

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Ciuraru, Carmela, "Cutting Remarks," ArtNews, November 2004

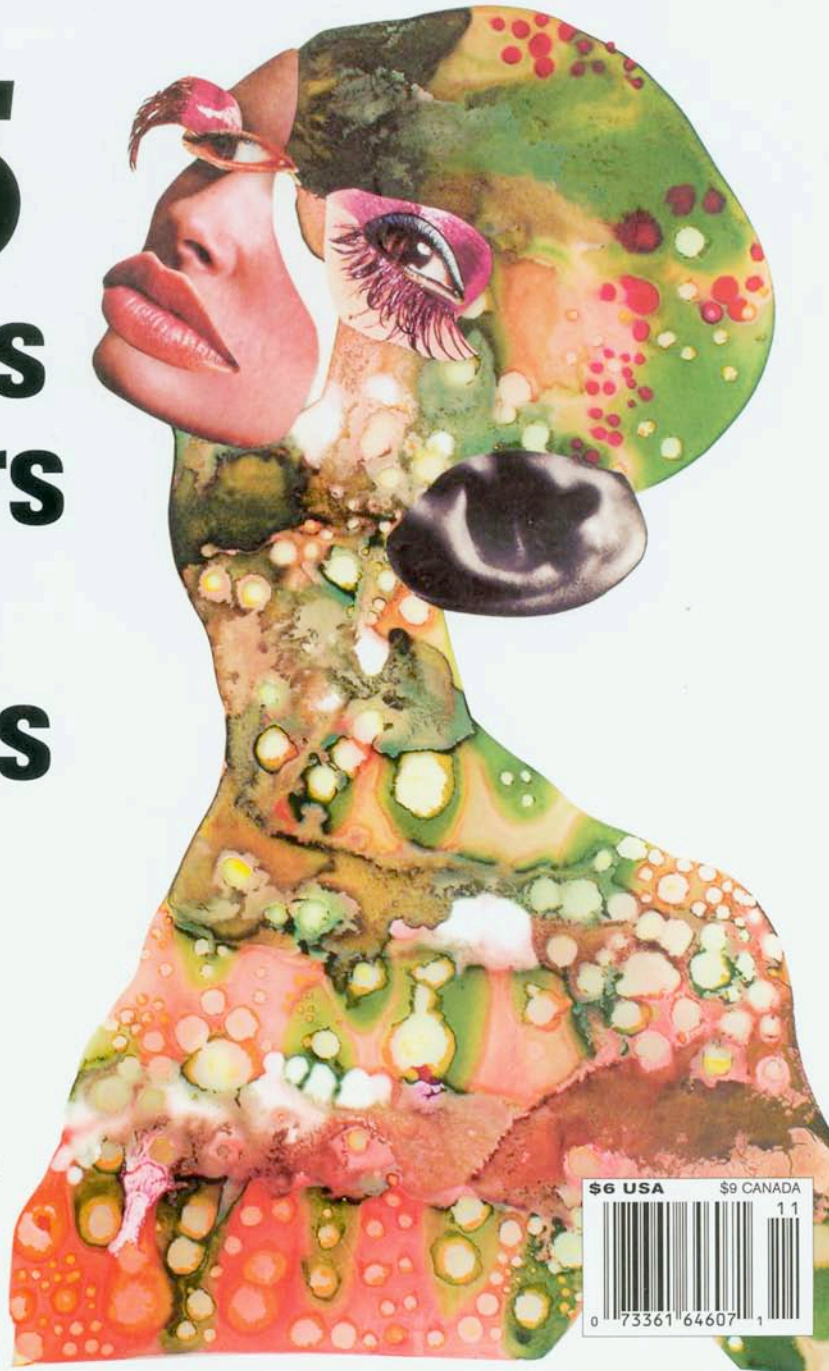
# ARTnews

NOVEMBER 2004

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## TRENDSETTERS

CUTTING  
REMARKS

*The glamorous images in Wangechi Mutu's playful collages don't mask their biting commentaries on notions of race and beauty*

**S**IMPLY CALLING herself an artist proved challenging for Wangechi Mutu, who was raised in Nairobi, Kenya, and came to the United States 12

years ago with her parents. "I always drew; I was always interested in the visual," she says. "But coming from where I was coming from, 'artist' means something very different from what it does here. It never occurred to me that there was this profession where thinkers and writers and makers could produce and discourse with one another in a really serious manner. So it has been a process for me—becoming an artist, realizing that I am one."

Mutu, 31, who lives in Brooklyn, attended the Cooper Union in Manhattan, where she intended at first to study anthropology. "I felt there had to be a field that examined human behavior and culture and desire that was not art," she says. "It occurred to me, the further I

got into it, that art is that exact field." From there Mutu attended the Yale University School of Art, earning her M.F.A. in 2000.

Though she began as a sculptor, Mutu has since progressed to drawings, mixed-media collages, and site-specific installations. Her work examines notions of history, race, and beauty. Mutu's sources for images are wide-ranging: she uses pictures from *National Geographic*, outdated ethnographic books, fashion and pornography magazines, cartoons, and Victorian botanical illustrations. Assemblage figures of African women unexpectedly combine pictures of motorcycle parts and severed limbs with full lips and curled eyelashes. Glamorous, sensual images of the female body mingle with images



ABOVE *A Passing Thought Such Frightening Ape*, 2003.  
OPPOSITE *The Bourgeois Is Banging on My Head*, 2003.



*Mushwomb 6*, 2003-4, combines paint, ink, and collage.

of hunting and feral violence. Mutu's art is as beautiful as it is harrowing and displays a kind of playful, self-conscious wit.

A site-specific drawing she did for the Studio Museum in Harlem, *You're Living on my Skin* (2004), "depicts bodies that are placed in lethargic, wasted, intertwined positions with mechanical-part helmets and missing extremities," she says. "It looks like a living junkyard, surrounded by a swarm of butterflies."

The decorative nature of Mutu's figures is at odds with the smaller, grotesque pieces they are made of. Christine Y. Kim, assistant curator at the Studio Museum, says Mutu "takes the European narrative canon and turns it upside down in a fantastical way, as well as one that relates very much to Kenyan storytelling and her own experience as an immigrant. The montage of things that otherwise would seem very dissimilar is used as the paintbrush and the vocabulary."

Though Mutu admires the work of such artists as Lee Bontecou and Louise Bourgeois, she cites both paleoanthropologist Richard Leakey and an uncle who is a political exile in Canada as influential mentors. "The people who have put a guiding light in front of me are not artists," she says. "They are people interested in change in a political, social, or civic manner." In fact, Mutu refers to another field to describe her work process, explaining that she considers herself not unlike an "amateur archeologist digging up, trying to find the meaning of something based on bits and pieces of where it's from."

Her work, which sells for between \$3,000 and \$14,000, has been featured in solo and group exhibitions at Momena Art in Brooklyn as well as at venues in Los Angeles, Paris, Lisbon, and Cape Town. And shows are lined up into next year at such venues as the Miami Art Museum and Susanne Vielmetter Projects, the Los Angeles gallery that represents her.

—Carmela Ciuraru

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