

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Clarke, Bill, "Wangechi Mutu," *Modern Painters*, April 23, 2010

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Wangechi Mutu

By **Bill Clarke**

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"This You Call Civilization?" Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto Through May 23, 2010

The Kenyan-born, New York-based artist [Wangechi Mutu](#) is well known for her intricate collages examining race, gender, geopolitics, and colonialism. "This You Call Civilization?," Mutu's first major retrospective in a North American museum, demonstrates how her work has grown in material and conceptual complexity over the past decade.

The exhibition focuses on pieces produced between 2004 and 2008, which mix ethnographic imagery with pictures of women's body parts clipped from fashion and porn magazines. The 32 postcard-sized collages that compose "The Ark Collection," 2006, explore the stereotyping and eroticizing of African women. An untitled series of 12 beautifully repellent collages from 2004–05 combines 19th-century illustrations of cancers of the female sex organs with black glitter and glossy magazine images to form "faces" that address the effects of imposing both Western standards of beauty on African women and "superior" Western knowledge on other cultures. For an installation created for the show, Mutu had holes gouged in the drywall and stained red to resemble weeping sores, then hung this "wounded wall" with "Sleeping Heads," 2006, a series indicting perpetrators of horrors who can still rest at night, as well as people who close their eyes to those horrors.

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Wall text next to the video *Cutting*, 2004, explains that it was filmed near the U.S.-Mexican border, but it could be set anywhere where border tensions exist. In it Mutu laboriously hacks away at a wooden log with a heavy blade, giving up after five minutes, apparently exhausted. As in much of her work, however, the subject is not futility but perseverance.

Current Show

Bonn: Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland,
Jul. 15–Nov.1, kah-bonn.de



Courtesy the artist and Sikkema Jenkins & Co

Wangechi Mutu's "Sleeping Heads 4
of 8," 2006