

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Eve MacSweeney, "Art Sentinel," *W Magazine*, September 2019

# W

## ART SENTINEL *With new sculptures melding tradition and futurism, Wangechi Mutu brings a changing of the guard to the Metropolitan Museum of Art.*

BY EVE MACSWEENEY PHOTOGRAPHS BY LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER STYLED BY FELICIA GARCIA-RIVERA

It could be a high-concept movie: The aliens are coming, and they'll be landing on that bastion of Western civilization, New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art—on September 9, to be precise. Four six-and-a-half-to-seven-foot-tall bronze female figures—part African queens, part cyborgs—will take up position in the building's exterior niches facing Fifth Avenue that have stood empty for more than 100 years. The sculptures are the work of the Kenyan-born artist Wangechi Mutu, and this homecoming, if you can call it that, carries all manner of poignant historical, political, and redemptive narratives along with it. An institution founded on the appropriation of antiquities and a Eurocentric view of culture is being turned on its head.

"It's a way of bringing in contemporary art and engaging with our collection that is perhaps more bold and more playful than before," says Max Hollein, the Met's vivacious Austrian director, who took up the post last year. "Any sculpture on the facade of a building of this kind has a custodial nature, and I think these will be very different custodians than you would expect." The fact that the museum's facade has remained blank in this way for so long was simply a question of budget. Back in the day, "they ran out of money," he says, pointing out that original plans from 1895 include renderings of generic panels and statues representing the Four Arts and their most storied practitioners, like Michelangelo and Dürer. But until now, there have never been sculptures filling those niches. Mutu was the ideal choice, says Kelly Baum, the Met curator who proposed the artist for the project, because "her expansive vision takes into account multiple strands of the history of art as it emerged out of Africa and Europe." Plus, she adds, there's the little matter of female power in the context of the Met's male-dominated past. "There's some drama there, which I appreciate."

On a rain-lashed spring day a few months before unveiling these works for the Met, Mutu, over chai and grapes, is showing me pictures of the custodians-in-progress in her studio in Bedford-Stuyvesant,

Wangechi Mutu, with a work in progress, at the Modern Art Library in London. — Queens, Mutu wears a Dior Vuiton dress, her own jewelry and shoes.

# GLADSTONE GALLERY



W VOLUME FOUR 2019

99

# GLADSTONE GALLERY



Brooklyn. When the museum approached her, she had been drawing these figures over and over in her sketchbooks, inspired in part by looking at images of caryatids: those patient ladies who make an appearance in numerous classical art forms, holding up the roof of one of the temples of the Acropolis, for example, as well as in African staffs and stools. "I was thinking about how to empower these women," Mutu says. "They're seen as powerful, of course, because they're holding up the king, or they're carrying the staff, but they're forever laboring under the weight of whatever these men have created. So I thought, Well, release them from that."

Mutu's caryatids are kneeling, or seated on their haunches, and are elaborately embellished with mirrored headpieces atop bound, elongated skulls. "In my mind, they are beings that have arrived here and taken on humanoid form because they want to tell us something," she says. Cast in a foundry in Walla Walla, Washington, each figure is holding up a mirror to us, "to send a message of alert to dumb humans, who are destroying the world. But the mirror's actually a remix of very traditional embellishments: a lip plug, or a disk worn on top of the head, like a torch." Right now, Mutu is working on ideas for the patina, to make the figures "more ethereal, fleshy. We're going to paint them with fire and metal."

This mash-up between the traditional and the futuristic is a constant theme in Mutu's work. Following her studies at Parsons, Cooper Union, and Yale's M.F.A. program, Mutu became known for fiercely original paintings that incorporated African female figures, nature, animals, feathers, beads, and watercolors. Her subjects' bodies were forged from collaged images gathered from fashion and pornographic magazines, as well as from "exotic" travel photographs from *National Geographic*, each source offering commentary on the ways in which such bodies are distorted and commodified in Western eyes. In turn, Mutu's figures project a defiant ninja strength back at the viewer, just as the artist herself conveys a fearless independence. For years, she wore her hair in electric blue braids. "Wangechi is not a yes-lady," says her friend Adrienne Edwards, the Whitney Museum of American Art's performance curator, with a laugh, describing their challenging conversations about art over the years. "She likes to push, in her wonderful and indelible way."

Mutu's studio occupies the parlor floor of her house. When I first visited, a decade ago, it was stacked with carefully labeled containers for her cutouts—lips, legs, and so forth. Today, in their place, there are tubs with different varieties of Kenyan tea leaves, coffee, and soil. This is because, three years ago, Mutu made a life-changing pivot. Due to complications with her visa and green card, she was unable to travel outside the United States, even as her reputation was growing and she was receiving more and more invitations to exhibit internationally. (She is now a dual U.S. and Kenyan citizen.) Once freed from the restrictions,



**MUTU'S FIGURES PROJECT A DEFIANT NINJA STRENGTH  
BACK AT THE VIEWER, JUST AS THE ARTIST  
HERSELF CONVEYS A FEARLESS SENSE OF INDEPENDENCE.**



Clockwise from top left: The artist, in her Brooklyn studio, with (from left) her works *Flying Root I*, 2017, *Unrested*, 2019, *Flying Root II*, 2017, *Sentinel II* (detail), 2018, in the 2019 Whitney Biennial; *Quiet Motor Mouth*, 2015. Opposite, from top: A wax mold of *Sisters*, 2019, at the foundry in Queens; *Forbidden Fruit Picker*, 2015. Mutu wears an Acne Studios top, Rick Owens shorts, Prada shoes, her own jewelry.

# GLADSTONE GALLERY



she decided, with her husband, Mario Lazzaroni, and their two young daughters, to have an adventure. Where would it be?

As luck would have it, their new home came, as have several opportunities in her life, via her mentor, the renowned Kenya-based paleontologist Richard Leakey. He knew of a large property in Nairobi that was for sale. Mutu now divides her time between her house there, conveniently located close to the airport and bordering a national park, and Brooklyn. Lazzaroni, an Italian-born former McKinsey & Company consultant, now works as the sub-Saharan manager for Estée Lauder. He takes numerous short trips for work, while Mutu makes fewer longer ones.

"I wanted to surprise myself," Mutu says of this new chapter. "I wanted to get rid of some inherited or created baggage and leap to the next level." This bicontinental life works remarkably well, she says, in part thanks to excellent wireless connectivity in Kenya, the result of decades of terrible, corrupt government phone service leading Kenyans, from tribesmen to grandmothers, to become early adopters of cell phones and text banking. When in Kenya, Mutu confers with her Brooklyn studio every morning, and vice versa. "It's sharpened my perspective at both ends," she says.

Her Kenyan workspace, currently a large converted garage with a tent for spray-painting and sculpting, is a place where Mutu can enjoy uninterrupted time to focus on her art, much of which is turning out to be monumental in scale and heavily influenced by the natural world. She is now seeing daily the animals and birds she's long used as part of the mythological and metaphorical language of her portraits. "We have warthogs on the property, and tree hyraxes," she says, "ibises, crested cranes, a black swan. These are actual creatures I'm seeing, and I'm able to put them right into the work." Dirt and plants have become her paint. "There's this red organic soil and this black cotton soil, and tea and coffee, which are the cash crops of Kenya. I'm using them for their amazingly rich colors, not just for ideological reasons." Since the country has so much less paper waste than the U.S., her collage practice has receded, though she still churns shredded newspaper into papier-mâché that she mixes in large, witchy tubs with glues and soil to make

# GLADSTONE GALLERY



her sculptures. "I said, 'What is that gunk?'" recalls Edwards, describing a visit to Nairobi soon after Mutu bought a home there. "It's scary. Wangechi is an alchemist in the studio." Mutu sees it differently. "The texture is great," she says. "It's giving me these new, three-dimensional volumes and earthy, android-y results."

The caryatids are not the only Mutu figures stalking New York these days. A pair of her "Sentinels," large sculptural figures born of this earthy, android-y mix, are currently winding up their sojourn in the Whitney Biennial, which runs through September 22. They're imposingly grand mutant hybrids, with legs that might end in a hoof or a high-heeled shoe, and heads in a tree stump or a fringed adornment like a tribal crown. "There's a softness to them," Mutu observes, "even though they're dry and hard, and have a real relationship to the land." It's work that would not have happened without her return to Africa.

Born in 1972, the daughter of a businessman turned academic and a nurse, Mutu grew up in the Nairobi suburbs with her sister and two brothers. As a child, she caught the attention of Leakey, the father of a school friend, who became an avuncular figure. "When she was a small girl in kindergarten, she was certainly one of the more remarkable kids who used to come to the house to play," he recalls. "She was always a leader. She knew what she thought." He encouraged her, amid some resistance from her family, to join his daughters in finishing her high school education at UWC Atlantic College, a progressive international school for gifted children in, of all places, Wales. "She did brilliantly well," he says, "and all those things—Parsons, Yale—happened as a result."

Mutu's experience as an African in America pushed her deeper into the investigation of her history, which plays into her work, whether it's painting, sculpture, film, performance, or installation. "As an immigrant, it behooved me to think about what this identity was that wasn't easy to describe," she says. "Where are you from? 'How were you raised?' 'Why do you speak that way?' Responding to very simple questions, I realized that I would have to talk about the colonization of my country, and how it was before that, if you really want to understand where I come from."

Mutu's success at building a reputation as an artist, first with Sikkema Jenkins & Co., in New York, and later with Gladstone Gallery, helped point the way for others. For the writer, photographer, and art historian Teju Cole, her freedom of attitude was instructive. "There was always a sophistication in her work," he says. "It was disrespectful of borders and boundaries, and looking for common cause and connection." In 2014, Mutu collaborated on fabric designs for clothing made by Miuccia Prada, Carolina Herrera, Stella McCartney, and others to support the philanthropic initiative Born Free, dedicated to preventing the transmission of HIV from pregnant mothers to their fetuses. Also that year, she launched the initiative AfricaOut! to protest the threatened criminalization of homosexuality by several African countries. Her approach was to present sexual diversity as a cause for celebration, rather than focus on African "problems."

For the young painting star Njideka Akunyili Crosby, who came to the U.S. from Nigeria, Mutu made an art career seem possible. One day, in New York, she ran into Mutu. Smitten, like a true fan, she was "starstruck and babbling," but Mutu generously agreed to a studio visit and offered guidance and advice. The two became firm friends. "Her work resonated with me, as a contemporary artist of African descent," Akunyili Crosby says. "It opened up art as something where I could be included and represented."

Now in her 40s and a leading figure in the art world, Mutu can look back on the ambitious turns and self-imposed challenges of her career and see the thread that unites them. "I still work with nature and the female form," she says, "and I'm still distorting it. I'm changing and shape-shifting these figures." As her majestic, unearthly bronze guardians prepare to take up their posts at the Met, where they'll remain through mid-January, Mutu acknowledges her kinship with the women she creates. "It's hard for me to articulate, because this is a place I usually go to only in my head when I'm on my own, but I think they're me," she says. "What the work describes is how it feels to be a woman on the inside. Pulling out all of that psychological matter and turning it into something physical is part of my task, my job, my triumph." It's a big, complex idea, made gloriously simple. ♦

Above: An installation view of *Water Woman*, 2017, at Gladstone Gallery, New York, in 2017. Opposite: The artist, in her Brooklyn studio, with *Flower/Head*, 2015, and works in progress. Mutu wears an Acne Studios top, Rick Owens shorts, her own jewelry.

MADE BY ANDREW COOPER FOR LUMA. MENDES BY SEE MANAGEMENT. EDWARDS BY COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND THE WASHINGTON MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART, NEW YORK. COLE BY COURTESY OF THE ARTIST. CROSBY BY COURTESY OF THE ARTIST. AKUNYILI BY COURTESY OF THE ARTIST. MUTU BY COURTESY OF THE ARTIST. PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANDREW COOPER FOR LUMA. MENDES BY SEE MANAGEMENT. EDWARDS BY COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND THE WASHINGTON MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART, NEW YORK. COLE BY COURTESY OF THE ARTIST. CROSBY BY COURTESY OF THE ARTIST. AKUNYILI BY COURTESY OF THE ARTIST. MUTU BY COURTESY OF THE ARTIST. PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANDREW COOPER FOR LUMA.

GLADSTONE GALLERY

