

GLADSTONE GALLERY

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Wangechi Mutu, "The storm has finally made it out of me, Alhamdulillah," 2012, collage on linoleum, 73 x 114 x 4 inches. (From the artist and Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects)

By David Pagel

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In 1940, Thomas Wolfe published a story about the emotional fallout that results when individuals leave their families and friends for the promise of new lives in far-away places. "You Can't Go Home Again" became a great American novel because it captured the psychological costs of a nation on the go, whose increasingly mobile population, largely made up of immigrants, is even more so today.

At Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects, Wangechi Mutu's fourth solo show in Los Angeles brings the bittersweet resonance of Wolfe's premise up to the minute — and out of this world. More personal and more ferocious than anything Mutu has made, her potent works lay bare the distance between peoples' past and their present, particularly when these parts of our lives do not form harmonious wholes.

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Dissonance and conflict charge every square inch of Mutu's collages, sculptures and installations. Titled "Nitarudi Ninarudi," with a single line crossing out the first word, her four-gallery exhibition uses Kiswahili, the language Mutu grew up with in Kenya, to spell out "I plan to return" and "I will return." The road home, paved with good intentions, is a slippery slope, chock-full of pitfalls, many of which make us face our worst selves.

What we want our pasts to be and what they actually are collide in Mutu's wickedly sophisticated images, whose kick is primal.

The 40-year-old New Yorker, who was born in Kenya, raised in Wales and educated at Yale, stirs fantasy and reality into a diabolic cocktail that is neither as pretty nor as polished as her earlier pictures of phantasmagorical creatures.

Rougher and uglier and far less fussed over, Mutu's mind-bending mutants make a mess of global perceptions of women and Africans, not to mention machines and beasts, aliens and natives, selves and others. If Frankenstein and the monster from "Alien" had a lovechild, it might well resemble any of the fantastic beings in Mutu's cut-and-paste pieces. Thick with fabric, bones and beads, as well as paint, charcoal and glitter, many pack the punch of three-dimensional things. Think Hieronymus Bosch for the 21st century, by way of Hannah Hoch and Louise Bourgeois.

In three room-size installations, Mutu forgoes the overdose of details that gives her pictures their power. Knowing when to be explicit and when to leave room for mystery, she brings the past into present by reawakening regrets and aspirations long buried by the relentless busy-ness of our modern lives.

Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects, 6006 Washington Blvd., (310) 837-2117, through Dec. 22. Closed Sundays and Mondays. www.vielmetter.com