroads: alluding to crises of the past and present as well as the looming uncertainty of the future.

This work, in many ways, encapsulates the visual progression and socio-political content of Mutu's art. Among her many aesthetic and conceptual concerns, she has focused on re-imagining the world, the transformative and transgressive power of the female



WANGECHI MUTU, *UNTITLED*, 1997 (FROM THE ETHNOGRAPHIC JEWELRY SERIES), mixed media performance / OHNE TITEL (AUS DER SERIE ZU ETHNOGRAPHISCHEM SCHMUCK), Performance, verschiedene Medien.

body, and the fluidity and performance of this body, which re-inscribes and undermines authority. Mutu describes life's contrasting, yet interdependent, dualities of both empowering moments and periods of insecurity. She speaks openly, in life and in her art, about the state of the world, the lives of women, and her experience of traversing and blurring boundaries as a Kenyan, a woman, and an artist who now lives and works in the United States. So it comes as no surprise that this tension—the contradiction between life's eloquent splendor and potential and its grotesque aggression and futility—is precisely what makes up Mutu's creative vision.

Mutu's early "ethnographic jewelry" works of 1998 were inspired by her interest in the way Kenya has been imagined, exoticized, and consumed: the ways in which her country figures prominently in the psychology and fantasies of the U.S. public, as well as on walls, bodies, and coffee tables, in the form of artifacts, glossy picture books, and "ethnic-inspired" fashion. Her large necklaces and bracelets—unique pieces made of leather, fiber, horn, shell, and bone—were designed to be worn so that their volume and contorting qualities could be examined, drawing attention to the physical form of the wearer. The adorned body, in turn, became a loaded object onto which projections of ethnicity, race, gender, and desire were posited. Similarly, in Mutu's *Pin-Up* series (2001), each drawing presents ethereal figures with distended and traumatized bodies, many of which engage the viewer directly. Mutu describes these elegant forms as "masquerading across the paper, embodying what people both desire and detest,"<sup>1)</sup> and in this way, they are involved in a process of becoming, of changing, and surviving.

To date, most readings of Mutu's art appropriately frame these collages, drawings, and installations within critiques and discussions of race, politics, gender, beauty, consumption, and identity. These aspects can undoubtedly be culled from her work, for they exist both overtly and subtly in the lines, shapes, pigments, and images that comprise Mutu's canvases. Yet, the quality of otherworldliness also urges us to delve deeper. What are we to make of the additional interpretations that linger at the contrasting edges of one of her cut and torn collages, and under the deli-

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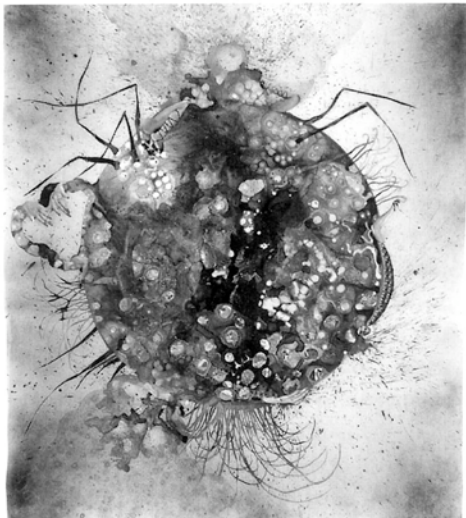
cate, layered, and overlapping surface of her mutated painted figures and ink drawings? Here, interest and curiosity are piqued. It is in these "other-worlds" that Mutu situates her art and generates a new space for herself where she can entice and guide her viewers through meandering forms that are both familiar and fantastical.

Mutu's work, such as *RIDING DEATH IN MY SLEEP* (2001), brings to mind Mikhail Bakhtin's comments on the nature of the carnival that likewise centers on the body in all of its ubiquity and excess and that signifies the symbolic break down of authority. The carnival, as Bakhtin envisioned it, allows for an alternate space and time of freedom, release, and renewal, while, at the same time, co-opting dominant cultural and social structures through the re-invention of the body and through the processes of inversion, subversion, and appropriation. Mutu's art conveys this contradiction and ambiguity. It inhabits, appropriates, and expresses the signs of both domination and subordination that are integral to our social systems and, therefore, to the very social experiences and ideas that Mutu visually engages and

critiques. In *RIDING DEATH IN MY SLEEP*, she brings disparate and opposing parts together—a curvaceous female form, fake leopard skin, bird parts, and a carpet of mushrooms—to create a whole: an altered body, which she positions crouching upon another planet in order to critique this world and to imagine a new one.

As in this work, Mutu's figures are almost always in motion. They are jumping, looking, hiding, and revealing, as they stretch and contort across the picture plane. They are engaged in an expressive performance of culture, history, and ideas. These corporeal conditions are the alternate "stories" narrated by Mutu's figures and they are articulated in her use and layering of lines, shapes, edges, fragmentation, and alteration. The figure in *RIDING DEATH TO MY SLEEP* establishes another realm by insisting upon a kind of theatrical presence, a clear and intentional manipulation of the materials that comprise its active form—color, texture, paint, and ink in murky conversation with images torn from *National Geographic* and fashion magazines, sprinkled with glitter, sequins, and other materials.

Within this world, Mutu frequently and subversively inscribes meaning upon the female form, which becomes the conundrum of representation that affords her the opposition and ambivalence she craves. And yet, she is very specific in her visual language. "I'm fascinated by certain things that don't make complete sense together, that don't seem to 'belong' with one another. It doesn't matter that punk rock music, African-derived things, political issues or fashion aren't seen as elements that go with one another... I'm able to pull them on top of one another and make images that have a discernible wholeness, images that are visually potent." By being intentional with the symbols she includes on, and in, her bodies, Mutu imaginatively produces multiple layers of meaning, which at the same time mock, comment upon, re-configure, and, ultimately, destabilize the presumed superiority of "official culture" and the oft-presumed invincibility of humanity. On the mylar of Mutu's painting are hints of seductiveness, strength, and agency, as well as reminders of fragility and violence. The female body in her art is confrontational, playful, delicate, and susceptible. It em-



WANGECHI MUTU, UNTITLED, 2004 (FROM TUMORS), ink, paint, collage, on Mylar, 42 x 37" / OHNE TITEL (AUS TUMOREN), Tinte, Farbe, Collage auf Mylar, 106,7 x 94 cm.

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*WANGECHI MUTU, PIN-UP, 2001, mixed media on paper, 13 x 10" / PIN-UP, verschiedene Materialien auf Papier, 33 x 25,4 cm.*

phasizes the rigidity of dominant culture—its shortcomings, its distinctions between high and low, its inconsistency and unpredictability, its lack of space for the common person, for concern and consensus.

Change and uncertainty are central to Mutu's work; so these visions of alternate space, these assertions of renewal, these moments of release are also fleeting, for she always hints at the downfall of humanity and her hope that the end, or demise, might also signal a beginning, a time to usher in the new.

In a recent exhibition, Mutu's video work entitled *CUTTING* (2004) seemed unexpected, given her affinity for collage. But it also made sense. In *CUTTING*, Mutu uses her own body as a central site for investigating history and culture. Her figure is seen against a vast rural landscape repetitiously hacking away at a large pile of wood and debris with a machete. Exhausted after breaking down the pile into a mass of rubble, she leaves her machete stuck upright in the wooden bits—its handle forming a strong, foreboding vertical against the horizon—and turns to walk up a hill.

When asked why she had now decided to work with video, Mutu explained, "The world—and perhaps by extension people—is in a period of self-destruction. It exists in a constant state of pain that is in many ways self-inflicted. This work conveys immediacy and highlights this anxiety. I also wanted to draw on a sore connection between the idea of a rural space and the fear of elimination and infestation as well as the idea that tools used for providing and creating can so easily be transformed into weapons for murder." Mutu created videos back in the late 1990s, so in some sense she wanted to move back to where she started. "Nothing is clear cut. Issues shift.



Video allows me the capability of creating yet another world and putting myself in the middle of it because I am part of it...the problems and the solutions. Video, for me, is a means by which to dramatize urgent issues, to invent and re-invent." Mutu sees the medium as being very much linked to her love of assemblage, to the acts of cutting, splicing, and combining elements. It expands her repertoire. She then has more to work with as she creatively and continually reworks her bodies, builds her environments, and re-imagines her art and the world.

1) All quotes derived from conversations with the artist on Dec. 29, 2004 and Feb. 2, 2005.