

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Watson, Simon. "Wangechi Mutu: Mass in Time of War," Whitewall, Spring 2008

whitewall

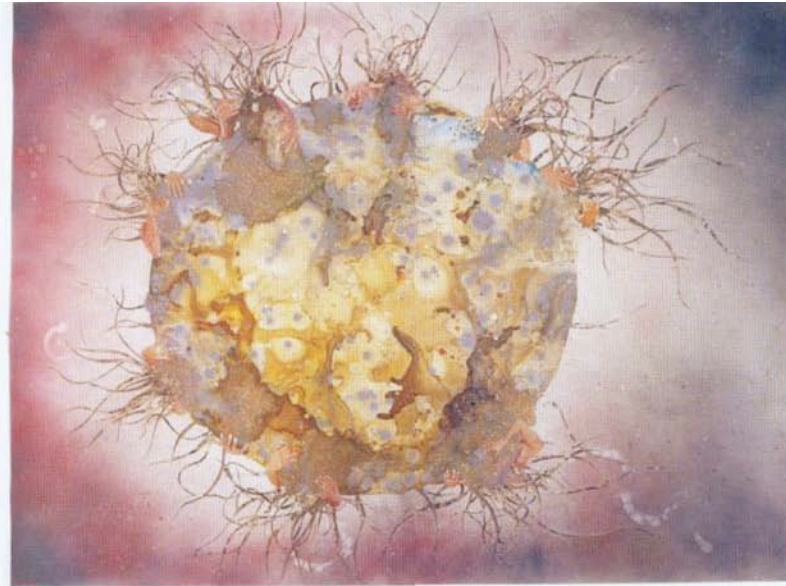


THE UNSEEN WORLD OF CONTEMPORARY ART

SPRING 2008

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women. And from the presence of wounds and hybridized, machinelike limbs, they appear to be survivors of battle. These painted and collaged works function as potent social critique while simultaneously exploring more poetic strains of mythology and allegory, as well as sensuous color and form.

Speaking about her collages, Mutu has said, "Females carry the marks, language, and nuances of their culture more than the male. Anything that is desired or despised is always placed on the female body." From the get-go with her "Pin Up Series" in 2001, she says, "I wanted you to walk up to them assuming you were going to see these pretty, interestingly posed females. It takes some time to see that every single one of them has some trauma or alteration that is severe and aggressive." Despite their injuries, Mutu's women are powerful survivors, heroic and connected with something—some power—that gives them immense strength. It is equal parts seduction and repulsion, and undeniably awe-inspiring.

NEW ARTIST

WANGECHI MUTU: MASS IN TIME OF WAR

BY SIMON WATSON

Wangechi Mutu was born and raised in Kenya and came to the United States in the mid-1990s. Her work has been exhibited internationally at galleries and museums that have included the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Miami Art Museum, Tate Modern in London, the Studio Museum in Harlem in New York, Kunsthall Düsseldorf in Germany, and the Centre Pompidou in Paris. She also participated in the 2004 Gwangju Biennale in South Korea. Her work has been featured in several major exhibitions including "Greater New York" at the P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center and "The Museum of Modern Art in New York," "Black President" at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York and the Barbican in London, and "USA Today" at The Royal Academy in London.

Wangechi Mutu is known for elaborate, hallucinatory, and unsettling collages as well as dark, brooding installations. For this native of Kenya who has closely followed the horrors of civil war on the African continent, her work bridges a gap between our temporal fetishes and the raw force of history's totems, goddesses, and shamans. Her most recent installation, *Perhaps the Moon Will Save Us* (2008), created for the New Museum show "Unmonumental" (on view through late March), is apocalyptic in appearance: a massive mud-coated wall landscape with a fur-covered moon floating in its center, surrounded by hundreds of moths that closer inspection reveals to be collaged pigs with furry wings. It is a dark vision: a planet devoid of people but filled with flayed animals and their remains. And yet even here there are grace notes—tactile collaging in the central furry orb, and even a perverse humor in the collaged, flying little pigs.

Mutu's collages of hybrid females combine ink drawing to create flamboyantly distorted figures that reflect contemporary society's obsession with youth. These bejeweled and bizarre, slick and mutable, Afro-futuristic figures of women seemingly mingle *Vogue* and the work of Romare Bearden. Mutu has assembled these elegantly grotesque images with obsessive precision, using myriad clippings from sources as diverse as fashion and motorcycle magazines, copies of *National Geographic*, and African-art coffee table books. She mixes these fragments on sheets of Mylar, adding hand-rendered ink drawing that ranges from delicately rendered lines and shadows to thick, oozing passages that sometimes seem blood-clotted.

Her work is rooted in the history of Kenyan traditional storytelling and postcolonial horror. She is particularly interested in myths about gender and ethnicity that have long circulated in Africa and the West. Subtly and painfully twisted images reference traditionally clad African



Wangechi Mutu

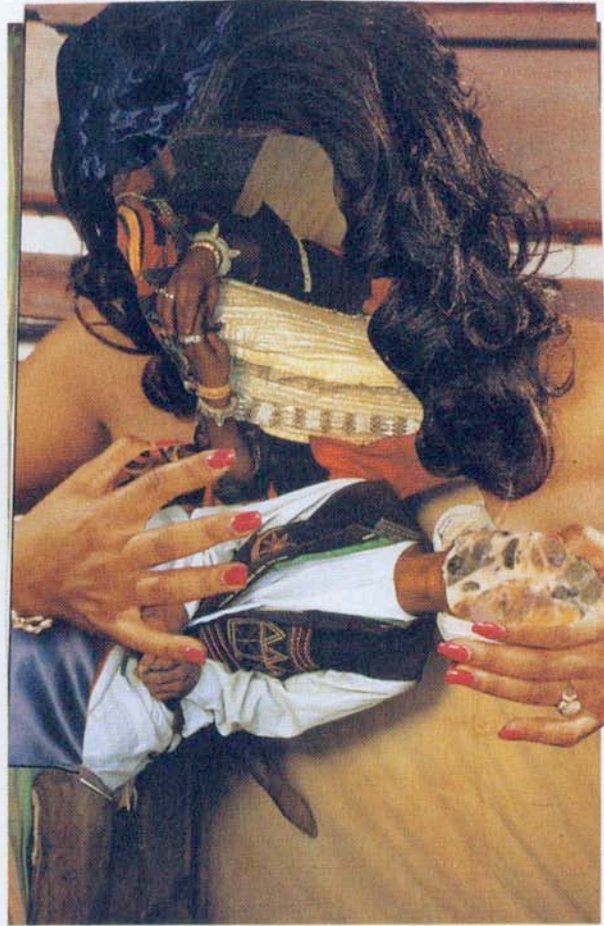
...
Perhaps the Moon Will Save Us (installation view and details)
2008
Mixed media, blankets, plastic pearls, aluminum foil, animal pelts, packing tape, ink, and other materials
Dimensions variable, site-specific installation
Courtesy of the artist and Skansen Studios & Co., New York

Wangechi Mutu

...
Turmoil: My history, our unfettered love
2005
Ink, acrylic, glitter, contact paper, and collage on Mylar
51 1/2" x 80 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Skansen Studios & Co., New York

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Wangechi Mutu
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The Ark Collection
2006
Mixed-media collage
on postcards
Courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins &
Co., New York

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Wangechi Mutu
...

Untitled
2005
Mixed media on Mylar
22" x 22" inches
Courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins &
Co., New York

>
Wangechi Mutu
...

Untitled (Pin Up Series)
2001
Collage and watercolor
on paper
Courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins &
Co., New York

