



WANGECHI MUTU: ARTIST STATEMENT

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WANGECHI MUTU

ARTIST STATEMENT

When asked in an interview "Do you have a central idea or figure out of which you want to generate the overall assembly of the image . . . Is the process one that starts with a very firm sense of where it will end and then accidents and serendipities begin to happen?" Wangechi Mutu responds, It's both. Now I have a greater sense of confidence and I can comfortably say I want to head in this direction, I want this to be a powerful leaping figure and I want this color. But it happens in tiers. I start off with an 8.5 by 11 sheet of paper, and then I transpose that image to life-size, a scale I'm using more often now. Then I start to shift what happened in the original drawing. Maybe that life-size looks a little too literal, so I slowly augment things; perhaps something looks too natural, or it's too elegant. So I disrupt it, I remove a limb or change the elbow. When I'm doing that larger drawing, I temporarily place all the elements that are not going to be inked and I add the mechanical elements, like the beak on the face. Finally, I put on the Mylar and start to ink. I can see the drawing from under because Mylar is translucent but, when I ink, I'm very aware that it does what I want it to do. It will get to a certain point and then the meniscus of the liquid breaks. It trickles away here and there and creates a new form, everything from a drip to a bulge.

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[The history of representing women in Western art as attractive is] an issue in my case because black women in the arts are still incredibly exotic. There's not that many of us and there are often times when I walk into a museum to install an exhibition and it takes a while for people to register that I might be the artist. We're not used to seeing women of color, especially black women, in powerful positions in the art world. The other element is that beauty is subjective and I have to say that it's very sensitive ground. I remember when I was at school at Cooper Union, that's where the grasp I have on contemporary art started. The teachers were rigorous, well-read and brilliant. Their breadth of knowledge was tremendous and the people they brought in to teach and work with us were also incredible. But we would have discussions about art and one of the worst words you could say in class was "beautiful." I remember thinking, What in heaven's name is wrong with this word and why do people get a rash every time they hear "beauty" or "beautiful"? I went from questioning to resenting why no one was willing to discuss why we couldn't utter the word. I believe the reason is because beauty was actually available to them, their culture decides for the whole world what is beautiful, how beauty should evolve, where it begins and ends. So they were rebelling against the very thing that had protected them. They didn't want to use the term "beauty" because they owned it. Maybe "beauty" is a sensitive and politicized word for people who have a hard time describing their own culture at this particular point because of the hierarchy colonization has set for things. It's not something they want to reject because they're still fighting to have it. If your entire history of art and your language and your culture are considered to be primitive, maybe you'll fight for the idea of something being beautiful.

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Robert Enright asks Wangechi Mutu about her description of her "Pin-up" series as, in her own words, "distorted glamour Frankensteins" . . . "Do you want it both ways: to have the beauty and its opposite at the same time?" She responds, I think so because things and ideas exist, at least in my mind, in contrast and in relationship to other things. I also believe that how we process and recognize things is relative; what one person is scared by has little to do with me and more to do with their own history. So I do want to slip back and forth in those places. I also want to draw people into the work. I don't feel privileged enough to be entirely invisible or too vague.

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"How much of the message of the work is dependent upon a knowledge of the sources you're using," Robert Enright asks Wangechi Mutu. He continues, "You use hyenas in the "Creature Series" and "hyena" is an especially derogatory slang term for female in Swahili. Is it necessary to know that to understand the piece?" I compare it to appreciating music in a language you don't understand, she responds. If you really want to appreciate it more, you can look for a translation. People will listen to Hugh Masekela for years and have no idea what is being sung. But the nature of the voice, and the complexity and the nuance with which the music is played, all those things are more appealing than understanding the intricate language. You can appreciate Mozart without understanding the whole history of German music. But it can help to know the mythology of a particular animal. I don't necessarily think that all Kenyans would look at my work and say, "That's what she's saying." But there is obviously a jarring aspect to seeing a well-posed female figure with this scraggly hyena mask. I think that's the way masks operate in general. Think of the Guerrilla Girls.

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I think that the word "contemporary" is my saving grace because it's where the individual breaks off and where you are allowed to invent something that may have no necessary relationship or loyalty to one history or another. No one lives in a bubble and no one isn't influenced by everything around them. The material you're working with has much to do with the time in which you exist. Working with Mylar, which didn't exist 70 years ago, has allowed me to make collages that look like they're in-between sci-fi material and something very organic. It happens because Mylar is able to take on both perspectives from both ends of history. We're completely influenced by where we are, but in the end I don't feel it's fair for anyone to have forced upon them something they may not want. Also, how possible is it that I would be carrying the entire history of anything?

from "Resonant Surgeries: The Collaged World of Wangechi Mutu" by Robert Enright, Border Crossings 105 (February 2008)

WANGECHI MUTU, whose artwork has received international acclaim, has been collected by Tate Modern in London, the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York Museum of Modern Art, Studio Museum of Harlem, Chicago Museum of Modern Art, Montreal Museum of Contemporary Art, Princeton University Art Museum, and the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art. She has also exhibited her work at a number of institutions, such as Germany's Staatlichen Kunsthalle Baden-Baden, the Wiels Contemporary Art Center in Brussels, the Brooklyn Museum, San Francisco's Museum of Modern Art, the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto, Berlin's Deutsche Guggenheim, the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington (DC), Sompō Japan Museum of Art in Tokyo (Japan), and Monica de Cardenas Galleria of Zuoz, Switzerland. In 2010, Deutsche Bank honored her with its Artist of the Year award. In 1991, she received the I.B. from the United World College of the Atlantic, Wales, UK, and in 1996 she graduated from Cooper Union for the Advancement of the Arts and Sciences (NYC) with a BFA degree. In 2000, she went on to earn the MFA in sculpture from Yale University. She was born in 1972 in Nairobi, Kenya, and now lives in Brooklyn, New York.



Wangechi Mutu, *Try Dismantling the Little Empire Inside of You* (2007)
Ink, Mylar, pigment, photo collage with mixed media on Mylar and wall (54" x 97")
Courtesy of the artist and Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects

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Wangechi Mutu, *Botanical Arrangement Limber* (2011)
Mixed media collage and paint on Mylar (51 3/4" x 31 3/4" x 1/2")
Courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York

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Wangechi Mutu, *I Sit, You Stand, They Crawl* (2010)
Mixed media ink, paint, collage on Mylar (97" x 61 1/2")
Courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York

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Wangechi Mutu, *Humming* (2010)
Mixed media ink, paint, glitter, fake pearls, collage on Mylar (94" x 79")
Courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York



Wangechi Mutu, *All the way up, all the way out* (2012)
Collage and mixed media on linoleum (74" x 50 3/8")
Courtesy of the artist and Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects
Photographed by Robert Wedemeyer, 2012

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Wangechi Mutu, *Oh, Madonna!* (2010)
Mixed media ink, paint, collage on Mylar (91 1/2" x 54")
Courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York