WANGECHI MUTU:

BY STEPHANIE CASH

Wangechi Mutu creates visually complex collage drawings that offer more than meets the eye.

THE WORK OF KENYAN-BORN Wangechi Mutu features gorgeously grotesque creatures that range from amusingly freakish to macabre. Using ink and collage on Mylar or paper, she combines humans, animals and machines in seamless and commanding compositions full of small moments of discovery and random elements that may betray only an oblique relation to the overall image.

Muti received her B.F.A from Cooper Union in New York (1996) and her M.F.A from Yale University (2000). Since then she has enjoyed no lack of fans or exhibitions.
Cash, Stephanie, "Wangechi Mutu: Terrible Beauty," *Art in America*, May 2010

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opportunities in the U.S. and Europe. Her work is now the
subject of two major exhibitions: one at the Art Gallery of
Ontario (AGO) in Toronto, and the other at the Deutsche
Guggenheim in Berlin. The Berlin show is a component of
the Deutsche Bank Prize, of which Mutu is the inaugural
recipient. The award also includes the acquisition of a
number of her works for display in the bank’s corporate
offices.

When I visited her Brooklyn studio in February, with the
AGO show about to open, Mutu was preparing work for

Berlin and for her first exhibition at Gladstone Gallery,
slated for November. The studio walls were covered with
pieces in various stages of completion and images cut
from magazines, copied from books or downloaded from

**CURRENTLY ON VIEW**

"This You Call Civilization?" at the Art Gallery of
Ontario, Toronto, Feb. 24-May 29. "Wangechi Mutu"
at Deutsche Guggenheim, Berlin, Apr. 30-June 13.
the Internet: faces, eyes, mouths, animals, ethnographic
studies and, her recent fascination, a particularly jowly
Neapolitan mastiff. Because of her figures’ ultimate other-
worldly manifestations, it was most surprising to see that
they begin as rather classical drawings before they are
reworked, manipulated, amputated, ornamented and
otherwise transformed.

Mutu’s work is informed by important social and cul-
tural issues, but leaves the ugly truths for the surrounding
discourse, even though there are hints in the works, such
as stereotypical depictions of “exotic” Africans. There
are layers of meaning but never heavy-handed didactic-
ism. She attracts us with her exacting skill and beauti-
ful effects, from the marbled ink that often serves as the
subjects’ skin to the touches of glitter, shiny paper and
baubles she attaches to the surfaces. Many viewers sim-
ply admire her fantastical compositions and never deduce
the subtle critique at play. It’s hard to deny the work’s
sheer visual delight.

As Hannah Höch once wrote: “Photomontage could be
used not merely to produce things heavy with political
meaning . . . but . . . one could also regard it as a means
of self-expression and eventually arrive at purely aesthetic
works.” A number of scholars have remarked on Mutu’s
kinship to Höch, and the pairing is apt, particularly when
comparing Mutu’s works incorporating African sculpture
and people in ceremonial attire with Höch’s 1930 series
“From an Ethnographic Museum,” in which, for example,
an African sculptural head might be montaged onto a
Western female body. Coming from imperialist, colonizing
cultures, most modern artists who appropriated African
elements might not have considered the racism underlying
their formally daring but otherwise culturally acceptable
gestures. Mutu often incorporates clichéd depictions of
Africans, which admittedly add visual intrigue, as a way to
subvert the persistent misrepresentation of Africa.

IN “THIS YOU CALL CIVILIZATION?,” the compact six-
year survey (2002-08) at the AGO, organized by contem-
porary art curator David Moos, Mutu ironically under-
scores the violence and oppression that “civilization”
often entails. She introduces a sense of decline or disre-
gard by replicating, along the bottom of several walls, the
stains of a flood mark or the sooty grime that settles on
decrept buildings. The marks are partially inspired by the
ghostly traces of Hurricane Katrina—a poignant reminder
of inhuman neglect and ruin—that she encountered in
2008 as a participant in Prospect.1 in New Orleans, and
they create a dramatic shading effect of the kind Mutu
favors at the edges of many of her works.
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The first room of the AGO exhibition encapsulates Mutu’s progression. The earliest work in the show hangs here, a quiet, small-scale drawing from 2002 of a reclining female figure, her ovoid alienlike head in profile on a blank ground, the collage elements minimal. The adjacent wall presents the titular This You Call Civilization? of 2008—a far more intricate composition featuring a leggy monstrosity that is actually four vertically conjoined figures. Whether the bottom one with the sturdy gams is burdened by the other three or the group is struggling to work together as one, the metaphor of a civilization in crisis is clear.

The main gallery is dominated by Mutu’s cerulean-painted “wounded wall,” as she calls it, which is pockmarked as if hit by bullets or mortar. The “wounds” are stained red, making the implicit violence seem almost bodily. Installed here is Sleeping Heads (2006), essentially a set of eight “portraits” turned on their sides as a comment on intellectual leaders. In this context, however, their sleep seems to be eternal and to have been brought about brutally.

A Shady Promise (2006) is a large diptych that could be read as a present-day Annunciation scene and a

IN "THIS YOU CALL CIVILIZATION?" HER COMPACT SIX-YEAR SURVEY, MUTU IRRONICALLY UNDERSCORES THE VIOLENCE AND OPPRESSION THAT "CIVILIZATION" OFTEN ENTAILS.
tongue-in-cheek critique of religion, though Mutu is never so specific in her associations. A cool, self-possessed woman wearing shades and a blingy lily-shaped bracelet straddles an arching tree trunk that is rooted in each panel as heavenly rays shine down from the upper left. An exquisite birdlike creature, emanating an angelic glow, alights on the tree as another (the Holy Spirit?) sits on the woman’s head. Long thin blades of grass, their forms cut from images of diamonds, lend a dazzling effect, even as they call to mind the “blood diamonds” mined and sold in Africa to fund wars and insurgencies.

Two multipart works present a comical cast of char-
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THE ARK COLLECTION MELDS TWO OF MUTU’S CONCERNS: STEREOTYPICAL DEPICTIONS OF EXOTICIZED AFRICAN WOMEN AND HYPER-SEXUALIZED AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN.

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grouped four pieces in a single frame and, in a striking departure, has added text to the bottom of each. The artist doesn’t deny that there is a feminist quality to her work (she was included in the 2007 “Global Feminisms” show at the Brooklyn Museum), though she believes that the approach can be limiting when “there are so many political issues in other spheres of society,” Mutu says. As she puts it, “The art world is not where true urgency exists.”

MUTU HAS PREVIOUSLY created installations using sheets of plastic or blankets shaped with packing tape into treelike forms. One column at the AGO is wrapped with coarse woolen blankets to form spreading roots at its base. Other blankets attached to a wall serve as a screen for the projection of Cleaning Earth (2006), a video in which Mutu futilely scrubs a dirt floor. (The artist appears in all her own videos, as an everywoman.) Mutu is drawn to the blankets as a signifier of economic contrasts between the West, where they’re considered low-grade and often used for moving furniture, and Africa, where for many they serve the basic function of providing warmth. The other video in the show, Cutting (2004), shows Mutu approaching a log on a rise in a scruffy landscape. Shot against the sunset, the log at times resembles a body as Mutu hacks at it with a machete. The sound of metal on metal, an unintended result of the way she was filmed, adds to the video’s disconcerting effect.

Mutu undertook her first live performance during last November’s Performa biennial in New York. The piece was titled Stone Ng’A, a reference to executions by stoning; in it Mutu and the singer Imani Uzuri expressed—through body language, Uzuri’s vocalizing and Mutu’s speaking in her native Kikuyu tongue—deep anxiety regarding an unspecified event about to take place. As Mutu explains, “nothing happened,” so gradually the audience’s attention was directed to the minutiae of the women’s actions. Mutu had hoped for a more interactive experience and a more in-the-round setup, as would be the case at a stoning.

Though she considers her works in these other mediums to be an integral part of her oeuvre, they don’t yet approach the resolution achieved in the collage drawings. Among the works on view at the Deutsche Guggenheim is Fallen Heads (2010), a large-scale vertical collage drawing with a regular pattern of bloody, decapitated heads, inspired, she says, by the current “heads-will-roll” economic climate. The video Mud Fountain (2010), shot in a dungeonlike space, shows liquid mud pouring down on Mutu, who eventually crumples to the ground in a fetal position. Considering the culminating image of defeat, the pouring mud sounds incongruously like a peacefully trickling fountain.

Mutu has begun work on a series of double-headed female images but their significance hasn’t been quite formulated: as with much of her work, the references can be multiple. Aside from her interest in the conjoined twins Abigail and Brittany Hensel, two girls who share and cooperatively control one body, she suspects that the new figures might have something to do with the status of immigrants, who lead hybrid existences and have to be many things at once. For a multifaceted artist whose work can also be many things at once, that makes perfect sense.
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