

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Banai, Nuit, "Body of Evidence," One World 2002



## Body of Evidence •

✎ Text Nuit Banai / Photography Wathira Wa Kamonji

Multimedia maven Wangechi Mutu bends and blend photographs, sculpture and video into a pastiche on cultural boundaries

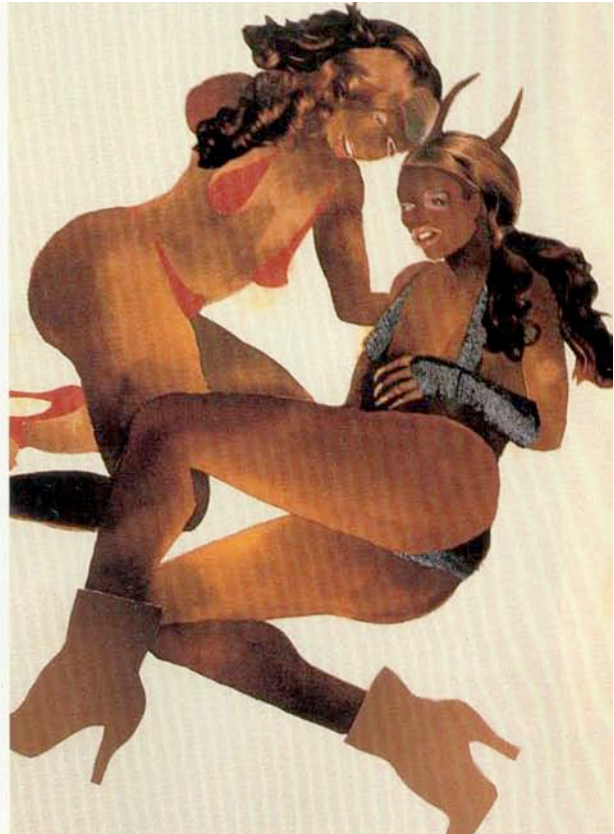
Born and raised in Nairobi, Kenya, educated in the United Kingdom and trained in sculpture at Yale University's acclaimed M.F.A. program, Wangechi Mutu is a storyteller whose vast vocabulary of visual images is as strong as the power of the word. Mixing multiple, often clashing influences in intricate, visually arresting sculptures, photographs, videos and drawings that are, in her words, "an homage to the various worlds I have lived in," Mutu questions the boundaries traditionally maintained between styles, continents and cultures, emphasizing her own role in bridging between contexts while fully belonging to none. Based in Brooklyn since 1996, Mutu has channeled the contradictory experiences that make up her identity into many of her works. For instance, in *Chant*, a video work from 1999, a female figure exposes herself to the scrutiny of a spectator's gaze in a staged, dreamlike environment with no visible exit. Observed without the possibility of engaging with the viewer, persistently judged without real rapport, she moves in a monotonous, maddening motion, which for Mutu replicates the uneasy condition of a female artist in exile. It is a way of life, she suggests, in which crossing often-invisible cultural boundaries can lead to deep emotional scars.

As her most recent work shows, Mutu is not afraid to confront the painful consequences of colliding perspectives. In her *Pin-Up* series, 24 drawings of African women fabricated for an imaginary 12-month calendar, Mutu transposes African folk tale and mass media imagery, combines modernist collage and assemblage techniques with everyday objects like glitter, foil and sequins, using delicate watercolors to represent often violently scarred or maimed female figures. This series, featured in the Studio Museum in Harlem's *Africaine* exhibition organized by assistant curator Christine Y. Kim, tackles profound sociopolitical issues through the representation of the African female body.

While these sirens may at first seem to fulfill the pin-up fantasy, posing nude on trees and tables in gilded high-heels, dazzling jewelry, fake nails and free-flowing manes, the collage elements and physical disfigurement separates them from the flawless mass media images that are Mutu's source. Look closely at their facial features and you'll see perversely large smiling mouths and crooked baby-blue eyes that are clearly not their own. Gaze at their luscious bodies and you'll encounter missing limbs or bloody stumps in place of arms and legs. In one exceptionally striking image, a faceless silhouette with a skimpy

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dress, thigh-high boots and long blue nails holds onto an emaciated, barefoot child whose distended stomach is evocatively juxtaposed with the glittering diamonds in his hair.

For Mutu, this grotesque beauty should not be reduced to a message about victimhood—either of women, Africa or herself. She firmly insists that her aim is not to critique the media for offering mythic fantasies of the female body nor make a statement about women who try to alter themselves through the artificial trappings of fashion. On the contrary, she applauds female resilience, a quality that keeps women buoyant even in the hardest of circumstances. Indeed, the embrace of artificial products is nothing women should be ashamed of, if it offers them a possibility of reinvention and a sense of empowerment.

And speaking of power, Mutu explains that, to her, women are "like flags for their nations and countries," and as a result are the "best meter of what a culture is feeling about itself." Using the female body, she tries to capture the psyche of the wounded African continent, which seems to be "pouring out at the seams but acting like everything is okay." As for her own role, she is happy to remain a storyteller, an inventor who bridges between fantasy and reality through the power of images. ●