

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Muhammad, Erica Dalya, "Body Politic," Art Review, July 2004



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The women in Wangechi Mutu's collaged paintings may be culled from fashion magazines, but set in the context of war and displacement they become altogether more confrontational. By Erika Dalya Muhammad. Photography by Jason Schmidt. Art direction by Cary Estes Leitzes

This page: Wangechi Mutu photographed during her residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem, July 2004

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With its visual vocabulary of war, nightmare, hallucination and rank fertility, the recent 'Mushwomb' series is one of many allegorical 'creature features' produced by Wangechi Mutu. A native of Kenya, the 32-year-old artist mines her country's cultural traditions to recontextualise the African female body within a narrative framework that embraces postcolonial horrors, high fashion contrivance, media debris, anthropological exploration and cyborgian adventure. The 'Mushwombs' are characteristic of the artist's visual mythologies, which are all about the fusion of disparate elements. Mutu's collages, which she originally referred to as 'drawing poems', mix facial features from fashion and pornographic magazines with guns, motorbike parts and other mechanical accoutrements. Most of her work depicts women; although a male presence sometimes emerges, Mutu observes that 'cultural aggressions, like physical mutilation and beauty obsession, are historically carried out on the woman's body'. What distinguishes Mutu's process from other artistic bricolage is its exquisite tenderness, coupled with the artist's willingness to experiment with cultural and political ideas without making her work overly earnest or unpleasurable.

Mutu's distinctive compositions surfaced within the late-Nineties resurgence of liberatory African art and revolutionary multimedia depictions of post-colonised women. The most striking assemblages of the artist's oeuvre are her collaged supermodels. This collection of atypical, stylised female bodies are metaphors for the discourse of war, representing crimes of genocide, rape, mutilation and a myriad of hardships. Mutu's women are maimed, but they are also on the move, propelled by animatronic limbs on stilt-like claws. One can imagine these women fleeing a wave of destruction, crouching in fields of scorched grass to conceal themselves. In many of the paintings, they strike weird poses, with their feet precariously perched on stilettos fashioned from automotive parts. These phenomenally erotic women carry war narratives within their bodies, and their insides reveal the vestiges of combat.

Because the figures are essentially nudes, the paintings also allude to the vulgarity currently in vogue in women's fashion. As Mutu explains, 'it is only recently that women have been able to reveal their bodies and, of course, this new-found liberation comes with baggage from the male gaze. Women have gone to an amazing place to be incredibly sexy, but this autonomy is altered by the lens of male society and patriarchal attitudes.' The work is more universally about women than it is about black people; race is conceptually under erasure here. Fuller lips on her models do not necessarily denote an African genealogy; fair, translucent or blemished skin might refer to the loss or distortion of pigmentation in burned or diseased skin as well as to miscegenation.

Forever expanding what she calls her 'Petri dish environments', the artist also fills her paintings with exploding astronomical bodies, fungi and fast-moving invertebrates to create a ravenous developed world devouring human society. The creation of selfhood or identity is achieved through the process of assembly, a method that dispenses with the illusion of wholeness in lieu of a remixed body politic. Her pieces are marked by disorder: Mutu herself admits that she is messy, but this does not mean the work lacks care or precision. Her characters lead a patchwork existence, their compound bodies making sense of a cut-up, globalised, mechanical existence.

Marked by their struggle, Mutu's bodies are battlefields of obscene dynamics; but they are rendered beautiful, chic and tantalising by the

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material the artist uses as her base: Mylar. A thin, strong polyester film, Mylar is ordinarily used in packing, insulation, recording tapes and photography. Unlike paper, which crumples and tears, it resists absorption and is not affected by compound deposits. 'I like the collage effect the material encourages; it is inert and it behaves objectively,' Mutu explains. 'When the ink hits the surface it creates a bubbly, marbly effect. I give up a certain measure of control using the Mylar.' Accordingly, the subject matter takes shape organically. As the ink dries, the translucence of the material gives the images a fantastical appearance, while the magazine and paper appliqué lend the collages a 'noisiness' the artist likes.

Raised in Nairobi in the 1970s and 1980s, Mutu attended high school in the UK and pursued a career as a graphic designer in Kenya before studying for an MFA in sculpture at Yale. She recalls, 'I was a Catholic schoolgirl, and the visual representations that I was exposed to were religious iconography and the work of local artisans who sold their carvings in curio shops.' With Kenya in strife and Mutu unable to return home, she created a hybrid, post-apocalyptic aesthetic that was informed by political upheaval in Rwanda and Sierra Leone. 'Rebels who were trying to express their disdain with the diamond trade were mutilating people of all ages and both sexes,' Mutu explains. 'Their self-loathing led to an anger and aggression that was quite tragic. Refugees were in need of prosthetics. I began thinking: diamonds, decadence, civil war, scarring, reddened limbs – collages were a formal solution for how I viewed the world.'

Mutu's studies of forced displacement and cultural alienation are now manifested in her 'Ladybug' series, works depicting female insects that appear to be listening in on various social systems like a 'bug'. Mutu likens their sensibility to immigrant women quietly working as domestic servants in Western homes, who have a unique vantage point from which to survey the behaviour of the privileged.

Mutu's visual language also addresses the idea of 'unlimited imitation'. Her animal/machine hybrids are in constant camouflage; her supermodels pay homage to our ability to disguise ourselves from one another. 'I was interested in the way immigrants mimic from the outside in,' explains Mutu. 'Immigrants will oftentimes imitate behaviour from their surrounding environment – it is a very chameleon-like existence that is not stable.' Indeed, when one settles into a new country, histories are often forgotten or displaced. Mutu experiments with this cultural amnesia in wall paintings that recount lost and stolen histories. The effect, while visually arresting, is sometimes confrontational, as with the provocatively judgemental text in the wall piece *You Live On My Skin* (2004), made for a current exhibition at the Studio Museum in Harlem. Her creations can be ruthless and distressing – but such is the art of war.

'Figuratively', to 25 Sept, Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, NY 10027 (+1 212 864 4500, www.studtomuseum.org); 'Afrika Remix', to 7 Nov, Museum Kunst Palast, Düsseldorf (+49 (0)211 8992460, www.museum-kunst-palast.de), touring to London, Paris and Tokyo

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