The immense female figures in Muto'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 boa—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, Muto 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 Muto 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."