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fierce creatures

Kenyan artist Wangechi Mutu has brought her fresh and vividly energetic vision to figurative art—spinning fantastical tales of folklore and modernity. By Dodie Kazanjian. Photographed by Martin Schoeller.

the women in Wangechi Mutu's paintings are a strange and disturbing breed. Beautiful but grotesque, powerful yet maimed, they perch in trees or cavort in the tall grass, their hair erupting in wild shapes and arabesques, their limbs missing or metamorphosed into bird legs with talon feet. The unfinished one I'm looking at right now, in the artist's Brooklyn studio, is an African odalisque with a ferocious expression; her blotchy, pink-and-white skin looks diseased, but the mottled effect could also be from light falling on her through jungle foliage. She's fascinating but scary, someone I wouldn't want to cross. "This one is coming along," says Wangechi in her gently cadenced, lilting voice. "She's a superchill girl, very relaxed, no tension. She's going to have gorgeous jewelry and have it on her head. Everybody's

BROODING MUSES

Mutu in the backyard of her Bedford-Stuyvesant home, a diptych in progress from her "warrior girls" series behind her. Clothes, Mutu's own. Hair, Oscar James for Ken Barboza Associates; makeup, Polly Osmond for Christian Dior at Art Dept.; set design, Mary Howard.
Sittings Editor: Phyllis Posnick.

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a queen in this show; they'll all wear crowns. These are warrior girls. I hope they'll jump out of their space and kick some ass."

Wangechi, a superchill beauty from Kenya, slim and regal-looking in her layered outfit (wrap skirt over jeans, bold-patterned shirt over two strappy tops, cashmere wrist warmers), has cobalt-blue extensions braided into her own crown of black hair. She is working around the clock these days, getting ready for her New York gallery debut in May with not one but two ambitious shows: at Sikkema Jenkins in Chelsea and Salon 94 on the Upper East Side. There's already a lot of excitement about Wangechi Mutu. The *Los Angeles Times* critic David Pagel, reviewing her show there in 2003, called it "a stunning solo debut . . . the best in recent memory." The Museum of Modern Art and the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art have bought her work, and so has Charles Saatchi, the international art world's leading bellwether, who has put her in his multipart "Triumph of Painting" exhibition and in his upcoming "USA Today" show at the Royal Academy of Art in London. She also has shows this year at SITE Santa Fe and Power House, Memphis. Half a dozen of the top galleries were wooing her, and plenty of admirers are in line to buy her work, but Wangechi keeps that sort of thing at a safe distance. "I don't want to hear about anything outside of what's going on here," she says, meaning the studio. The studio is a long, narrow floor-through in a brownstone house she bought two years ago, in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn. (Her escalating market, rigorous saving, and Bed-Stuy's being "the last affordable place in New York," as she puts it, made the purchase possible.) Taped to the door outside is a printed sign that says, PREPARING ILLEGAL BREW. It refers, she tells me, to "moonshine from home called chang'aa, poor-people liquor. I put it there because [*conspiratorial whisper*] the brew is my work."

Much of Wangechi's work to date centers on the mystery and vulnerability and transformative power of the African female body. She remembers watching a 1992 demonstration in Nairobi during which a group of mothers protesting the imprisonment of their sons on political charges took off their clothes, in an ancestral tribal ritual, to shame the authorities. It was "an incredible expression of the power of the naked female body," she has said. Wangechi evokes this force in a great many of her fantastical drawings and collages, combining and juxtaposing images of mouths, eyes, hands, breasts, and wickedly high heels, along with snakes, birds, butterflies, animals, flowers, and other exotic fauna and flora. Most of these are images she's clipped from magazines—including *Vogue*, *National Geographic*, *Newsweek*, and black pornography publications—and assembled on large sheets of clear Mylar with frequent garnishings of fake

diamonds, broken glass, pearls, and glitter. The jarring changes of scale in her collages remind you of Romare Bearden, the African-American artist whose work she saw as an art student at Cooper Union. But Wangechi's talent is protean and sui generis, and everything she does comes piping hot from her own experience as a 33-year-old African woman who lives in New York but longs to visit home. Wangechi, who came here as a student in 1992, has her working papers and is waiting for her green card to come through. If she leaves the country without one, she won't be allowed back in—and at this point in her life she definitely wants to live here. She hasn't been home for ten years. "This is the ludicrous thing about Wangechi Mutu," she tells me. "I can't travel. I'm trapped in America."

We walk over to another large work in progress, on the wall of her studio. In it, a brown-skinned girl with a Medusa headaddress of writhing green snakes kneels in the grass, holding up with one arm a full-grown palm tree. Turquoise-blue macaws circle around it. "These gorgeous green snakes, mambas, we have them in Africa," she says. "I still have quite a bit to go here. There are going to be more tendrils and more fruits in the tree. This utopia tree that she's holding up is like a reverse Statue of Liberty that draws you back toward your home. It's a torch, a lighthouse, a place of memory that's not bringing you in but taking you backward, back home. It's completely personal. It relates to me in a big way."

Born in Nairobi in 1972, Wangechi was the second of four children in a middle-class family. Her mother was a nurse; her father, whose grandfather had been a Kikuyu chieftain, ran a paper-importing business in the city; much later he became a university professor, teaching African history and literature in Michigan. Wangechi went to the Loreto school in Nairobi, a very

proper Catholic girls' school where, in addition to an excellent, well-rounded education, she acquired the poise and self-confidence that balance her somewhat mischievous personality. One of her classmates was the daughter of Richard Leakey, the world-famous paleontologist; recognizing Wangechi's potential, he persuaded her to apply, at age seventeen, to the United World College of the Atlantic on the Welsh coast, a two-year academy for gifted students from countries around the world. "It was the best two years of my life so far," she says.

As a child, drawing had been so easy for her that she had "no respect for it." Her art teacher at Loreto was even more of a damper, a "horrible, slimy man who used to look up our skirts and make us do the same still life week after week." The Dutchman who taught art at the Wales college changed her mind. He took the students to museums and art studios in London and



SNAKES IN THE GRASS

A work in progress showing a Medusa-headed woman holding what Mutu describes as a "utopia tree . . . like a reverse Statue of Liberty."

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MIXED MEDIA
For this untitled painting from the "Forensic Forms" series, 2004, Mutu added appliqué and collaged images taken from *National Geographic* and fashion and porn magazines.

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Cardiff. He also gave each of them a big sketchbook and said, "This is your life now. You are going to fill this with photographs, drawings, journal entries—everything that you're experiencing, put it in there." This opened Wangechi up to art. "Anything I read, any movie I watched, I could bring that information and that challenge back into the sketchbook. The process was so simple, thinking about something, letting it sink in, and then being it. I realized, I can do this. It was so good to find that art wasn't just something I could do easily and forget about. I thought about it all the time."

in Nairobi again after her graduation in 1991, Wangechi found the idyllic, peaceful Kenya of her childhood much changed. A failed coup and a soured economy—hit hard by rising oil prices and inflation after Operation Desert Storm—had taken their toll. Her father's business was bankrupt, and he couldn't afford to send her to college. She worked for an ad agency for six months. But then, once again, Richard Leakey stepped in. He offered to pay for one year of schooling, wherever she chose to go. "I wanted to get out of Kenya, and I wanted to go to school," she tells me. "I couldn't go to London, because I couldn't afford it. But New York sounded feasible." She was accepted by several schools and chose Parsons, where she studied for a year and then "stole" another semester before dropping out with a semester's worth of debt. Soon after that, she discovered Cooper Union, a first-rate art school that was tuition-free. Working at a dozen different jobs—waitress, baby-sitter, teaching assistant—and living in a succession of cheap apartments (Lower East Side, Williamsburg, Harlem), she hung on, paid off her debt at Parsons, and graduated from Cooper Union in 1996. "Cooper really taught you how to think about and look at art, how to be critical. It taught me I could take all my experiences and push them into the work. I learned that there was a place for me to envision African ideas and my story through contemporary art."

Wangechi had her heart set on going to graduate school at Yale, whose program in art was one of the best, but there was no money. She spent a year working for the SoHo Partnership, a community philanthropic program. In her spare time, she made sculptures that resembled traditional African jewelry and took what she calls "ethnographic" photographs of her friends, images meant to expose the prejudices and misrepresentations that outsiders often visit upon her compatriots. None of this work succeeded in her view—people missed the humor and took it literally—but one of her pieces, a hanging sculpture of used pillows ("People's dreams and nightmares get stuck in pillows"), was chosen for the Johannesburg Biennale in 1997. She kept thinking about Yale. "I always wanted to go to Yale, from very far back," she says. "Everyone knows about Yale. Being a foreigner, I needed the kind of credentials that would be appealing in any country." In 1998, she won a full scholarship to Yale's Graduate

School of Art and Architecture, which more than lived up to her expectations. She studied with Kara Walker, William Kentridge, Paul McCarthy, Jeff Wall, and other visiting-artist teachers. Her own work "bounced all over the place," as she puts it—sculpture, painting, photography, video, installation pieces. "Yale expanded my vision. I also realized how difficult the art world was going to be, and got some idea of the business side of it."

In the spring of 2000, her Yale MFA in hand, she moved back to New York. Broke, sleeping on the sofas of friends for three months, she arrived at a new place emotionally. "I let myself sink in and surrender to the very intimate ideas I had at that point. I stopped trying to make so much sense and stopped being afraid of fiction and mythologies and the fantastical, which I've always loved." She began, once again, to draw obsessively in her sketchbook, which she carried everywhere. "It was my anchor," she says. "It kept me thinking, and it kept my hand trained." In September she moved to "a hideously ugly little place" in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn. Within a few months, her work began appearing in out-of-the-way group shows.

Christine Kim, a curator at the Studio Museum in Harlem, dropped by one day, saw her sketchbooks, and put a dozen of her "Pin-Up" girl drawings in a show called "Africaine." Watercolors with collage, the pinups were witty distortions of the images in Western glossy magazines—especially *Vogue*—that she had devoured as a little girl. (The fashion magazines had been far too expensive then for her to buy; she saw them at the hairdresser's.) Most were single females against a white background. "They all have big wigs and accessories, and most of them are missing some body parts," Wangechi tells me. "Those are the works that opened up the floodgates. That's where it really begins." The Studio Museum selected her for its highly competitive residency program the following year, and her work got noticed. "During our year with her," Thelma Golden, the Studio Museum's dynamic director, tells me, "I got used to running into dealers in our lobby." Wangechi's talent was immediately clear to Golden. "There's something in her work that's trying, subtly but forcibly, to redefine the nature and understanding of African art."

Wangechi wants me to come to Harlem, where she's having new extensions braided into her hair. (She does this every two months or so.) "You've got to get hip to the black-girl head thing," she'd told me. We meet for a quick lunch first, at a French-Moroccan restaurant she likes called Native, on Lenox Avenue at One Hundred and Eighteenth Street. She's half an hour late. "I had to cut the old extensions off," she explains, "because it's easier and less painful to untangle your own hair. I worked on it all night." She's wearing a big, floppy suede cap that covers her hair, and a wrap coat with oversize fur cuffs and collar. "It's my *Foxy Brown* look, my fake Diane von Furstenberg—although I'm not a big label girl. I hope you have your passport," she adds, giggling, "because we're going for a trip."

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"There's a new wave of African immigrants up here, French-African folks from Senegal and Cameroon. With black women's hair, if you want to color your hair or get all the kinks out, you go to an African-American woman. If you want to get your hair braided, you go to the Africans. If you want to get your hair blow-dried so it looks superstraight, the Latino ladies are great. I always say there's no better person to get the African out of your hair than a Dominican lady [*big laugh*]." Wangechi doesn't want to get the African out. "Straightening will damage the hell out of my hair because my hair follicles are flat. The rounder the follicle, the straighter the hair. Asian-hair follicles are superround."

How does she know all this? "I don't know, I'm a hair nerd." After lunch we have trouble finding her hair-braiding salon because it's gone. Wangechi calls the phone number that's pasted to the window and identifies herself. We go around the corner and wait 45 minutes for Tina, the Senegalese hairdresser, to come back home from picking up her kids at school. Tina takes us to a room in the back of her house, where Amy, a Cameroonian, does Wangechi's hair. The braiding process—Wangechi wants thick "box" braids with a lot of blue in the back, graduating to blue-black in front—takes a couple of hours and is accompanied by loud hip-hop music, constant interruptions by the kids, and hilarious problems of communicating in a mixture of Cameroonian-accented French, Pidgin English, and sign language. "Oh, Mummy, Mummy," Wangechi pleads, "don't pull it too hard, 'cause I'll cry for you."

It's a month later, and I'm back in the Brooklyn studio. I meet her younger brother Irungu, a recent Rutgers graduate who wants to be an actor. He lives upstairs in Wangechi's house. Glenn Gould's second recording of *The Goldberg Variations* is playing on the stereo, and incense is burning somewhere. Her two gallery openings are looming. "The time just seeps away," she says, sighing. "I work so late at night to get those eight or ten hours when nobody is around and nobody calls me, and this place becomes my temple." She currently averages four hours of sleep at night, going to bed at 3:00 or 4:00 A.M. and getting up at eight. Not that she's reclusive. She goes out dancing, attends the openings of artist friends, and takes in a lot of vanguard theater and dance—two favorites are Bill T. Jones and Pina Bausch. She also has a new boyfriend, whom I'm not allowed to identify. She concedes at one point that she wants eventually to get married, have babies, and live part of the time in Kenya.

"Wangechi seems really self-possessed and in control,"

says Brent Sikkema, the dealer who beat out eight others who were eager to represent her. Jeffrey Deitch, who introduced me to Wangechi in the summer of 2003, when I was putting together a show of artists' self-portraits for *Vogue*, considers her a "unique voice, one of the five most powerful artists I've come across in the last ten years. People have been making figurative art since prehistory. It's really difficult to find a fresh way to render the figure, but she's done it."

The pictures in the studio are much further along than on my previous visits. It strikes me that Wangechi's "warrior girls" are more commanding than they used to be. There are no missing limbs or mutilations. The theme for both her upcoming shows is "decadence and abundance," she tells me. "I hope these images are going to insinuate opulence, but also a sort of dark place where abundance creates something horrific—which is

where I feel we are now." For some reason, this leads me to ask Wangechi how she feels about being in *Vogue*, which she has used so often as an image bank. "It's part of my vocabulary," she says. "I tear into *Vogue* all the time. But sometimes I worry about doing this story because I don't know how clear people are about my take on the fashion world and this magazine that basically sets the standard for beauty—not just



IN MINIATURE

Kora Dancers from "The Ark" series, 2005, collage on postcards.

female beauty but all kinds of beauty, including art and theater and whatever. I obsess on it. I hate it, and I love it. I ignore it, and I pay too much attention to it. Placing my work in that context will show how much I distort the raw material that I get from the magazine, but I hope it will also show that I have a different agenda. *Vogue* goes out to find very exclusive and exotic scenarios."

Like you?

She bursts out laughing. "Like myself. Great. Do you see what a problem this is? I'm getting eaten by the same beast I'm trying to kill."

The piece that Wangechi is doing for her other upcoming show at Salon 94, in the sumptuous home of the art dealer Jeanne Greenberg, is a single, room-filling installation on which she is collaborating with the much-admired London-based architect David Adjaye. Its elements include the pelts of a dozen or more dead animals (coyotes, beavers, otters, foxes, a bison), wooden-slat walls riddled with bullet holes, a translucent white curtain bearing one of her large, somewhat horrific images of a tumor, and 25 or more hanging, upside-down wine bottles, dripping real red wine onto a huge elliptical banquet table. All this will be refracted and reflected by the blood-red resin floor, to create what Wangechi describes (*continued on page 241*)

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bleeding. "This is my statement about waste and consumption and the excessive use of things that are useless to us," Wangechi tells me. "It's about the kind of damage that we've done out of greed and our desire to control this earth and each other."

That's a pretty big theme for a New York debut, and one that suggests the size of this young artist's ambition. Wangechi has been dealing more directly with social and political issues in her recent work. In a short video she made in 2004 called *Cutting*, a solitary woman (Wangechi) hacks at a fallen tree trunk with a machete, striking it again and again until her exhausted breathing fills the sound track. The reference is to the massacres in Rwanda and elsewhere. "The machete—we call it a *panga* at home—is a farm tool, used by both men and women to cut vegetation and do all kinds of different things. But in Rwanda, the poor people, the villagers, picked up their *pangas* and started killing each other. The *panga* went from being a working tool to being a killing tool. It's like what happened in Bosnia and Serbia. The teacher you were in class with last week was killing your father two weeks later. The important thing for me was that it was so very personal; you were so closely related to the thing that you were doing."

Last year, her latest video, *Amazing Grace*, was one of the hits at Art Basel Miami Beach. This one shows Wangechi (you never see her face) in a long white cotton dress, walking majestically on a beach and into the surf. The sound track is the hymn "Amazing Grace," sung by Wangechi (slowly and beautifully) in the Kikuyu language. In its simplicity and sparseness this lovely seven-minute work made me think of both death and baptism. It also confirmed for me the resonance of Wangechi's storytelling, with its overtones of folklore and religious ritual. To Wangechi, it's about the Middle Passage, the slave-ship route from Africa to America, during which so many black people died. "By entering the water, I'm sort of returning my body to the place where the souls of a lot of people still are. The sea is a graveyard for many of us."

It's growing dark, and I know that she's itching to get back to work in the studio. Before I leave, I ask her how she keeps going on so little sleep. "I'm strong, and I've got the energy to do it right now," she says. "Maybe next year I won't. But you know, I don't see my work as an individual practice. I see myself as part of a movement of people who believe that art history is being written by all of us. There's so much work to be done. Especially for someone like myself, who really does have a huge, huge belief in the possibilities that can come out of my home country and continent." □

FIERCE CREATURES

(continued from page 219)

as the atmosphere of Nairobi's biggest slum, where frequent floods leach out the red volcanic soil and make it look like the land is