

FEATURE
Artist interview

The Kenyan-born, Brooklyn-based artist Wangechi Mutu, 40, is best known for her elaborate collaged works on paper and Mylar polyester film, conjuring up fantastic, fearsome creatures out of fused fragments of pornographic, ethnographic, fashion and nature magazines, mixed with vivid pools and splatters of ink and acrylic paint. Fellow artist and admirer Barbara Kruger has described Mutu's work as exploring "issues of sexuality, wounding, race, exile, violence, greed, war, colonialism and trauma, to name but a few". Okwui Enwezor, curator and director of the Haus Der Kunst in Munich, has declared that "in the past decade, Wangechi Mutu has carved out an extraordinary critical space in which to think about the... media production and contemporary consumption of images of African and black bodies within the global economy of mediated signs".

For her own part, Mutu welcomes multiple interpretations of her work. Speaking from her Brooklyn studio last month, where she was preparing for two major shows – at the Nasher Museum of Art in North Carolina (opening 21 March) and Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art in May – as well as preparing to give birth to her second child, she declares: "I think everyone reads the work depending on where they are coming from. I don't want my work read from one angle. My approach to race and ethnicity and my identity all shift depending on where I am."

Mutu has called her hybrid beings "human conditions", "Chimeras" and "Warrior Women", and they have won her a burgeoning international reputation. She was part of Charles Saatchi's "USA Today" exhibition at the Royal Academy in 2006; her work has been shown at London's Tate and MoMA, New York, and there have been solo shows at San Francisco's Museum of Modern Art (2005); Vienna's Kunsthalle Wien (2008); the Museum of Contemporary Art in San Diego (2009) and the Art Gallery of Ontario (2010). She received the Deutsche Bank Artist of the Year award in 2010, along with a solo show at Deutsche Guggenheim Berlin, where the judges praised the way in which her work "questions our conceptions of beauty, our image of the



Biography

Wangechi Mutu

Born Nairobi, Kenya, 1972
Lives and works Brooklyn, New York
Represented by Victoria Miro, London; Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York; Susanne Vietmetter, Los Angeles
Projects Education: 2000 Yale University School of Art, MFA 1996 Cooper Union, BFA 1991 United College of the Atlantic, Wales, US
Selected solo shows 2013 Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, North Carolina; touring to Brooklyn Museum of Art, New York; Sydney Museum of Contemporary Art, touring to Orange County Museum of Art 2012 Staatliche Kunsthalle Baden-Baden 2010 Deutsche Guggenheim, Berlin; Art Gallery of Ontario 2009 Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego; 2008 Kunsthalle Wien, Vienna 2006 Salon 94, New York
2005 San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Miami Art Museum
2004 ArtPlace, San Antonio
Selected group shows 2012 Paris, Triennale; Kochi Muziris Biennale; Mumbai 2010 Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles 2009 10th Biennale d'Art Contemporain de Lyon 2008 Studio Museum in Harlem, New Museum, New York 2007 PMH Gallery, Beijing; 2006 SITE Santa Fe Biennial; 2004 Tate Modern

other, of what is foreign". Her personal experience is a crucial point of departure in the work. "I've always enjoyed but also slightly suffered from the understanding that what's going on inside of you and what people are seeing from the outside is not necessarily the same thing," she says. "Perception is so subjective, so mutable and so powerful because it can be sculpted and moved around, and that is the essence of how I work. I juxtapose and slice up reality and fiction quite easily because I'm aware that it is up for grabs and a powerful tool to explain how we take control of our reality and use it to send messages. It's something I've always had."

Mutu's reality has certainly been one of striking

contrasts, and from early on has helped to shape an outsider's view. Born in Nairobi to a middle-class family, where her mother was a midwife and her father ran a paper-importing business, Mutu went to a Catholic school for girls, which she acknowledges as "fabulous as a place to inspire myself in terms of pictures and stories", but where she also acquired a sceptical view of Catholicism. "There were all these white nuns and African girls, with the Madonna also this virginal young girl and I thought, what does this have to do with us and me?" At 17, this self-described "city girl" left Nairobi for the United World College of the Atlantic (now UWC Atlantic College), based in a 12th-century castle in south Wales, in the UK, where Mutu took the

International Baccalaureate. The setting provided "the escape I needed. I was up for an adventure", she remembers. "It was very idyllic and it was where my understanding and ability to say that I was an artist were born."

After a brief return in the early 1990s to a Nairobi much changed by a failed coup and increasing political and economic instability, Mutu left for New York and has lived there ever since. However, she considers that her sense of dislocation is more than a matter of geography, and in fact stems from her earliest years. "I came out to New York at the age of 20, but I think even as a young girl in Kenya there was this sense of disjuncture and not feeling at ease with my place. As a young creative female, there just weren't enough inspirational role models around me."

After a brief spell at Parsons, she graduated from the Cooper Union with a BFA in 1996. Two years later, she won a full scholarship to Yale's Graduate School of Art and Architecture, where her teachers included William Kentridge, Paul McCarthy and Jeff Wall and where, as she puts it, "my work bounced all over the place".

Multiple realities, shifting identities

Although she has said that Yale "expanded my vision", it is significant that when she first arrived in the US, Mutu also chose to study anthropology as well as fine art, as a means of grappling with her sense of shifting status. "I landed in the US and I became the minority. Instead of being middle-class, I entered the working class, because I was an artist and very poor," she remembers. "There was this inability to figure me out because I was not the black person they were supposedly acquainted with... And there was a kind of void that made me want to go, how do people study people? How do you sit down and start assessing another person's culture and come up with assumptions and realities about what the hell they are?"

A more interrogative approach to the subject also appealed. "Anthropology was no longer being taught in the traditional way. We had this very particular discussion about deconstructing and re-assessing the canon... about how, when you are looking at people, you cannot be objective, your interest is tainted with myriad things. You come with all your own baggage, your emotional desires, your exoticism. I thought this was fascinating and it has always stuck with me."

This enduring awareness of multiple realities and her "desperate desire to figure things out" feeds directly into the work. Mutu has described her collages, with their myriad conflicting juxtapositions, as "a formal solution for how I view the world". Although she can now afford technical assistance for the intensive work each piece requires, it remains crucial that she makes the work herself. "I've thought about it a lot: I would make more and bigger work if I had people

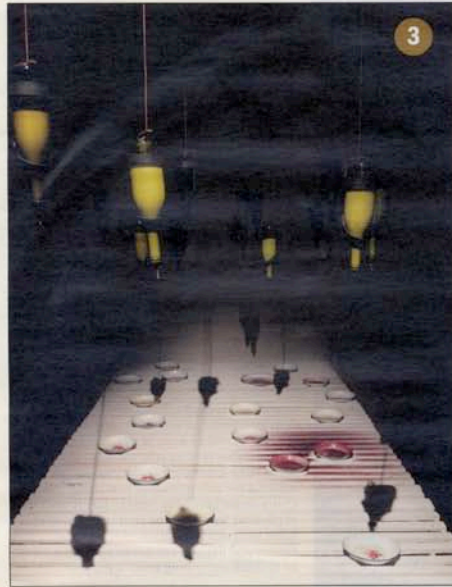


Mutable
MONTAGE

One of the most dramatic artists to emerge from Africa in the past decade, Wangechi Mutu discusses the arts of immersion, identity, politics and collage. By Louisa Buck

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Louisa Buck, "Mutable Montage," *The Art Newspaper*, March 2013, p. 62-63.



Collage, films and installations make up the bulk of Mutu's work: *Pretty Double-Headed*, 2010 (1), *Funkalicious Fruit Field*, 2007 (2), *Exhuming Gluttony: A Lover's Requiem* installation with David Adjaye (2006/2011), "Cutting" (film still), 2004

working for me, but I rely on this process." Mutu describes the actual making of her work as "an intimate day-to-day meditation – sometimes it's not a calm meditation, but it is super-vital for me. As I make the work, I learn who I am, and I learn why things distress me, why they depress me, why they make me happy and why they turn me on. The exaggerated forms and the kinds of women and the nature of the worlds that they inhabit, they are crafted by a variety of things that I'm going through at a particular moment, and no one else can feel and internalise that process for me. I can't hand over my language and development as a human being to someone else".

From collage to film

Alongside the collaged figures that have become her trademark, Mutu also makes films in which she is always the sole participant, appearing as an everywoman, often performing repeated, ritualistic actions. In "Cleaning Earth" (2006) she futilely scrubs a dirt floor; in "Cutting" (2004) she hacks at a log with a machete, while in "Suspended Playtime" (2012) she dabbles elaborately bangled hands in chocolate cake and tramples it underfoot in high-heeled shoes. "I'm addicted to the process," she says. "I may only come up with an idea every one or two years, but it's a crucial part of my practice."

Mutu's films are often shown as part of her visceral, room-sized installations – an essential part of her work which "shares the same DNA" as her collages. For *My Dirty Little Heaven* (2010), she used grey blankets and masking tape to transform the Deutsche Guggenheim into a suggestive environment that recalled both a protective cocoon and a squatter camp; while *Exhuming Gluttony: A Lover's Requiem* (2006/11), made in collaboration with the British architect David

Adjaye, and shown at Salon 94 in New York and the Staatliche Kunsthalle in Baden-Baden, presented a monstrous parody of a banquet, where red fluid dripped from wine bottles dangling over a huge wooden table, the room lined with animal pelts and pocked with bullet holes. "I was thinking about the world as a ballooning place. I wanted to represent this perverse feast that we were engaged in, this overeating," Mutu declares. "There are a lot of figures of speech in African languages that correlate corruption and greed with feeding and eating and excess, and I'm still obsessed with this idea. When a few are overeating there are many who are starving."

While scenes of conflict and disaster zones are never far from the surface in Mutu's work, her most direct engagement with a specific situation was *Ms Sarah's House*, a project she began in 2008 as part of the Prospect.1 Biennial in New Orleans. Here she met Sarah Lastie, whose home in the historic Holy Cross Community in the hard-hit Lower Ninth Ward had been destroyed by Hurricane Katrina. She had then been swindled out of her settlement money by a construction company.

Mutu erected a poetic memorial in the form of a ghost structure of timber and lights where

"As I make the work, I learn who I am, I learn why things distress me, why they depress me, why they make me happy"

the house once stood and then sold limited-edition prints entitled *Homeward Bound*, which eventually generated enough funds to reconstruct the house using a local builder and voluntary help. "The project was such a task and so important and I'm so proud of the fact that we were able to complete the house – it's beautiful, it's a real home and it's a landmark," says Mutu, while adding: "I learned so much about being an artist in the region of activism and dynamic political work, but I also learned a lot about being an outsider trying to do things with a naiveté and a clear conscience."

Now, on the eve of her exhibition in North Carolina (21 March-21 July), and with a show in Sydney on the horizon (23 May-11 August) – not to mention the imminent arrival of a second child – Mutu is embarking on yet another avenue of exploration, an animated piece with the working title of "Enough of Eating Everything", which is destined for the Duke University show. Mutu describes this new departure as being "like one of the collages come to life... It's a new space for me. I'm looking at everything anew. I like to keep on the move and for the work to excite me every time I go back to it."

• On 1 February, Wangechi Mutu gave birth to her second daughter, Wathira, a sister for Neema.

