Eve MacSweeney, “Art Sentinel,” W Magazine, September 2019
Brooklyn. When the museum approached her, she had been drawing these figures over and over in her sketchbooks, inspired in part by looking at images of carvings that these patient ladies who make an appearance in numerous classical art forms, holding up the roof of one of the temples of the Acropolis, for example, as well as in African staffs and stools. “I was thinking about how to empower these women,” Mutu says. “They’re seen as powerful, of course, because they’re holding up the king, or they’re carrying the staff, but they’re forever laboring under the weight of whatever these men have created. So I thought, Well, release them from that.”

Mutu’s carvings are koielng, or seated on their haunches, and are elaborately embellished with pierced headpieces atop bound, elongated skulls. “In my mind, they are beings that have arrived here and taken on human form because they want to tell us something,” she says. Cast in a foundry in Walla Walla, Washington, each figure is holding up a mirror to us, “to send a message of alarm to dumb humans, who are destroying the world. But the mirror actually is a remnant of very traditional emblems: a tip plug, or a disk worn on top of the head, like a torch.” Right now, Mutu is working on ideas for the patina, to make the figures “more ethereal, ethereal. We’re going to paint them with fire and metal.”

This mash-up between the traditional and the futuristic is a constant theme in Mutu’s work. Following her studies at Parsons, Cooper Union, and Yale’s M.F.A. program, Mutu became known for her original paintings that incoporated African female figures, nature, animals, feathers, beads, and watercolors. Her subjects’ bodies were egested from collage images gathered from fashion and pornographic magazines, as well as from “exotic” travel photographs from National Geographic, each scene offering commentary on the ways in which such bodies are dissected and commodified in Western eyes. Soon, Mutu’s figures project a defiant ninja strength back at the viewer, just as the artist herself conveys a fearless independence. For years, she wore her hair in electric blue braids. “Wangari is not a yes-lady,” says her friend Adrienne Edwards, the Whitney Museum of American Art’s performance curator, with a laugh, describing their challenging conversations about art over the years. “She likes to push, in her wonderful and indefatigable way.”

Mutu’s studio occupies the parlor floor of her house. When I first visited, a decade ago, it was stuffed with carefully labeled containers for her creations—rips, legs, and so forth. Today, in their place, there are tubs with different varieties of Kenyan tea leaves, coffee, and soil. This is because, three years ago, Mutu made a life-changing pivot. Due to complications with her visa and green card, she was unable to travel outside the United States, even as her reputation was growing and she was receiving more and more invitations to exhibit internationally. (She is now a dual U.S. and Kenyan citizen.) Once freed from the restrictions,
GLADSTONE GALLERY

she decided, with her husband, Mario Lanzaoni, and their two young daughters, to have an adventure. Where would it be?

Achack would have it, their new home could, as have several opportunities in her life, via her mentor, the renowned Kenya-based palaeontologist Richard Leakey. He knew of a large property in Nairobi that was for sale. Muton now divides her time between her house there; conveniently located close to the airport and bordering a national park, and Brooklyn. Lanzaoni, an Italian-born former McKinsey & Company consultant, now works as the sub-Saharan manager for Estée Lauder. He takes numerous short trips for work, while Muton makes fewer longer ones.

"I wanted to surprise myself," Muton says of this new chapter. "I wanted to get rid of some inherited or created baggage and leap to the next level." This biocentennial life works remarkably well, she says, in part thanks to excellent wireless connectivity in Kenya, the result of decades of terrible, corrupt government phone service leading Kenyans, from policemen to grandmothers, to become early adopters of cell phones and text banking. When in Kenya, Muton commutes with her Ruidoso studio every morning, and vice versa. "It's sharpened my perspective at both ends," she says.

Her Kenyan workspace, currently a large converted garage with a tent for spray-painting and sculpting, is a place where Muton can enjoy uninterrupted time to focus on her art, much of which is turning out to be monumental in scale and heavily influenced by the natural world. She is now seeing daily the animals and birds she always longed as part of the mythological and metaphorical language of her portraits. "We have warthogs on the property, and tree hyraxes," she says, "bisons, cresting cranes, a black swan. These are actual creatures I'm seeing, and I'm able to put them right into the work." Dated and pristine have become her paint. "There's this red organic soil and thin black cotton soil, and tea and coffee, which are the cash crops of Kenya. I'm using them for their amazingly rich colors, not just for ideological reasons. Since the country has so much less paper waste than the U.S., her collage practice has resulted, though she still crafts shredded newspaper into papier-mâché that she mixes in large, wizzy tubs with glue and soil to make
her sculptures. “I said, ‘What is that gunk?’” recalls Edwards, describing a visit to Nairobi soon after Muta bought a home there. “It’s scary. Wangari is an alchemist in the studio.” Muta sees it differently. “The texture is great,” she says. “It’s giving me these new, three-dimensional volumes and tactility, and also rhythm.”

The carvings are not the only Muta figures filling New York these days. A pair of her “Sculptures,” large sculptural figures born of this earthy, ashy mix, are currently winding up their sojourn in the Whitney Biennial, which runs through September 23. They impress

Muta’s success at building a reputation as an artist, first with Sibell Johnkus & Co., in New York, and later with Gladstone Gallery, helped point the way for others. For the writer, photographer, and art historian, Telis Cole, her freedom of attitude was instructive. “I was always a self-taught artist, which is one of the things that I admired about her. She was very much her own person, and she could do what she wanted.”

For the young painting star Njideka Akunyili Crosby, who came to the U.S. from Nigeria, Muta made an art career seem possible. One day, in New York, she ran into Muta, who was in town for a show, and mentioned her work. “She was very supportive, very encouraging,” Muta says. “She made me feel like I could do it.”

Now in her 40s and a leading figure in the art world, Muta can look back on the ambitious turn and self-imposed challenges of her career and the string of successes that followed. “I still work with the same materials and the same subjects,” she says, “but I’m finding new ways to approach them.”

Muta’s work resonates with me, as a contemporary artist of African descent,” Akunyili Crosby says. “It’s opened up art as something where I could be included and represented.”

Now in her 40s and a leading figure in the art world, Muta can look back on the ambitious work and self-imposed challenges of her career and the string of successes that followed. “I still work with the same materials and the same subjects,” she says, “but I’m finding new ways to approach them.”

Muta’s work resonates with me, as a contemporary artist of African descent,” Akunyili Crosby says. “It’s opened up art as something where I could be included and represented.”

Now in her 40s and a leading figure in the art world, Muta can look back on the ambitious work and self-imposed challenges of her career and the string of successes that followed. “I still work with the same materials and the same subjects,” she says, “but I’m finding new ways to approach them.”

Muta’s work resonates with me, as a contemporary artist of African descent,” Akunyili Crosby says. “It’s opened up art as something where I could be included and represented.”

Now in her 40s and a leading figure in the art world, Muta can look back on the ambitious work and self-imposed challenges of her career and the string of successes that followed. “I still work with the same materials and the same subjects,” she says, “but I’m finding new ways to approach them.”

Muta’s work resonates with me, as a contemporary artist of African descent,” Akunyili Crosby says. “It’s opened up art as something where I could be included and represented.”