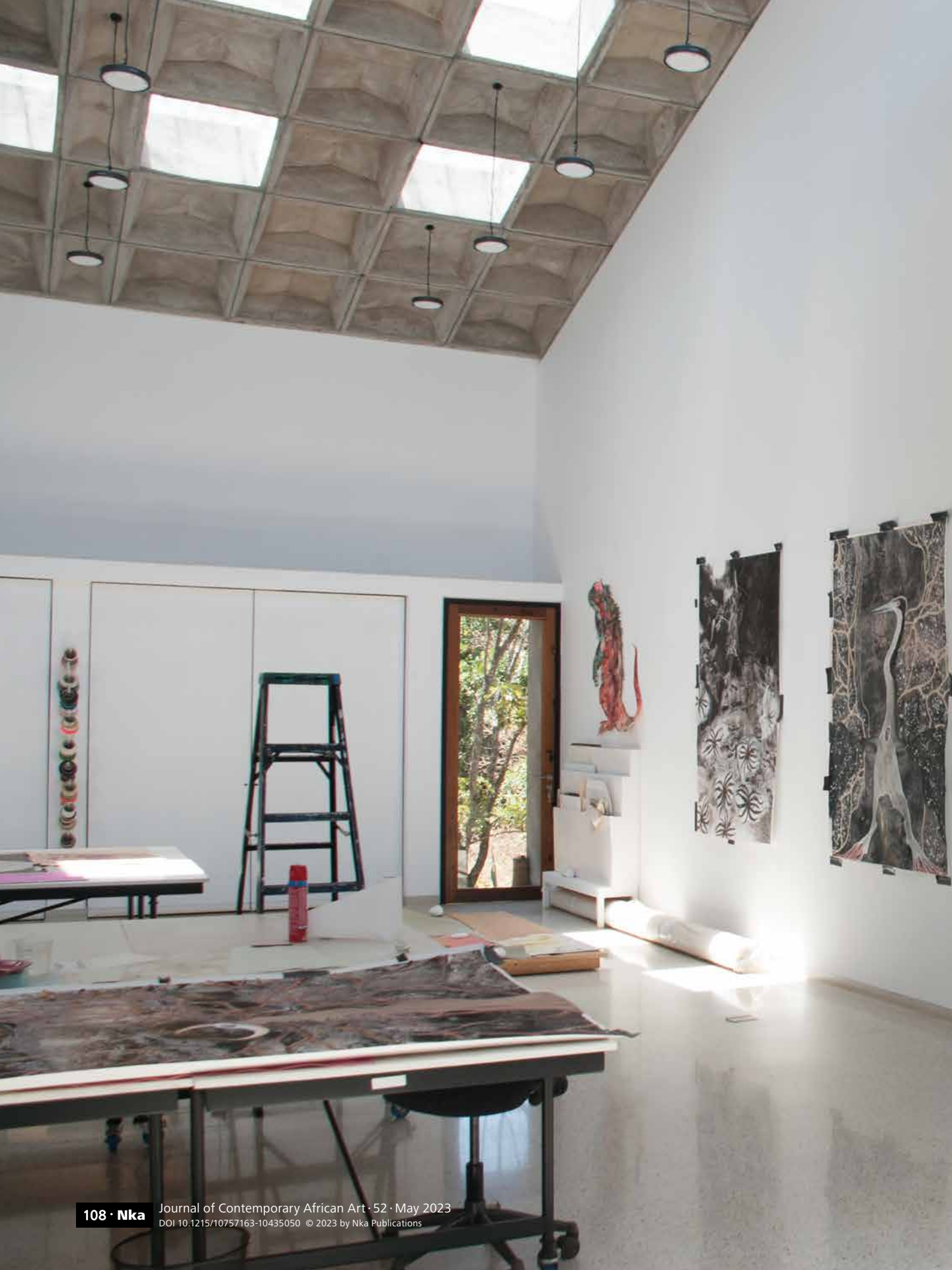
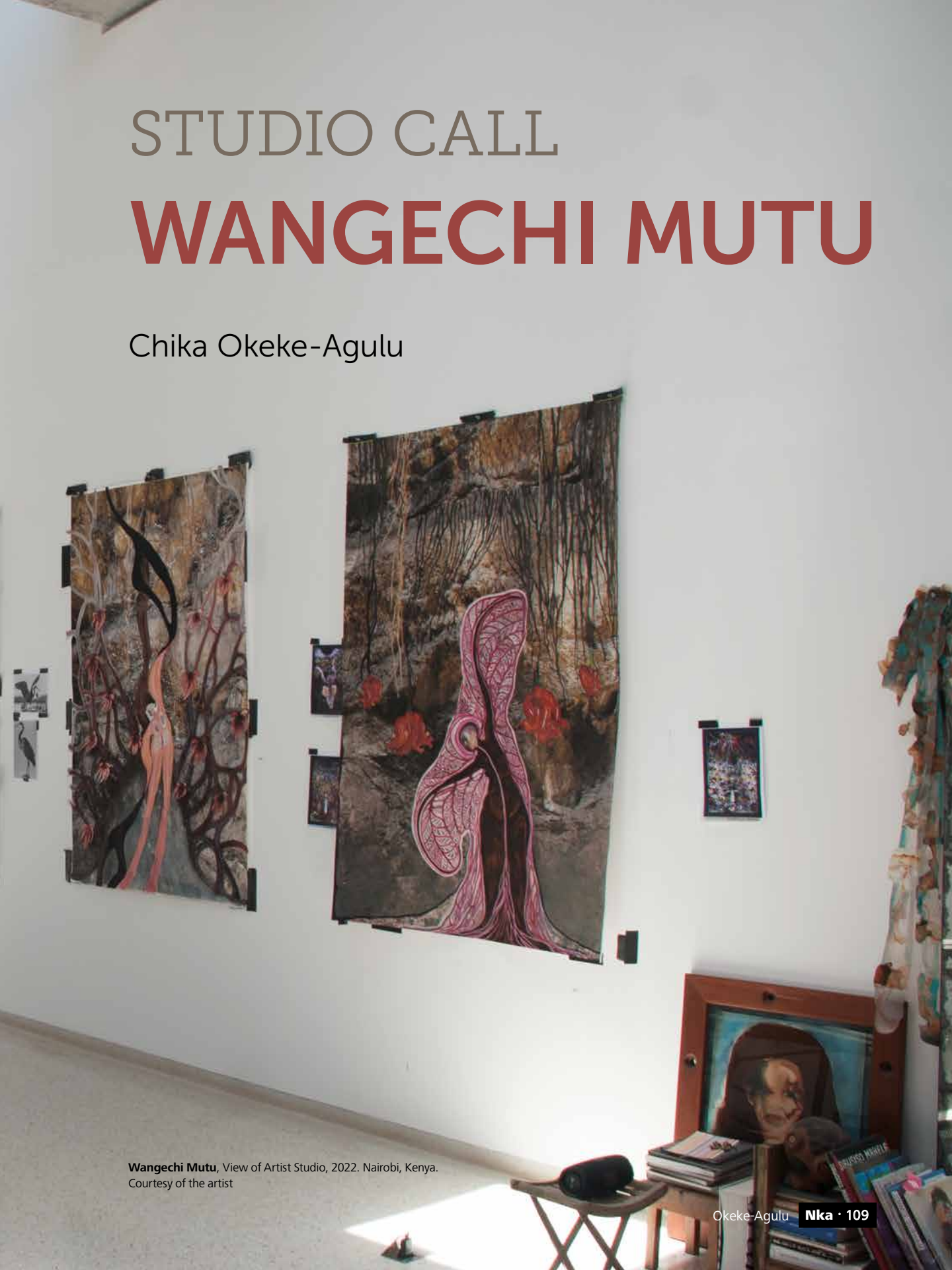


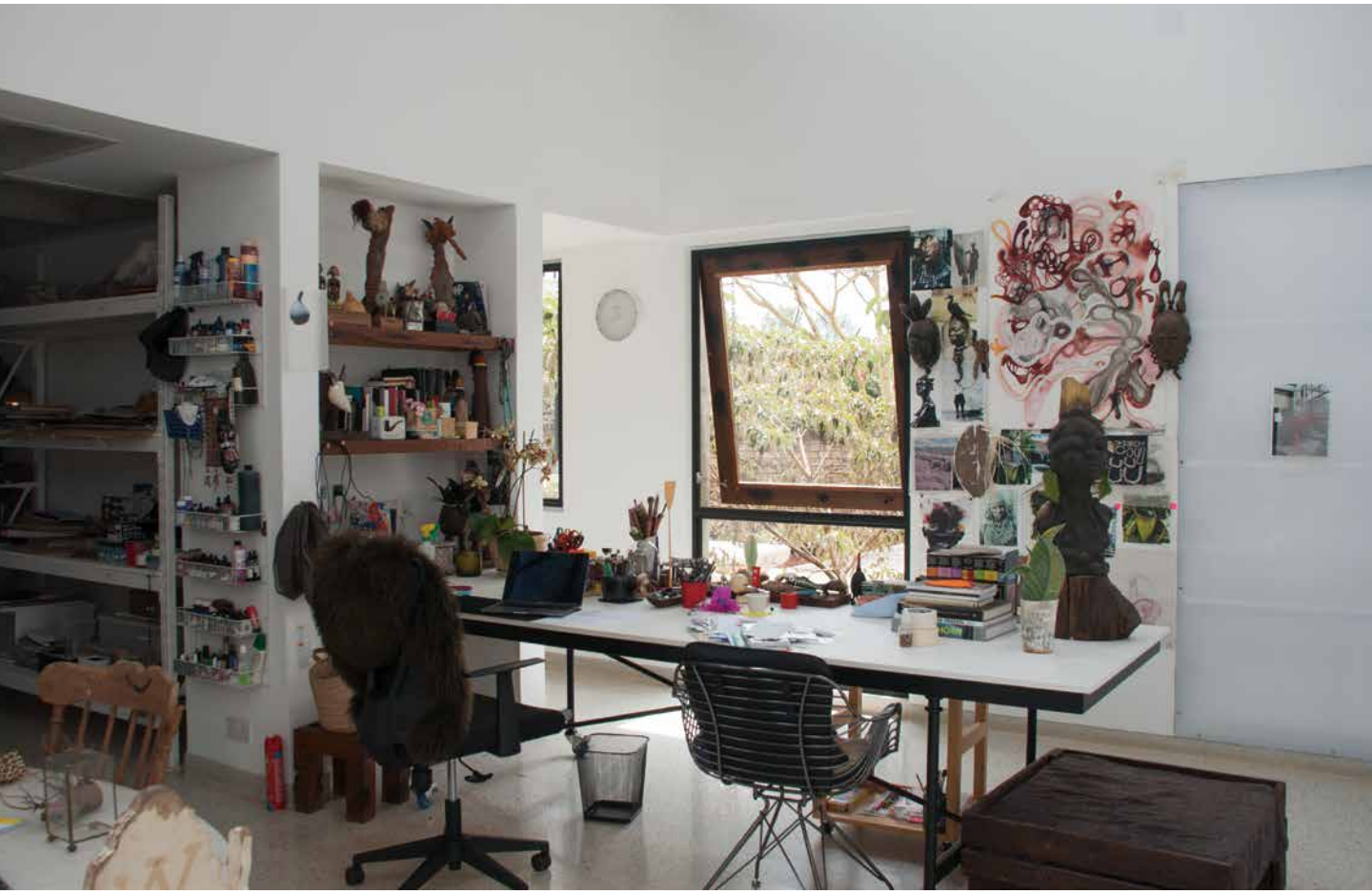

DOI 10.1215/10757163-10435050 

# STUDIO CALL
# WANGECHI MUTU

Chika Okeke-Agulu



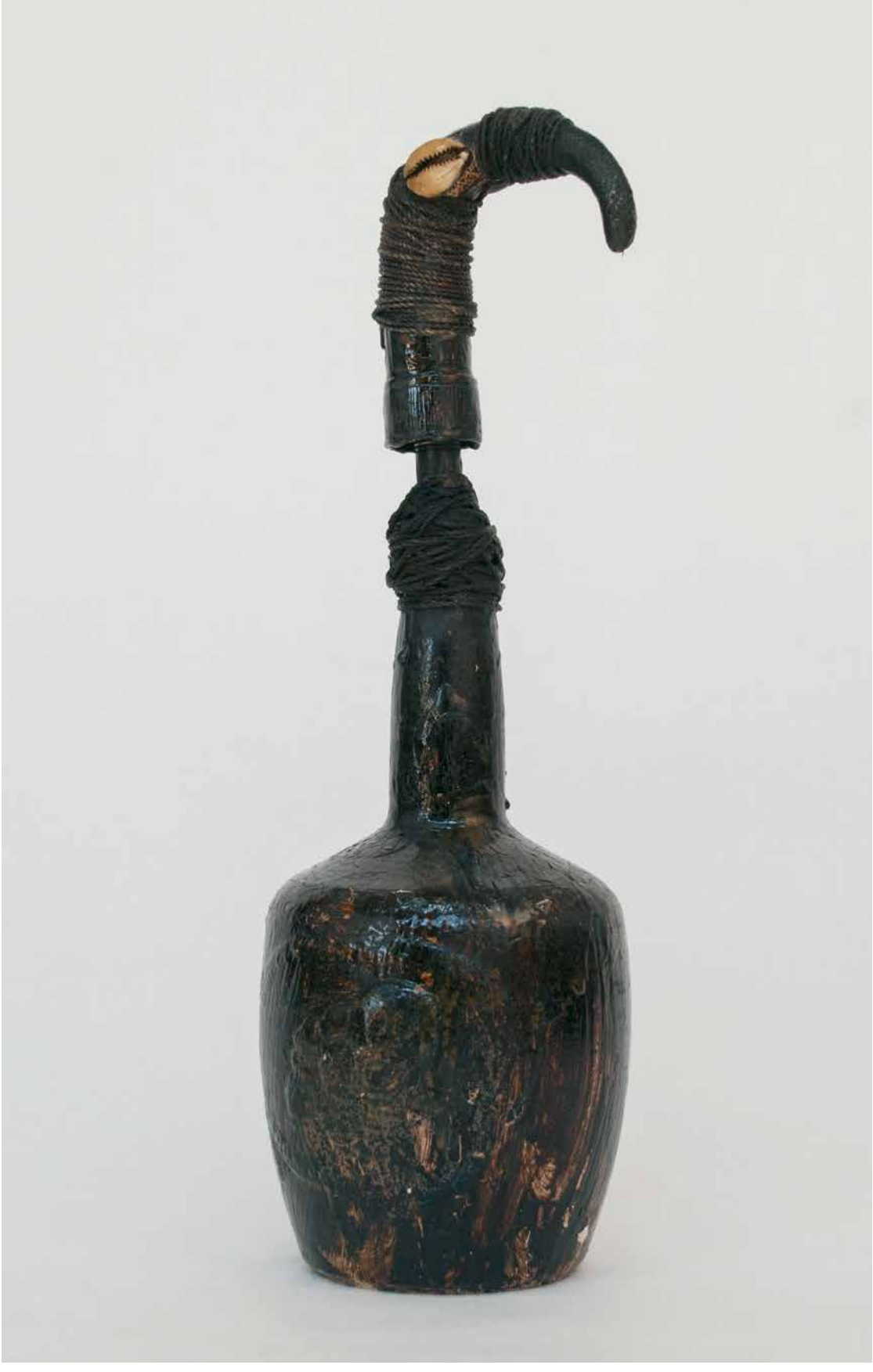
**Wangechi Mutu**, View of Artist Studio, 2022. Nairobi, Kenya. Courtesy of the artist



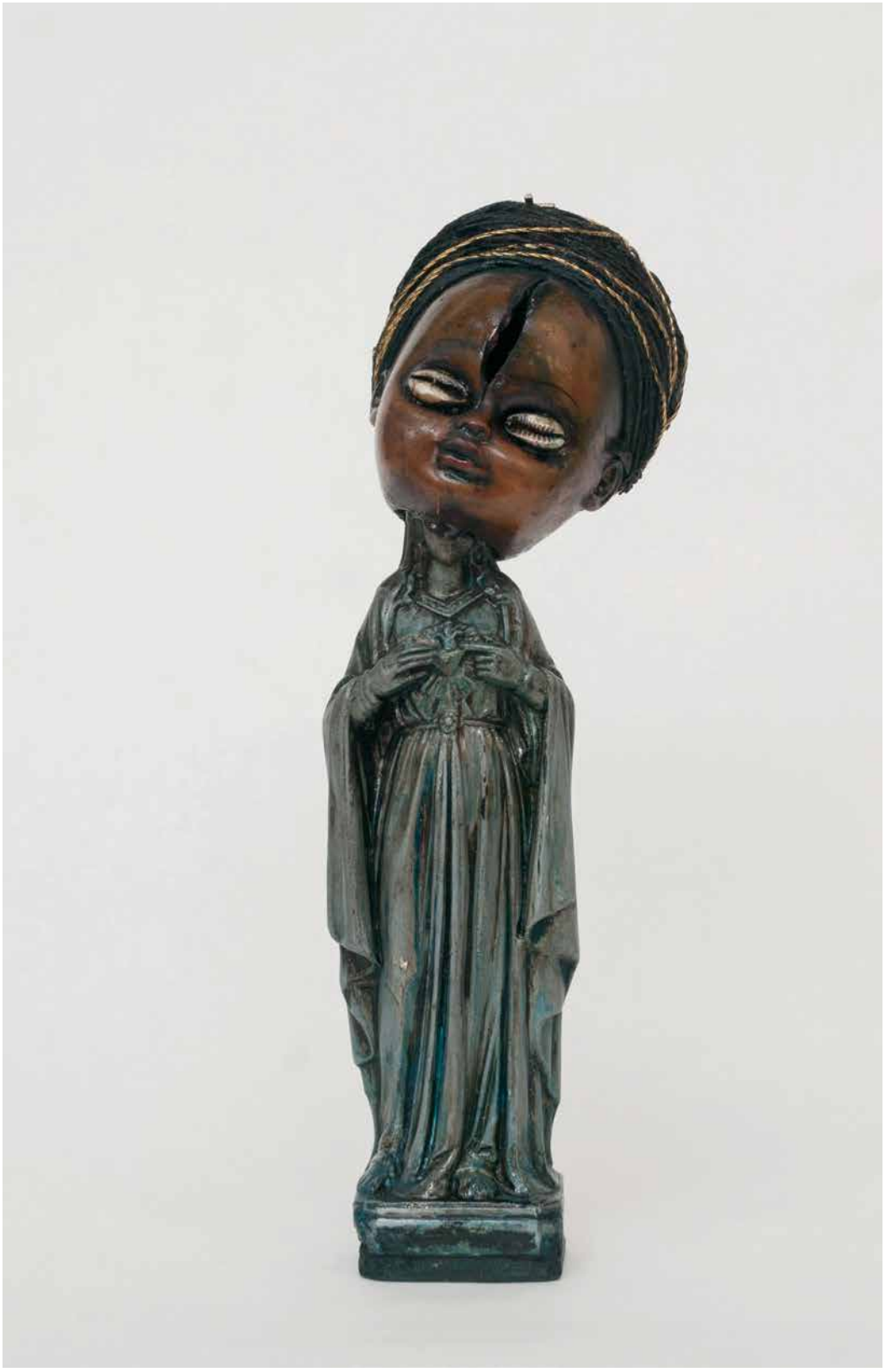
View of Artist Studio, 2022. Nairobi, Kenya. Courtesy of the artist

The summer of 2022, by every measure, felt as though the world was finally emerging from the dark, terrifying scourge of the COVID-19 pandemic. If the previous two years meant staying home to avoid the disease, the arrival and availability of vaccines restored some confidence in air travel. It was time to venture out again. And one of my first destinations was Kenya to fulfill a long-postponed visit with the artist Wangechi Mutu at her Nairobi studio. I had known Wangechi for decades, and we often talked about visiting her studio in Brooklyn, but that, alas did not come to pass. Then, just before the pandemic, she partially relocated her studio to Nairobi, her city of birth. This act of returning home, for me, was significant not necessarily because it reflects a growing trend among leading contemporary African artists who, after years of living and working in the metropoles of Europe and America, move their practices back to the continent, or establish studios and art institutions there.[1] Rather, it marks, I think, Mutu's full turn, a firm and generative recuperation of a mode of making, a craft sensibility, a disposition to material and media, and an aesthetic that was foundational to the work with which she announced her arrival on the art scene in the late 1990s. My primary objective for visiting her studio and work environment in Nairobi, therefore, was to learn more about the specific ways the relocation of her studio sped up the emergence of new work that unmistakably usher in her mature artistic phase through a reintensification of formal and conceptual principles underlying her early work.

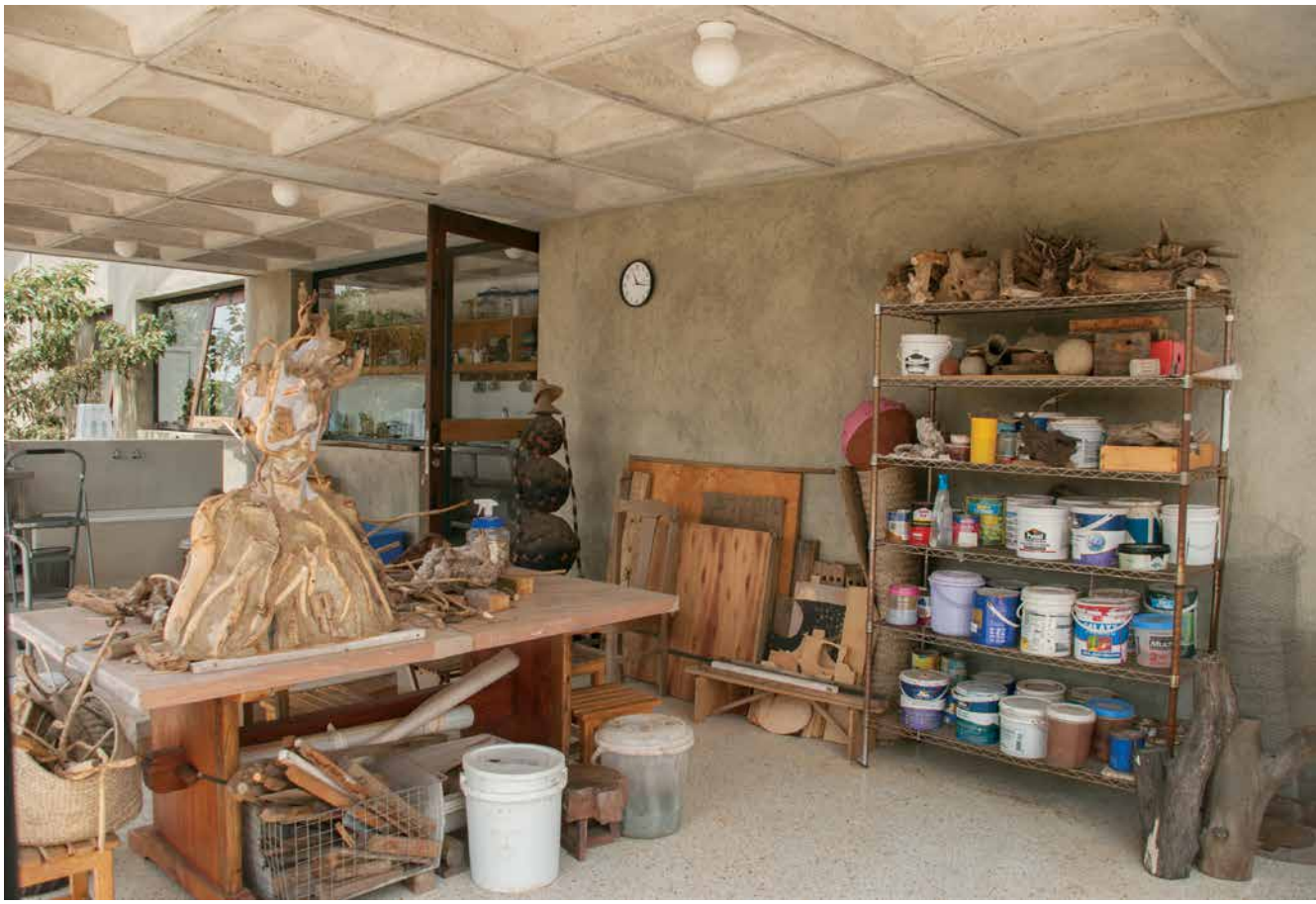
In 1997, fresh from art school, and still unsettled by her new immigrant experience in New York, Mutu



*Detail from Bottle People Series*, 1997. Glass, paint, varnish, shell, 13 ⅜ x 4 x 4 ⅛ in. Courtesy of the artist



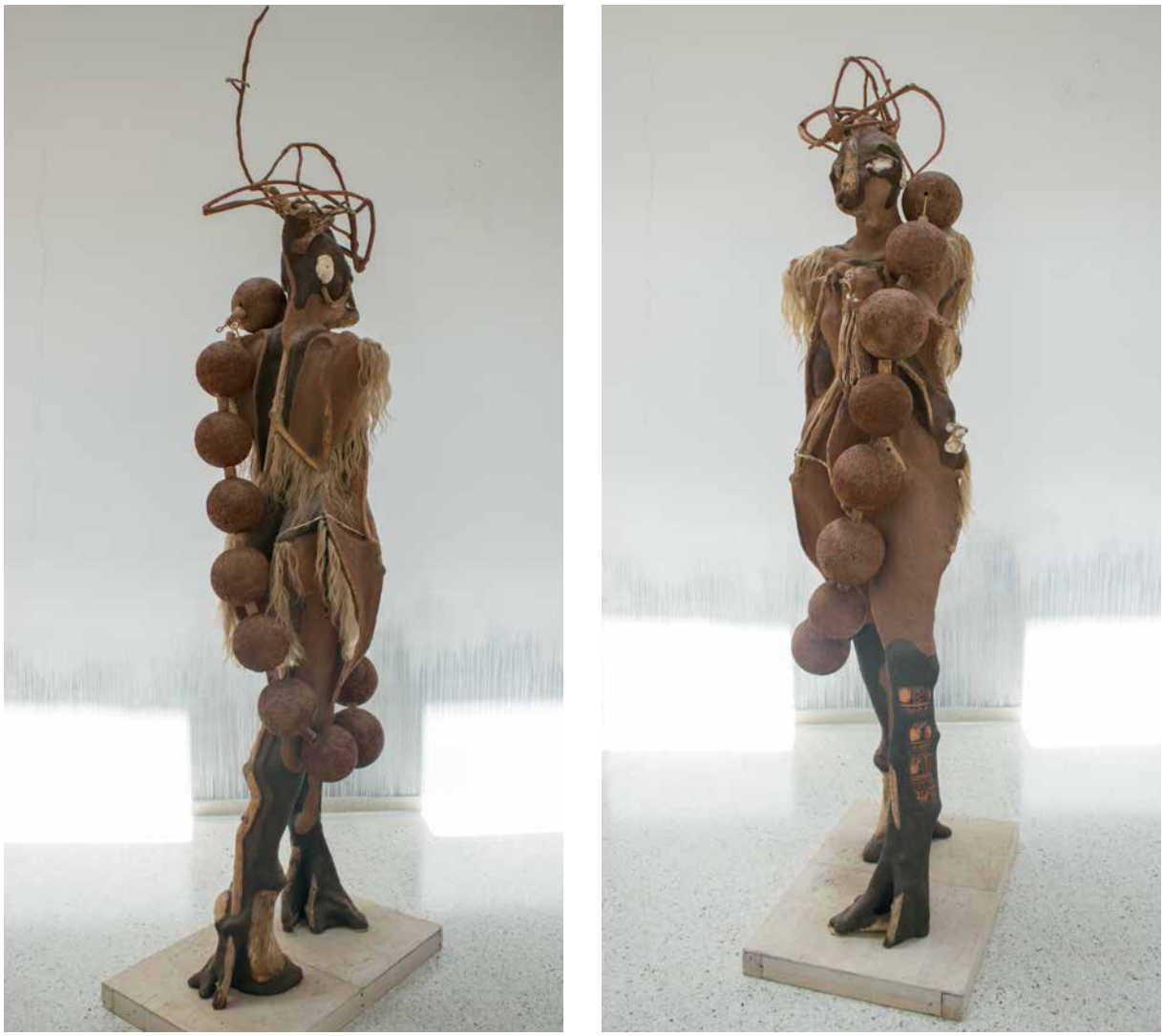
*Maria*, 1997. Plastic, string, paint, shells, found object, 11 x 3 ⅜ x 4 ⅛ in. Courtesy of the artist



View of Artist Studio, 2022. Nairobi, Kenya. Courtesy of the artist

participated in the *Life's Little Necessities* exhibition organized by Kellie Jones as part of Okwui Enwezor's critically acclaimed Second Johannesburg Biennale. Published in the exhibition catalogue was Mutu's *Maria* (1997), a discolored Immaculate Heart of Mary statuette the head of which she slotted halfway into an oversized brown-skinned plastic doll head with cowrie eyes, twine-bound hair, and a large gash on its forehead. This piece, as a stand-in for her biennial participation, invariably placed Mutu in the art-world to-watch list. It was comprised of relatively small, enigmatic objects—variously shaped bottles unto which she attached cowrie shells and sundry objects, bound with twine and covered with dark tar-like gooey stuff—she started making as an art student at Cooper Union. While these sculptures signaled Mutu's familiarity with modernist modes of image construction inaugurated by the European Dada and US assemblage artists, there was no mistaking their direct citation of the look and feel of African ritual objects, specifically the so-called "power objects," from central and west Africa. There is a rich history to this type of work. In the 1960s and 1970s, African American artists—Betye Saar, Noah Purifoy, Senga Nengudi, and others—who identified with various strands of the Black Arts Movement and what St. Clair Drake described as "Africa interest" within the African American world, found in the religious arts of the continent and its diaspora a rich and generative source for sculptural assemblages and ritualized performance. On the continent, similarly, Abdoulaye Konate, Moustapha Dimé, Tapfuma Gutsa and others, created multimedia work that insinuated the auratic power of African ritual artefacts as a tactic for projecting multilayered, rich and dynamic relationship between African histories and traditions and postcolonial subjectivity.

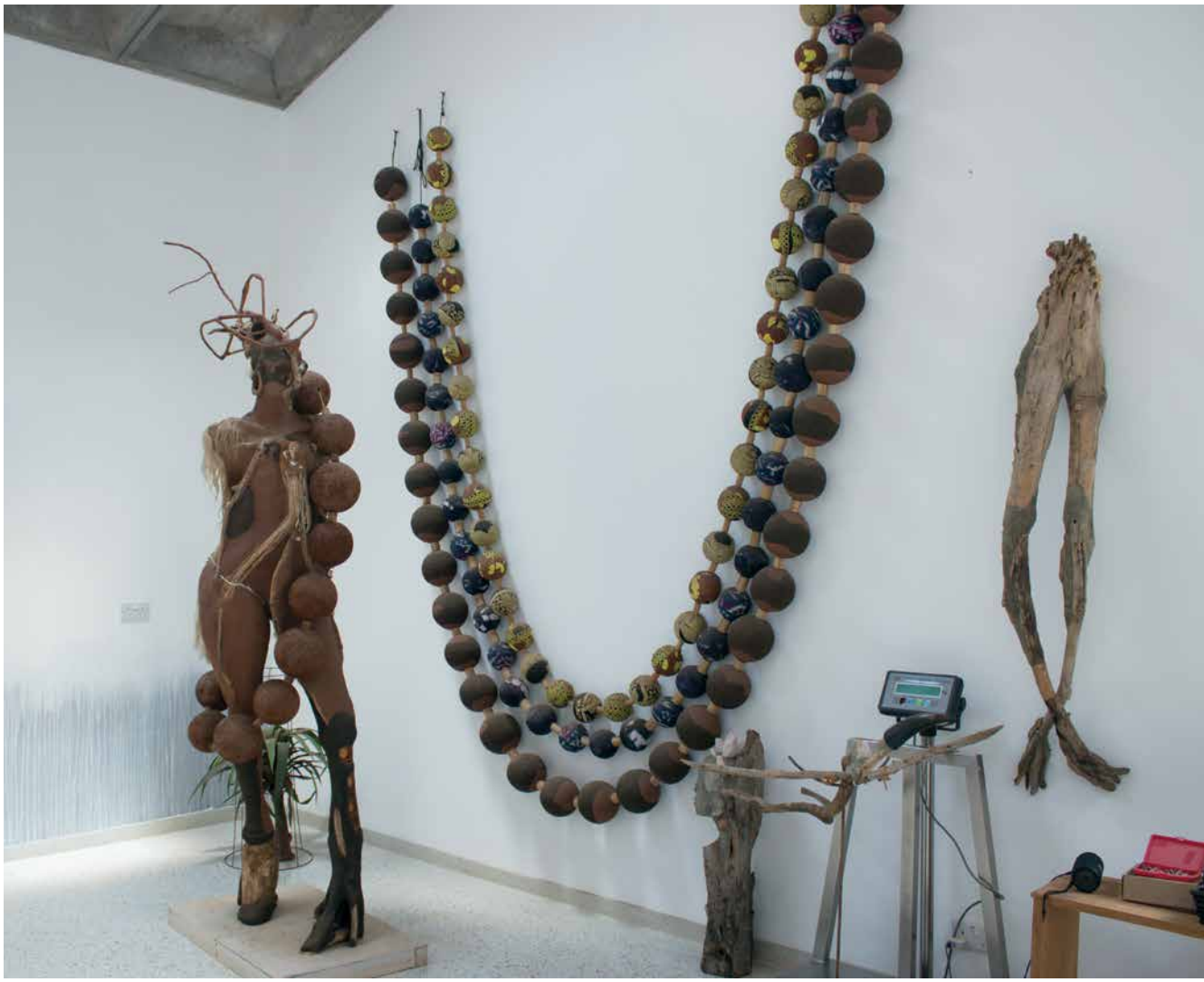
The point here is that while in her search for an



*Sentinel III*, 2020. Red soil, paper pulp, wood glue, concrete, charcoal, emulsion paint, ink, wood, glass beads, brass beads, brass bell, bone, tooth, gourd, shell, 81 ⅛ x 18 ⅞ x 22 ⅛ in. Courtesy of the artist

artistic voice and existential mooring during her early immigrant years in the United States, Mutu's expansive imagination—formed as it was by a childhood in metropolitan Nairobi and partial encounters with her Gĩkuyu cultural heritage; by a global worldview shaped through educational experience in three continents; and through immersion in a moment of thrilling multiculturalism in the New York artworld of the late 1990s—nudged her toward an approach to art similar to that of aforementioned Black and African artists. Even as she reveled in the incredible range of approaches to image making that New York and contemporary art offered, the focus on sculptures inspired by African ritual artefacts marked her initial engagement with their form, material, mode of facture, and in their signifying capacities and cosmological resonances. Although her subsequent, defining works are mixed-media paintings on Mylar, the initial focus on sculpture characterized by what Richard J. Powell has described, with Saar in mind, as "componential heteroglossia," afforded her a space where in she has noted:

> I could talk about contemporary and past cultural trends of Kenyan origin. I could discuss post-colonialism, syncretic languages, pre-colonial spiritual aesthetics, and the development of new ways of looking



View of Artist Studio, 2022. Nairobi, Kenya. Courtesy of the artist

> at things historically, artistically, culturally, in a way that painting didn't allow.[2]

After the initial gesture toward exploration of her material in the bottle pieces, and the long detour to painting and collage, Mutu's slow return to that sculptural sensibility picked up pace with deeper engagement in and an assertive consciousness of her Gĩkuyu and Kenyan roots. She articulated a vision shaped by her lived experience in and across diverse cultures in three continents. In this process, it seems, her earlier Africanisms—shaped by what one might call Black Atlantic Diasporic imaginaries—and the later collages featuring beautiful-repulsive humanimal cyborg women, have given way to new sculptures forged from deeper probing of Gĩkuyu folklore and cosmologies and through which she articulates her brand of critical ecofeminism.

On my way to Mutu's studio in Nairobi, I had made a detour to a conservancy and field research center in Nanyuki in the central highlands, north of Nyeri her ancestral home. There, against the background of nature's immensity, signs of drastic transformation of the environment by lack of rain were overwhelming: distressed pastoral communities, dead and dying wildlife, desiccated grasslands punctuated by gnarled lifeless boughs, and dusty red earth.

View of Artist Studio, 2022. Nairobi, Kenya. Courtesy of the artist

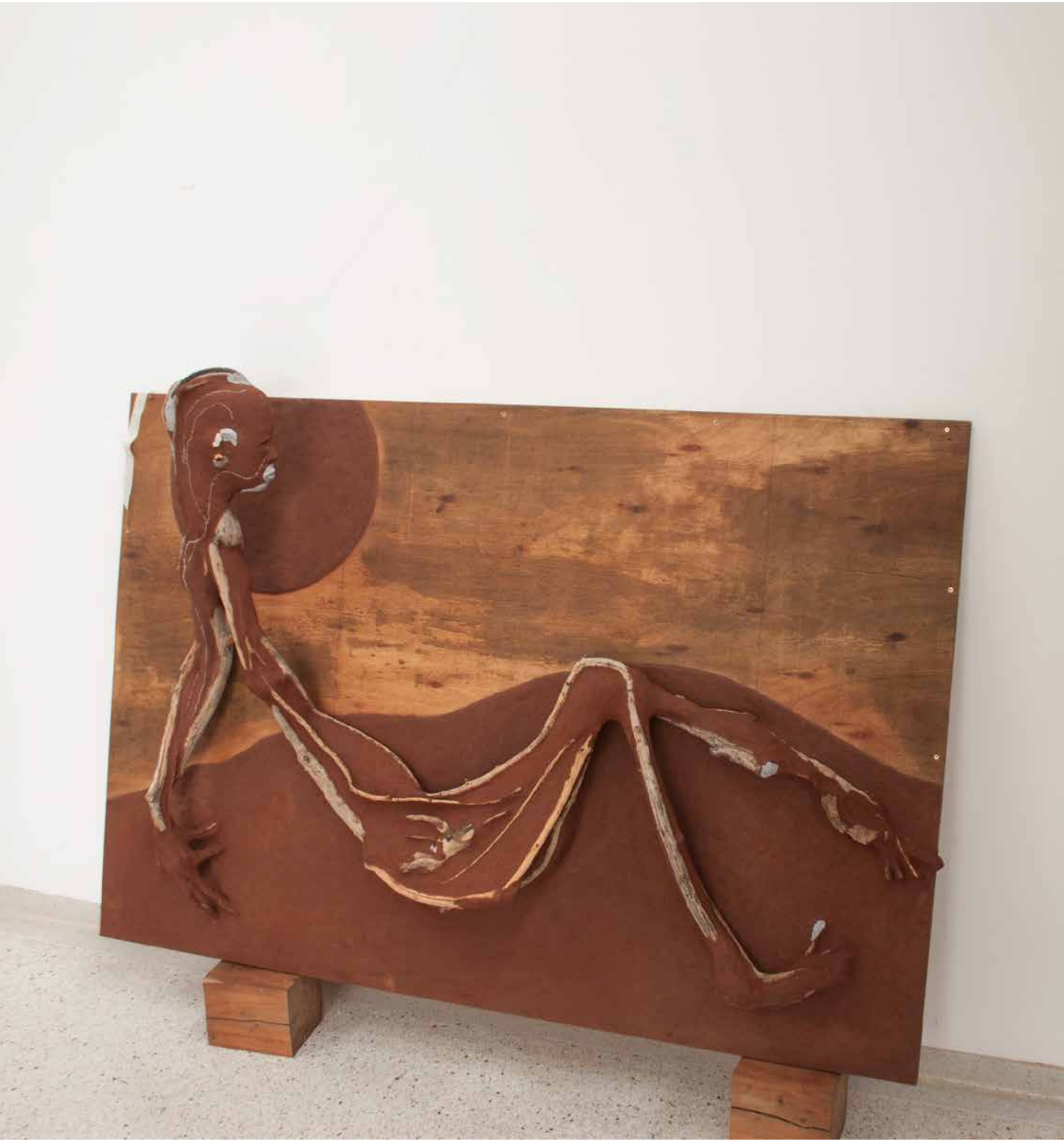
Seeing all this, it was impossible not to appreciate the significance and urgent necessity of the tree planting and environmental regeneration campaign of the Green Belt Movement led by the Kenyan Nobel Peace Prize laureate Wangari Maathai. It also afforded me clearer perspective on Mutu's recent material acts, and thematic preoccupation as a sculptor, and what relocating her studio to Nairobi had to do with them.

The studio, set in a still-verdant part of Nairobi, opens up to its environment, the sculpture section connecting the indoor spaces and the outside. In a corner are large containers filled with soaking red and dark brown soils—harvested from the lateritic, iron-rich earths from nearby highland region—as well as paper pulp and wood glue mixtures. Within and outside the studio, there are clusters of gnarly, dried wood, gourds, bits of rock, sea shells, seeds and beads. All these constitute the primary media, the "bones, organs and ornaments," with which Mutu builds the figurative sculptures of recent years, including the well-known *Sentinel* series.[3]

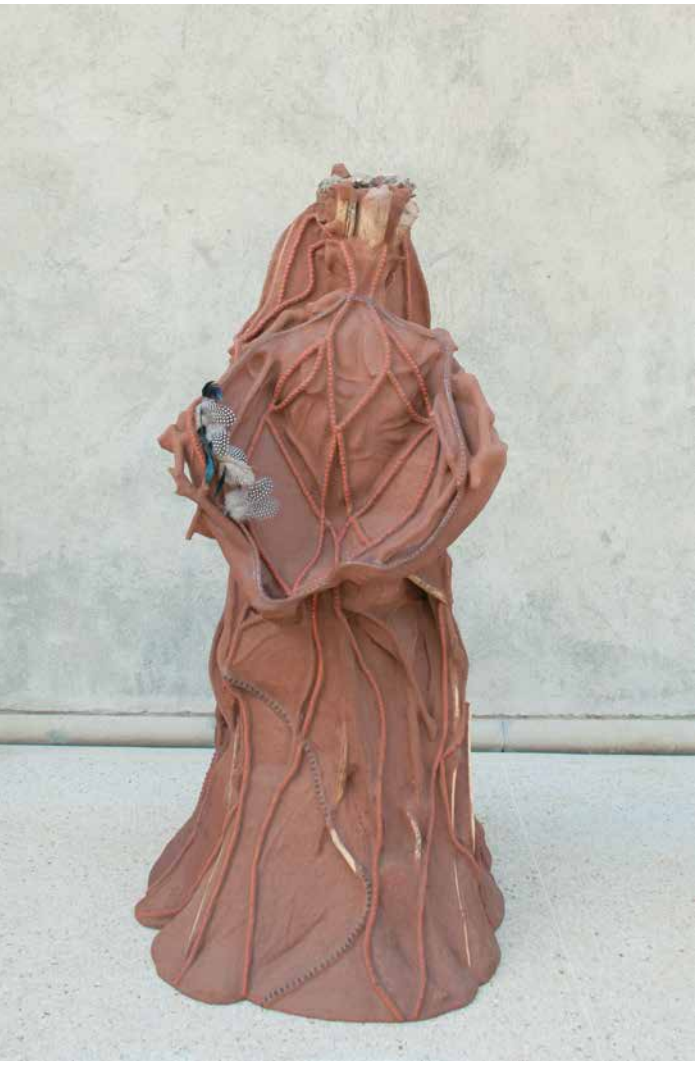
These diverse media, sourced from the local environment, are important for the work they do as material presences and synecdoche for land and nature, two themes that have preoccupied Mutu for more than a decade now. Whereas the New York period mylar paintings featured fashionably thin female figures with human and mechanical parts, and who, so to say, strut their thing in darkly colorful and threat-endemic atmosphere—which encouraged critics to designate them avatars and denizens of an Afrofuturist world—the Nairobi-phase sculptures with red-earth skins and bones of wood speak to Mutu's renewed focus on land as locus of identity and political citizenship and as the distressed bearer of our increasingly precarious biosphere. This shift is significant to the extent that it reflects the coming of her mature phase, which, in turn, came with the return home and a new, more profound engagement—through reconnection to especially Gĩkuyu cultural and political history and experience—with the place and role of women in the sustenance of society and life past and present.

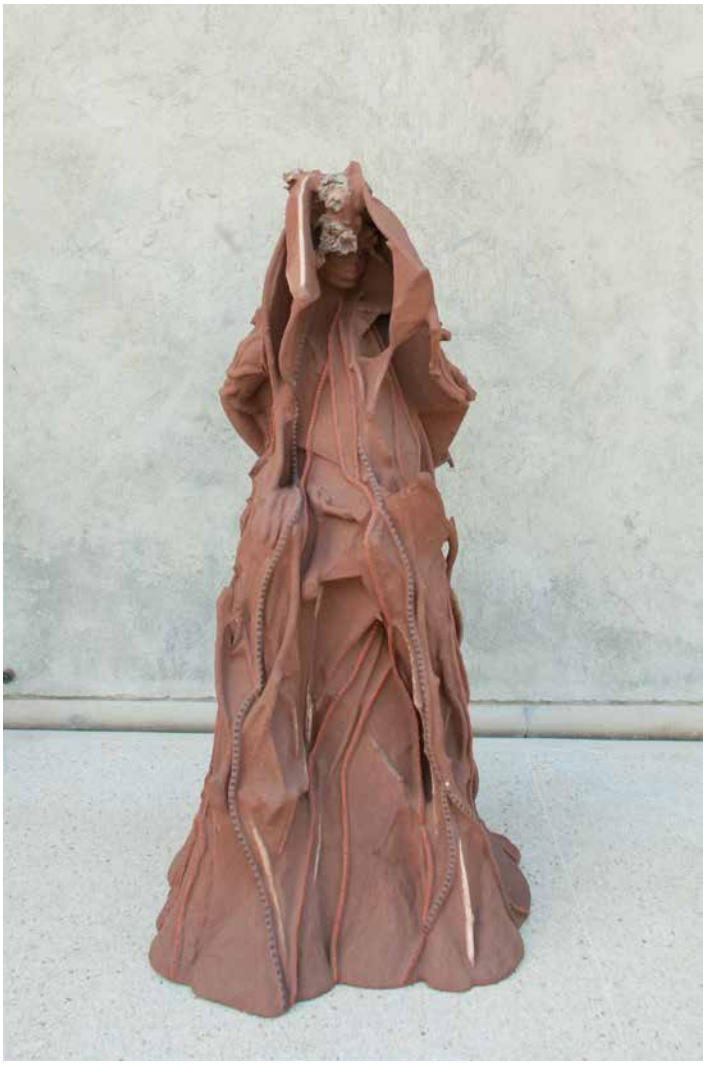
*Throned* (2022), which I saw last summer before its completion, exemplifies Mutu's new sculpture constructed from Kenyan red soil, paper pulp, dry wood, and other locally sourced material. Whereas the *Sentinel* series are resolutely figurative, *Throned* is a rather enigmatic form reminiscent of the termite mound, or more significantly, the rugged peaks of the sacred Kĩrĩnyaga (Mt. Kenya) the cosmological significance of which Mutu has often spoken about. Its wall-skin is broken up by subcutaneous wood forms, varicose vein-like, that erupt to the surface in a few places. As the work's armature, they bolster its structural integrity and, because they destabilize its formal wholeness, also insinuate its fragility. Two distinct vein systems, the dominant one of embedded indigenous red "lucky beans" seeds, and the other of cobalt blue "Dogon" glass beads course all over the surface. Near the top, within a cavernous space, there are exposed wood knots below which are pulsating bumps competing with what turns out to be a partially hidden woman's face. At the figure's back are a cluster of cobalt blue and white-spangled feathers of the indigenous vulturine guineafowl.

Thus, this form that references natural phenomena in the Kenyan landscape is also the body of a woman. While it retains the powerful and assertive presence staged by the *Sentinel* series, *Throned* is a more solemn, even mysterious, image of the woman, one that speaks to her role as an active player in the work of regenerating the now-threatened and increasingly distressed natural environment. It is also an enfiguration of the land (all that it sustains and protects), that evokes its cosmic power, biospheric significance, and—in the wake of anthropogenic climate change and environmental degradation—its vulnerability. Seeing all the objects Mutu has



View of Artist Studio, 2022. Nairobi, Kenya. Courtesy of the artist





*Throned,* 2022. Red soil, paper pulp, wood glue, wood, 68 ⅛ x 33 ⅞ x 43 ¼ in. Courtesy of the artist

collected from the environment around Nairobi and from the Kenyan countryside, objects that become vital media for her new composite sculptures, which themselves allow her to articulate an ecological vision in which women and traditional Gĩkuyu knowledge systems figure prominently, it became clear that returning home, for her, clarified and intensified this vision.

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### *Notes*

1 I am thinking here of Yinka Shonibare, David Adjaye, Barthelemy Toguo, Aida Muluneh, Yto Barrada, Michael Armitage, Kehinde Wiley and others.

2 "Oral History Project: Wangechi Mutu by Deborah Willis," *Bomb* magazine, Oral History Project series, February 28, 2014, https://bombmagazine.org/articles/wangechi-mutu/

3 See, "Wangechi Mutu and Carrie Mae Weems on the Profound Impulse to Make Art," *Interview Magazine*, December 7, 2020, https://www.interviewmagazine.com/art/wangechi-mutu-and-carrie-mae-weems-discuss-the-power-of-creation.