

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Annalisa Quinn, "Artist Wangechi Mutu: 'I wanted them to sit upright and unafraid,'" *Financial Times*, December 4, 2019



Artist Wangechi Mutu: 'I wanted them to sit upright and unafraid'

As her new works stand watch over the Met, the Kenyan-American sculptor talks about reshaping art history



© Miranda Barnes

In niches in front of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, four otherworldly yet familiar figures sit. Regal women, 7ft tall with elongated

GLADSTONE GALLERY

heads and tapering fingers, they seem like cosmic visitors here to pass judgment on a lesser species.

The work, “The New Ones, will free Us”, fills spaces on the facade of the Met that have sat empty since the building was completed in 1902. “I wanted them to sit upright and still and unencumbered. And unafraid,” says Wangechi Mutu, the Kenyan-American sculptor who made them.

Mutu calls the bronze figures “liberated caryatids”, after the sculptures of women that sometimes act as pillars in architecture. Perhaps the most famous caryatids are those that hold up the Erechtheion on the Acropolis in Athens with their ornate crowns. It was important to Mutu that her women hold up nothing but themselves.

“It’s clear that we have valued the role of women over the centuries, all over the world in many different places and cultures,” she says. “But it’s also clear that we have valued the work and the labour, and have completely taken it for granted that women are naturally supposed to be bearing the weight and bearing the load and holding up the culture that we live in. And that is also quite universal, you know, the working woman. The central, female icon as a bearer of all of this responsibility.”

Mutu, 47, was born in Kenya, then educated at a small international school in Wales before she moved to the US to attend Cooper Union and Yale. She now divides her time between Nairobi and New York.

GLADSTONE GALLERY



Mutu's artwork 'The New Ones, will free Us' is the first to fill the spaces on the facade of New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art since the building was completed in 1902
© Eyevine

Her work has long been preoccupied with hybrid female figures, from eerie tree women made out of earth, bone and other natural materials to her collages, which splice magazines and images from pop culture to combine images of female beauty with ones of horror, distortion and violence.

The 1990s, when Mutu was a student in the US, were a rich cultural moment; she recalls seeing shows such as the Whitney's iconic 1995 *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art*, and other "exhibitions that were specifically built around this idea that the art world has the obligation to represent the people who visit the art world, which is everybody".

At that time, Mutu says, "I was living the life of a young woman immigrant who was studying and working and making and surviving — and kind of not

GLADSTONE GALLERY

surviving half the time.” But “being really challenged made me so much stronger. I was able to really figure out what strength I carried within me, because I was hell-bent on making it through.”

Just as she began feeling like she was succeeding, the September 11 attacks happened. “The racist feeling in the air was immediately palpable,” she says. “One of the challenges was living through post-September-11th life and making sure that I didn’t succumb to the fear of what ‘a foreigner’ meant in America — knowing full well that America is a land of foreigners anyway.”



Mutu with work in progress at Modern Art Foundry, Astoria, New York. Her figures draw on diverse influences, from classical Greek sculpture to African body ornamentation © Miranda Barnes

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Mutu's collages became an expression of those fears: something about the way she was working with bodies, "mangling and distorting and cutting up" expressed "the trauma and anxiety that I was carrying and that I knew that other people were carrying," she says.

"The NewOnes, will free Us" is the first annual commission to fill the niches in the Met's facade. Originally set to be taken down in January, the figures, called "The Seated I, II, III, and IV", will now remain in place until June 8. A new commission will go up in autumn 2020.

"Rather than being subservient, here we have stately, seated, imposing figures who assert their authority almost as an act of intervention," said Max Hollein, the Met's new director, at an event that inaugurated the sculptures in September. "They watch over us when we come up the stairs of the Met and they become ambassadors for the Met."

The Met has always presented itself as an "encyclopedic museum," Mutu says. And that story is true in a way: "The images and the paintings they own encapsulate the history of humanity." But she says that the institution has been deeply compromised in another way, through an "erroneous hierarchy" that values some people and cultures over others.

"There's definitely been way more emphasis on western history as the dominant history" and European art as "the art canon", she says. The facade commissions are the museum's attempt to reconcile its story about itself with its reality. "It's about setting things straight and telling the truth about humans," she says. They are "doing some soul-searching and they're doing some actual work".

GLADSTONE GALLERY



Mutu: 'The histories of art that are carried on people's bodies are just as relevant as those that are carried in buildings' © Miranda Barnes

Mutu's figures draw on diverse influences, from classical Greek sculpture to African body ornamentation. Reflective discs cover mouths, foreheads, eyes and the backs of their heads, and coils envelop their bodies like robes. The coils cascading over the caryatids are reminiscent of neck rings worn in southern Africa, while the discs recall jewellery worn by the Mursi women of Ethiopia.

This is intentional. "The histories of art that are carried on people's bodies are just as relevant as those that are carried in buildings," Mutu says. "I think that's part of what I'm also very much trying to emphasise. That there is an

GLADSTONE GALLERY

actual, entire history of art that has traditionally been carried around by human beings. There's wealth and there's language, meanings and symbolism and ritual that has not relied on architecture."

Set above the crowds on Fifth Avenue, mirrors flashing, the caryatids have something detached, even extraterrestrial about them. "I think it humbles us when we really think about how we fit into this larger picture of the universe," Mutu says. "I was interested in using the sunlight and using the celestial as a way to position us as relatively minor in the larger scheme of things. To say that we should be cautious, we should be grateful, we should be joyful about the little tiny position we have earned, and also how threatened that little position is. Because it isn't guaranteed, you know."

Mutu has sometimes referred to the figures as messengers or witnesses. But on the question of what, exactly, their message is, she remains reticent. "I think these works are doing the work they're supposed to do — in the form that they're doing it. Not as pundits or as illustrations, but as art."

**Being really challenged
made me so much
stronger . . . I was hell-bent
on making it through**

And in certain ways, Mutu says, we don't need extraterrestrial guidance. "I get very frustrated," she says, that despite "the amount of things that we have learnt about how to exist in a humane and kind and compassionate way," that knowledge "hasn't really affected how we treat one another."

"From an individual perspective, you can say, 'Well, I'm going to try to be good'. But look at what's going on in the world," she says. "It's insane how

GLADSTONE GALLERY

clear it is that we know better. Some of those things make one doubt and make one go, ‘What’s the point? How do we do this?’” At the same time, “I also think about the fact that I’m making my art on a daily basis. For me, it’s progress, and it’s hope, and it is freeing. It is liberating me and, hopefully, those who are witness to it.”