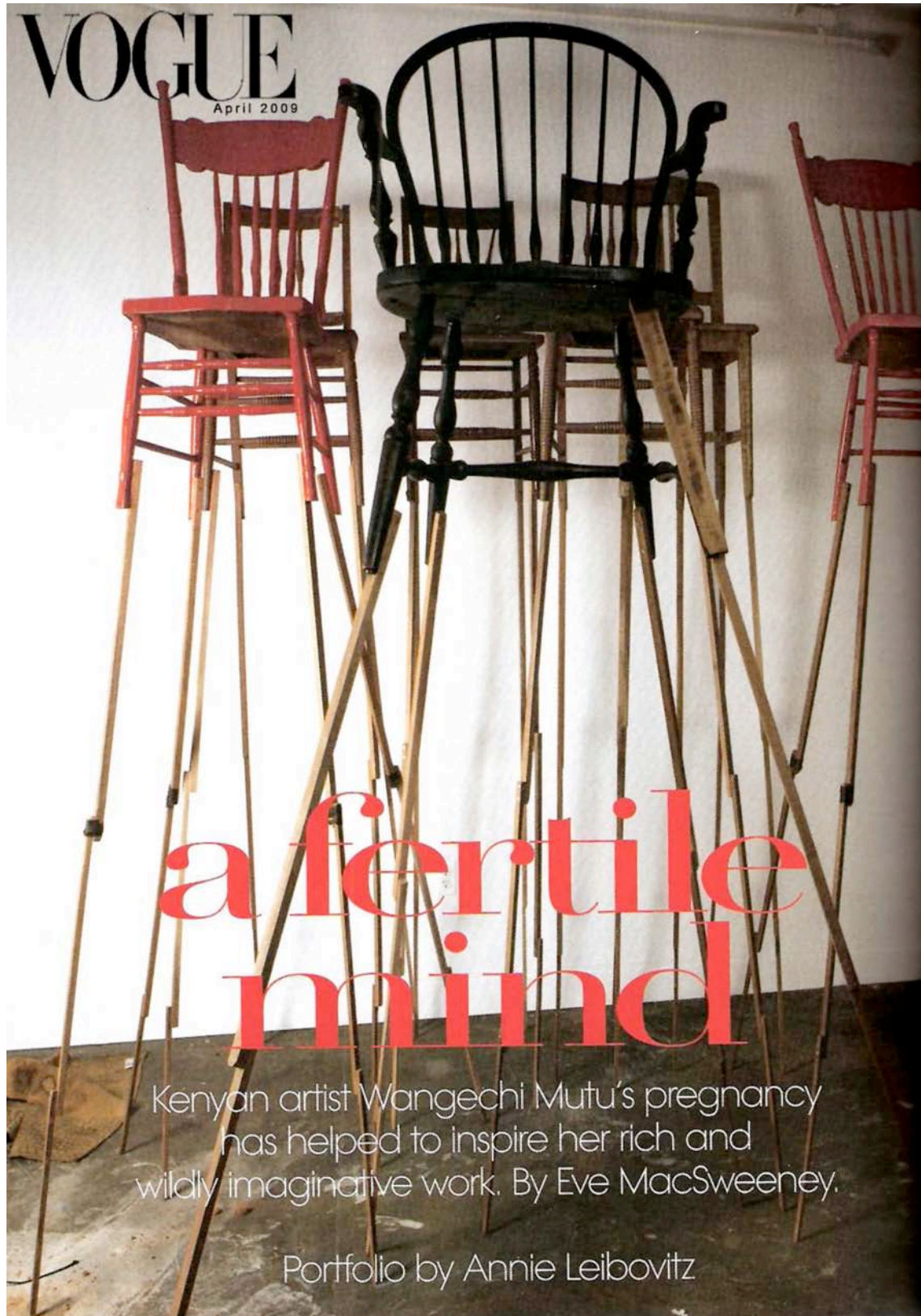


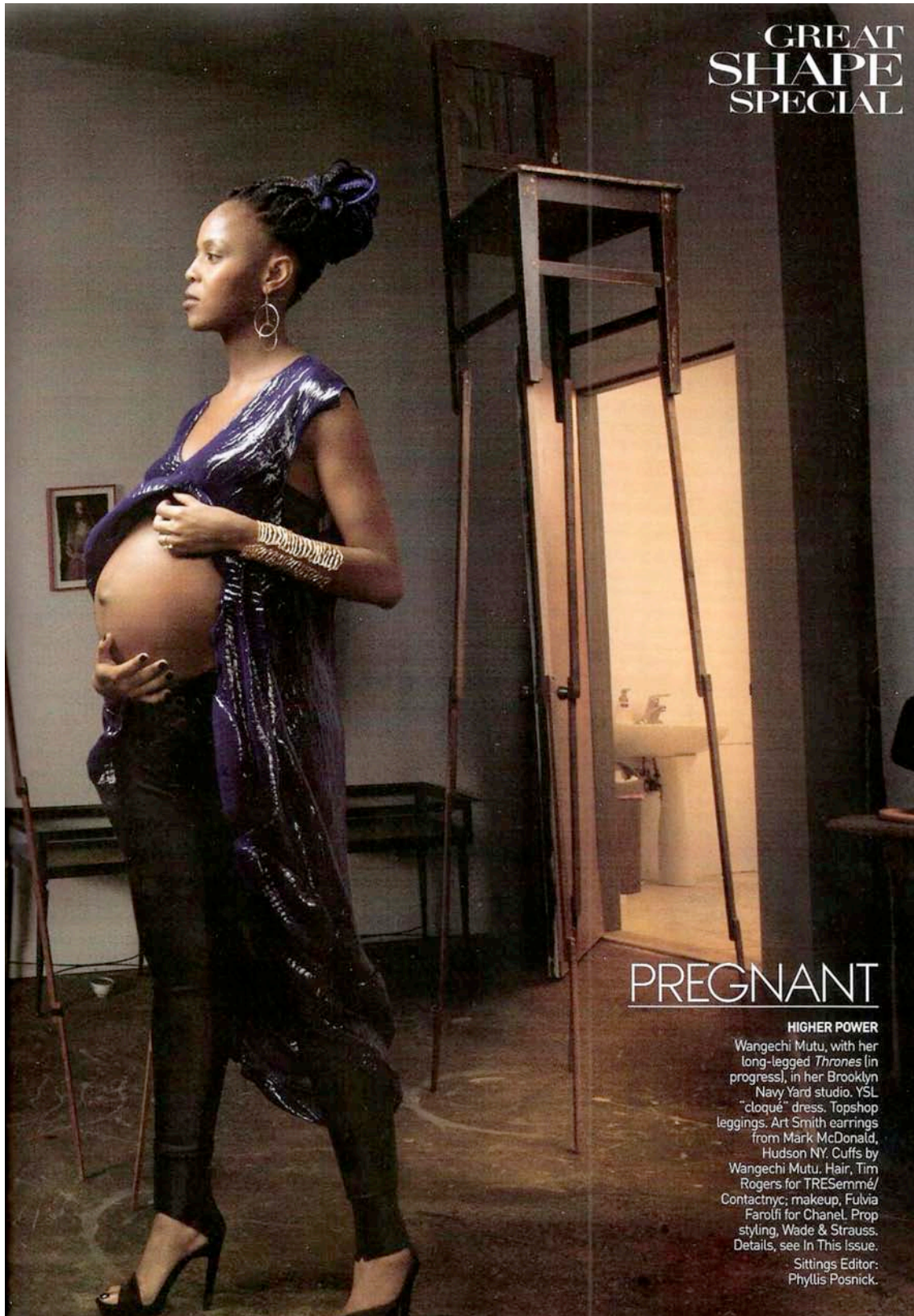
GLADSTONE GALLERY

MacSweeney, Eve, "A Fertile Mind," Vogue, April 2009



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GREAT
SHAPE
SPECIAL

PREGNANT

HIGHER POWER

Wangechi Mutu, with her long-legged *Thrones* (in progress), in her Brooklyn Navy Yard studio. YSL "cloqué" dress. Topshop leggings. Art Smith earrings from Mark McDonald, Hudson NY. Cuffs by Wangechi Mutu. Hair, Tim Rogers for TRESemmé/Contactnyc; makeup, Fulvia Farolfi for Chanel. Prop styling, Wade & Strauss. Details, see In This Issue.

Sittings Editor:
Phyllis Posnick.

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Most pregnant women go out shopping for expandable clothing whose aesthetic they can reconcile with a vestige of their former style. Wangechi Mutu, six weeks from her due date, went out shopping for feathers and a pair of ultrahigh-heeled shoes.

Though her work—richly imagined, fantastical figures and abstractions that draw on African folk tales, cyborg innovation, and quasi-pornographic display—may include feathers, glitter, hair, pearls, and fur, these feathers and heels were for Mutu herself to wear. While working on a project last fall for Prospect.1, the inaugural New Orleans art biennial (where she organized the building of a "ghost house" on the property of a woman who had lost her home in the Lower Ninth Ward to Katrina), she decided she'd like to have a portrait of

The results are currently pinned to the wall of Mutu's studio, which runs from front to back of the first floor of her town house in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn (she also has a sculpture-and-viewing studio in the Brooklyn Navy Yard), alongside a number of unresolved older works. "They're never completed, but they're never thrown out," she says. "I roll them up, and once in a while I'll take them out and rework them." A large central table holds containers of painstakingly prepared collage pieces—hands, lips, legs—awaiting disposition, while stacks of magazines, from *National Geographic* to *Elegant Bride*, stand ready to be pruned. A hank of fake hair, the kind used for extensions, is draped over a doorknob. "Hair is kind of beautiful and gross," Mutu observes. "I've used some of it around, and I like the effect of it."

The Minter portraits show Mutu as a fierce and ornate Amazon, naked apart from turquoise nail extensions, feathered anklets, a jeweled collar, and stacks of bangles, her body covered

in a shimmering gold wash. She is currently subjecting them to her signature mutations, pasting on magazine cutouts of enlarged lips, for example, and grafting motorcycles onto legs and crotches, suggesting the sexualized machismo of the male viewer as well as the transformative power of the woman. (Later she will progress with the collage to the point where the images become almost unrecognizable.)

Though these are her first self-portraits—"and I don't think I could have posed like this if I wasn't pregnant," she says—Mutu's work often has an explosive personal quality. In it she conjures her own African heritage, which she mines for its extraordinary wealth of culture, its modernity and possibilities, as well as her experience of how the West views Africa, often indiscriminately, as a place of violence and disease. Pages from period ethnographic studies of African tribes are pinned to a wall of the studio, evidence of the heavy stereotyping typical of colonial approaches to tribal society. ("Mangbetu Woman . . ." reads one, "deformed head and characteristic hairdo of married women. The profile reveals 'Ethiopic' features.") "That's how a lot of the problems in Rwanda were inflamed," Mutu observes. "Here were two groups of people who already had differences and their own

implied hierarchies, but the Germans and Belgians projected very European stereotypes on them that turned on the fact that the Tutsis must be a lot smarter because they were taller and had narrower noses and the Hutus are shorter and stockier."

Mutu, who is in her mid-30s, was born and raised in Nairobi, Kenya, the daughter of a businessman/academic and a nurse-midwife who for ten years ran her own pharmacy. At eighteen, she entered what she describes as a "life-changing" study program at the Atlantic College in Wales, and later took courses at Parsons and completed a BFA at Cooper Union and a master's at Yale. Her father, of the same background and generation as Barack Obama's, had studied in the United States and later returned for six years while Mutu was a student to teach at his old college in Michigan, so the family (Mutu has a sister and two brothers) moved back and forth. As for Mutu herself, "I had a bit of a rolling-stone restlessness," she says. Settling in New York after Yale helped her focus her energies, and her star began rising in earnest in the mid-2000s as she began to be exhibited in an increasing



GARDEN OF UNEARTHLY DELIGHTS

The artist in her backyard, as seen in *Vogue*, June 2006.

herself while pregnant. She E-mailed Marilyn Minter, an artist she deeply admires, to ask her to take the photograph.

"I wanted to get a pregnancy picture taken that would be outside the pure, maternal kind, which are beautiful but usually have a very similar feel to them," Mutu says. "I wanted something kind of groovy and dirty and rock 'n' roll." She arrived at Minter's studio with some inspirations, including images of Grace Jones—"I was thinking about sort of an Afro-futuristic-mythical being, a mother from the future, from the past." Minter called her manicurist and her makeup artist to plan the collaboration, which rapidly grew in concept from portrait to self-portrait to artworks interpreted separately by each artist that they plan eventually to exhibit together. "It was a labor of love," says Minter, aptly enough, "and we didn't know it was going to turn into something. It was one of those serendipitous encounters . . . the way art should be made."

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SURREAL BEINGS

One of Mutu's six-part series *The Gods Must Be Lazy*, 2008, watercolor and collage on paper.

An exceptionally beautiful woman by any standards, Mutu favors leggings and little dresses in cold weather and what she describes as "Stella McCartney clunky vegan boots." Today she wears a black cro-

cheted dress over a white long-sleeved T-shirt and navy leggings, black nail polish, and blue braids in her black hair, which she is planning to have redone shortly before the birth. "It's funny," she says. "I have a very 'A,' pear-shaped figure, so I haven't had to buy that many pregnancy dresses; I'm just wearing the ones I wore before and filling them in." Having to forgo her beloved heels (except when posing for her self-portrait) and to limit herself to soft, comfortable fabrics and "a lot more black than usual because it helps to even everything out and make you look like you're not a pumpkin," Mutu has been compensating in other ways. "I like fussing with my hair," she says, "and I'm accessorizing differently," with, for example, big, chunky necklaces. For evening, she loves a dramatic, flowing dress, like the violet-and-silver cap-sleeved Yves Saint Laurent caftan she wore to be photographed by *Vogue*.

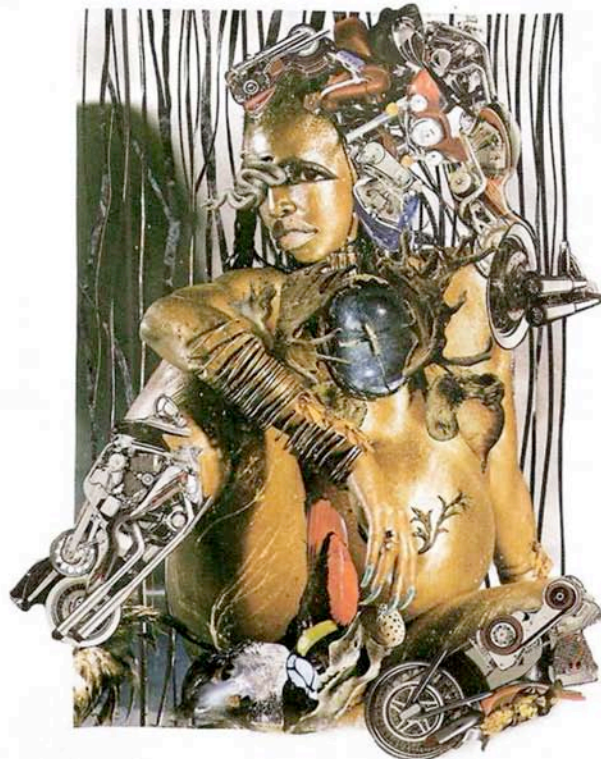
She swims a lot to keep fit in her pregnancy, and, craving ice chunks, feels a little more sympathy than she used to for the women, "all pregnant and primal," who, when she was a child, used to come and sit in her mother's garden in Nairobi and chew the rocks, seeking to satisfy some mysterious mineral deficiency. "My mom is a really good gardener, with fourteen green thumbs," she says. "She had a beautiful lawn with flowers on it, nicely manicured. Once in a while we'd come home from school and there'd be a little band of pregnant women digging up bits of rock from her lawn. They would sit there gnawing away. We just thought it was the most hilarious, bizarre thing." (continued on page 248)

number of solo shows and important group exhibits, such as 2004's "Pin-Up: Contemporary Collage and Drawing" at London's Tate Modern. Besides her project at Prospect. 1, her work, which includes videos and installations as well as drawings, paintings, and sculptures (notably her *Thrones*, recycled wooden chairs with elegantly elongated legs), has recently appeared in the New Museum's group show "Unmonumental," and in a solo exhibit at Vienna's Kunsthalle. Lately she has moved beyond her transformative figurative studies to forge an alternative fauna of gorgeous/grotesque abstracts morphed out of body parts, plants, and animals, and embellished with jewels and lush paint colors, like beautiful and disturbing organisms that somehow make their own perfect sense.

Since Mutu's images often feature the female body, and in particular the African female body, as such a charged and vehement expression of subverted expectation, potential, and creativity, it's hardly surprising that, during her first pregnancy, Mutu might find herself inspired by her fertility and "the notion that the boundaries of your body change." In other ways, too, the impending birth is something to wrestle with creatively in a profession that requires the kind of single-mindedness and focus that is sometimes called selfishness. "What's interesting and more subtle is this notion of how women continue creating and being active as thinkers and artists as they raise families; that's been popping into my mind a lot more," says Mutu, who is used to working through the night if she has an upcoming show and has never put limits on her ambition. "A lot of women that I've admired have had families, but you see the ebb and flow. You see Louise Bourgeois disappear for a certain amount of years—granted, it was way back. That concerns me, but I'm also interested in the challenge of continuing."

CYBORG MAMA

A work in progress from Mutu's self-portrait in collaboration with Marilyn Minter, mixed-media collage on paper.



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A FERTILE MIND

(continued from page 193)

Mutu's fiancé, Mario Lazzaroni, is not from the art world. "That's why it's working!" she says, laughing. He's Neapolitan, a consultant for McKinsey who came to New York five years ago. Like Mutu, however, Lazzaroni has a keen cultural appetite that is not just confined to art exhibits: They love going to the theater and to dance performances, and are busy planning activities to entertain his mother, who recently arrived for an extended visit to help take care of the new family. Mutu's mother is also coming soon, a combination that will create, she observes, an interesting range of menu possibilities.

Mutu may love New York, a place that, she says, "has given me the anonymity and space to investigate what I want to do," but she clearly hasn't shaken off all her rolling-stone tendencies, even with a baby due. Wangechi and Mario will marry in the Hamptons in June, and beyond that, their plans are wide-open. She has always relished the idea of spending more time back home, and he has a flexible attitude to work and location. "Mario told me, 'If you want to leave and pack up tomorrow, I wouldn't mind,'" she says, "and he would love to work in Africa in development." The ideal, Mutu suggests, would be to divide their time between Africa and a base either here or in Europe.

This would fit her experience of life as a hybrid of cultures and identities that comes through in Mutu's work. "I'd rather think of my children as intercultural than black or white and what that means," she says, and despite the large Obama poster that adorns the front of her house, she has some concerns about raising a biracial child in America. "I wasn't raised with the issues that have been enforced and implied for black people here, and I don't necessarily want our kids to go through that. It's one thing to come here at a certain age and learn it through books and through watching people and through having conversations; it's another to learn it by absorbing it all the way from childhood."

Three weeks later, her style completely uncramped by the fact that she is now just four days from her official delivery date, Mutu is out on the town

with Lazzaroni and a sprawling group of friends and relatives for a musical evening at an East Village club organized by Mutu's friend Somi, a superb Ugandan-Rwandan jazz singer who is performing, along with other African and African-American acts. Mutu—with her mother in tow, newly arrived from Kenya and wearing a hat indoors against the January cold—looks startlingly elegant (and noticeably pregnant only in profile) in jeans, a silver cardigan with a long silver necklace, and a black velvet top: "Velvet sucks in light," she jokes. She has evidently been fussing with her hair, which is wrapped on top of her head, the ends of the braids escaping like a garland of loose flowers, or flames licking around her head—much like the majestic and fantastical women in her paintings, in other words. Mario is radiant and relaxed as he talks to their extended crowd. "I can't say I'm ready," he says of the imminent birth of the baby whose sex they are keeping a mystery. "But I'm ready to be ready."

And then . . . D-day comes, and baby Neema (Swahili for "grace") is born. Talking on the phone, Mutu is suitably euphoric. "My mom was there," she says of the birth. "She was calm, calm, calm as the wind. It was wonderful." Neema, meanwhile, came out screaming, and has been pulling all-nighters at two weeks. "I adore her," Mutu says. "She's a dragon."

Clearly her mother's daughter. □