

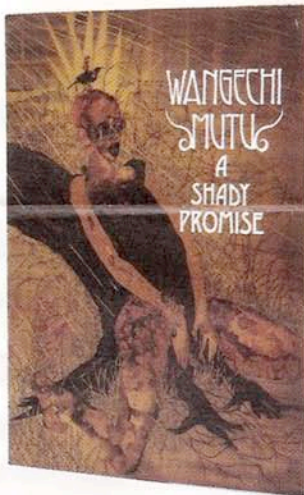
# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Fong, Phyllis, ed. Douglas Singleton, "Wangechi Mutu: A Shady Promise," Modern Painters, May 2008

**WANGECHE MUTU:  
A SHADY PROMISE**  
EDITED BY DOUGLAS SINGLETON  
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Wangechi Mutu, a young Kenyan who has lived in New York since 2000, works in the figurative tradition, culling images from Africana, *Vogue*, autopsies, anthropology, and black pornography to make collages that, while beginning in familiarity, end by defying taxonomic attempts. She gives us amputations, sexual holes, snaking hair, animalistic (or fungal) skins, and a pervasive squatting pose. It's the black female as fearsome, often beautiful, spectacle—a postcolonial kin to Kara Walker, from another dark continent.

As the ethnomusicologist Michael Veal writes in his introduction to *Wangechi Mutu: A Shady Promise*, colonial constructs of race are fiercely stubborn,



and their use is both painful and natural: "The artist has merely to agree to inhabit these discourses to begin her work." This first monograph divides Mutu's output into four roughly chronological chapters: "A Thin Line," "The Pin-Up" (watercolor collages), "Hybrid" (collage taken onto Mylar, which can support heavier materials and paints), and "Body as Space." In this last section, collage spills into rooms and site-specific installations, which become corporeal extensions as walls sustain injuries; red ink and oil are rubbed into gouged openings. These later works gather power through pressure, building claustrophobic spaces of used things: piled cloths and fur pelts, ancient-looking banquet tables, and, especially, recurring multiples of wine bottles, hung upside down from ropes



FROM TOP: Wangechi Mutu, *Riding Death in My Sleep*, 2001. Ink and collage on paper, 60 X 44 in. The Ark Collection, 2006. 9 1/2 x 6 1/2 in. Both images courtesy Damiani Editore, Bologna.

and calibrated to drip dark red slowly onto surfaces and floors. In *The Master's Imaginary Dual Is Over* (2006), an outdoor installation for Ballroom Marfa, the bottles hung amid spindly asymmetric crucifixes and shallow metal fonts for the pooling liquid. Like grass-lush tribalism or iconographic flatness, this bare, open-air Catholicism is yet another environment colonized by Mutu.

The artist speaks of a "cosmetic social contract" binding images for communal consumption to their defacements, which seems a fine way to describe her impulses, whatever the references may be (Klimt-like decoration, Schiele nudes, Surrealism, Chris Ofili). *A Shady Promise* collects a large part of Mutu's visions (there are some omissions, such as her extensive series of collaged tumors), and at its best, suggests that her subjects can have fates that go beyond spectacle. In the essay "Tactical Emissions," Malik Gaines and Alexandro Segade, of the performance group *My Barbarian*, write of a sympathy with Octavia E. Butler's science fiction, in which, post-trauma, a black heroine might await regenerative breeding with a tentacled beast. Mutu's mutants likewise show that, "though the future is scary and bizarre, a black woman can nonetheless take us there without fear. First she must accept hybridity, dehumanizing technology, and otherworldly love."

—PHYLLIS FONG