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Seductive hells

Wangechi Mutu, "Riding Death in My Sleep" (2002) (Wangechi Mutu)

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Wangechi Mutu is squatting on the forest floor, gorging on a three-tiered chocolate cake with bare, bejeweled hands. Chunks of dough lodge in long, curly acrylic nails, dark frosting smears across a flowing white dress and Plexiglas platform heels dig firmly into the soft earth.

The Kenyan-born artist's audacious video "Eat Cake" appears as a floor projection in "Wangechi Mutu: A Fantastic Journey," a traveling survey of her work that originated at the Nasher Museum of Art in Durham, North Carolina, and is on view for one more week at the Block Museum of Art in Evanston. Mutu is known as a maker of heinously alluring collages, not videos, but the show includes three, and this one provides a metaphor for her entire body of work:

Wangechi Mutu will have her cake and eat it too.

What this looks like, apart from a voluptuous woman with a thick mane of hair savagely devouring her pastry kill, is art that is as aggressive and repulsive as it is desirable. That's desirable in market terms — her mid-size collages sell at auction for upwards of $100,000 — but also as regards aesthetic and intellectual pleasure.

Mutu's paradoxical combination of critique and consumption is searingly visible in every one of the dozen spectacular large-scale collages on view here. It's evident in a selection of vicious little sketches from the artist's notebooks and in an engulfing mural that sends dirty torrents of blood raining down the gallery walls. But it's entirely absent in a dangling sculpture and a felt wall installation, which misguidedly prop up a cute, tacky backdrop behind two decades of riveting work.

To wit: "One Hundred Lavish Months of Bushwhack," from 2004, offers five-and-a-half feet of deliriously tangled cut paper, whirling molten paint effects, and meticulously applied magazine photos of lips, eyes and hands. What it actually pictures, though, is a glam girl with spiraling animal horns, a bloody motorcycle pileup where her left foot ought to be, raging hippos for hands, and a head wound that no amount of hot pink lipstick can offset. Amid a plain of tall, wavy grasses, a shrunken girl with dark, festering skin crouches down and holds up her mistress.

Mutu's collages may not be easy to look at, but they are fabulous.

Her subjects are nearly always women, give or take a few animal and machine appendages. Some celebrate real females: "Yo Mama" portrays Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, the Nigerian women's rights advocate and mother of musician-activist Fela Kuti, as a force powerful enough to behead a long, phallic serpent with the heel of her stiletto. But mostly Mutu's effigies are the nameless natives of a sparkly, bloodstained wilderness, rife with hierarchies, eroticism and violence.

Imagine Goya's "Disasters of War" reinterpreted by Vogue Africa. Recall the mutilated, destitute bodies etched by the Spanish painter, who witnessed the brutal French occupation of Spain in the early 1800s. Consider the fact that Vogue Africa doesn't actually exist, except as a chiding remark made by supermodel Naomi Campbell to the chairman of Conde Nast International during a fashion world press conference in London last spring.

Mutu, whose name is pronounced Wang-GEY-she Moo-too, was born in 1972 in Nairobi. After going to high school in Wales, she moved to New York in the mid 90s, studied art at the Cooper Union and Yale University, and today lives in Brooklyn with her husband and two daughters.

She cuts and pastes from Harper's Bazaar, National Geographic, i-D, World of Interiors and a variety of ethnographic journals, medical manuals and hard-core skin mags. Everything adds up, sometimes with trenchant wit: tribal busts for a head of hair, an elephant trunk for a curl, pink-petaled flowers for breasts, bodily orifices for wounds. Mostly photographs of eyes are used for eyes, lips for lips and ears for ears, to uncanny effect. Racial types combine in a multi-ethnic mash-up enhanced by skin tones that mix all the standard shades with blue and green speckled ones.

The pornography cutouts, stripped of graphic detail, work most insidiously. Look hard to find them. The woman at the bottom of the human pyramid in "Misguided Little Unforgivable Hierarchies" has a face assembled from grasping, contorted thighs and arms. Other women in other pictures have other parts: shiny bee-stung lips, pleading big eyes, long painted nails at the tips of caressing fingers, and plenty less easily identified bits. This is subliminal eroticism. It's also what happens to people unlucky enough to be caught in the middle of a war, be it in Rwanda, Baghdad or Jerusalem. Their bodies get dismembered by machetes and by bombs.

Where scraps from porn magazines aren't in use, stock poses — like the woman on her knees in "A Shady Promise," legs spread, back arched, hands at her crotch — do the work of seduction. But when it's this brazen, sexism itself is being laid bare.

Harnessing stereotypes in order to challenge them is a risky tactic that promises great rewards. Mutu exploits those associated with women, especially black African and African-American women, again and again and again. Savagery and sexiness rage everywhere. They must: once is not enough to register protest. Then that do-me pose, that naked woman in the savanna, that bling-bling jewelry, those ghetto nails, might just be mistaken for what they look like, rather than grotesque exaggerations that call out the abuse of women, the ludicrousness of tribal culture standing for the whole of African culture, and the wretchedness that armed conflicts wreak on human bodies.

War isn't pretty. Neither is sexism or racism. Mutu's genius has been to make them too gorgeous to turn away from.

She can have her cake. She's earned it. Lucky us, we get to eat it too.

"Wangechi Mutu: A Fantastic Journey" runs through December 7 at the Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University, 40 Arts Circle Drive, 847-491-4000, **blockmuseum.northwestern.edu**.

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