

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Cary Leitzes, "Sight Reading," *Elle*, December 2012, p. 312.



From left: Karen del Aquila, Hiroko Ishikawa, Alexandra Giniger, Mutu, Tuesday Smilie, and Virginia Wagner

## WANGECHI MUTU

The Shape-Shifter

Photographed in her Brooklyn studio with her team of assistants

The immense female figures in Mutu's collages aren't just sexy. They're loaded with double meanings—some quite scary—as well as opulence and beauty. For the 40-year-old, born to a middle-class family in Nairobi, Kenya, a woman's body (particularly an African woman's body) can represent the most powerful and opposing forces in the world around it. So when she says "My work tends to be erotic," it's not a boast. It's an understatement.

Her sculptures—ceramic moths with leather wings and dancing legs; skeletal chairs with tripodlike limbs wrapped in black garbage bags and feather boas—are as forbidding as they are majestic. Her

emblematic figures leap from the Mylar surfaces of paintings, assembled from beads, pearls, synthetic hair, strips of leather, and cutouts from fashion, porn, and *National Geographic* magazines.

After the arrival of her second child, due next month, Mutu will head to the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University for the debut of her first animated film. It stars an omnivorous sea creature brought to tumorous life by the singer Santigold, whom Mutu has given the body of a spaceship and the hair of Medusa. "If something hurtful enters your body," she says, "you create something beautiful to protect yourself from it. That's my philosophy."

Styled by Sarah Schussheim; hair by Martin-Christopher Harper for Bumble and bumble at Kate Ryan Inc.; makeup by Yoshie Kubota for Nars Cosmetics