GLADSTONE GALLERY

WANGECHI MUTU
NEW YORK

The brilliant thing about collage has always been its unique ability to put forth distressingly immediate juxtapositions. Kenyan-born, Brooklyn-based artist Wangechi Mutu brings an uncanny freshness to this time-honored shock. Choosing images from fashion magazines, pornography, and ethnographic photography, she builds works that point up the fetishization of the female form—by way of threatened or powerless situations as well as dismemberment, scarring, and mutilation.

When it comes to content, these works scintillate only a little less brightly. Mutu’s concerns include the body, gender, and race. More specifically, she investigates the way in which culture is written, burned, scarred or otherwise marked on the female body. It’s well-trod territory, but that’s hardly Mutu’s fault—indeed, to mention such explorations in an artist’s statement is tantamount to declaring seriousness of purpose in contemporary art practice these days.

It’s Mutu’s meticulously tended aesthetic and inventiveness that set her work apart. She augments her compositions with a variety of materials that, in less unsettlingly skilled hands, could feel like a jumble. But somehow, Mutu combines incompatible elements into a seamless whole. She also uses paint and ink on Mylar to give her compositions a ghostly, unsettling brightness and depth of texture, which she expertly manipulates for disturbing effects. Gillies, jewels, beads, fur, and feathers make appearances as well, subtly disrupting the glossy surface that can render collage merely superficial.

In past works, she explored the female body as a site for illness and decay. Here, in the exhibition Hunt/Bury/Flour, her figures fall prey to more active, and thus more intentional, processes—as well as more destructive, be they self-destructive or other-imposed [Gladstone Gallery, October 30—December 18, 2010]. All this is to say that it’s personal. This aspect of the show can lead to a certain mental fatigue. After all, many have convincingly argued that Surrealist images of mutilated, disfigured women are still sexualized and thus misogynist. How can a sexualized image of a woman’s mouth splattered with blood and dirt—when shown in a contemporarily art context—not be exploitative? How can it proffer a high-minded “challenge” to the “question of difference”—to quote the Gladstone press release?

Placing such fruitless questions aside, the viewer will have many distressingly sexualized images of decay, abasement, and mutilation to contemplate. In Oh, Madonna! 2010, a figure with exotic or tribal accoutrements strikes a sexualized pose on a chair. Humming, 2010, features two female figures surrounded by flies, including one very large tentacled bug—or fly-octopus-aggregate—that seems to bear malicious intent toward one or both of them. Nobody loves me. It’s true, 2010, shows a despondent figure with pendulous breasts and truncated animal legs, whose bloated, spotted skin is bound by uncomfortable cords. Sprout, 2010, presents an upside-down figure with arms buried in muck, whose disfigured head is pushed against the ground at an ugly angle, with a tangle of leaves and twigs sprouting from its anus and its severed legs. Birds peck at its decaying skin, its eyes are gone. The image could be redemptive, suggesting regrowth. But the foliage isn’t lush, the birds don’t appear particularly inspired. Like many others in the show, this image simply dwells on decay for its potential to distress, unsettling, and disturb.

Indeed, it almost feels as though Mutu herself were tired of her chosen discourse. But the difficulties of her practice are neatly solved in the installation Moths, 2010, the show’s dark anchor and best success. The work entails a wall of tiny ceramic women whose shapely, naked legs are topped by dark leather wings and silky feather antennae. Their poses could evoke dancing, struggling, or sex. Despite the suggestion that these winged creatures have been captured and pinned in ews like so many bugs on a card, they glaze with stately menace, suggesting, if not a hopeful fate, at least a vengeful one.

—Lara Kristin Hemdon