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Wangechi Mutu
Artist of the Year 2010

Haunted: Photography, Video, and Performance in New York

Anish Kapoor in Bilbao

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"We Categorize What We're Afraid Of"

An Encounter with Wangechi Mutu
by Matthew Evans and Oliver Koerner von Gustorf

Upon entering Wangechi Mutu's Brooklyn studio, one immediately feels something akin to the overwhelming sensation of opening a box with an impossible jigsaw puzzle. Magazine cutouts, mostly of female body parts, litter every surface; animal hides shroud the walls; and a buffalo horn dangles from a hook, its sheen worn out by the unrolled sheets of iridescent Mylar stretching along the tables and floors. This total chaos of pictures, objects, and materials feels like a cross between a laboratory and a chamber of wonders: catalogues and art books from every conceivable era and movement are piled up on shelves; containers with brushes and pencils stand next to a mannequin head; newspaper clippings, notes, pages from books on ethnology are pinned to walls and doors alongside bags with pearls and glitter. Yet despite this immense variety, everything seems to be

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related here, part of an organically growing visual cosmos. There are works in varying stages of completion, from the first associative collections of materials to the elaborately opulent collages, for instance *Fallen Heads* (2010), a large-scale work that was just completed for Mutu's exhibition at the Deutsche Guggenheim and takes up an entire table surface. Women's heads covered in roses and pearls seem to sprout through a veil of blood-red hues. Black lines emerging from their eyes and mouths recall whips, tentacles, or seaweed floating in water, suggesting sensory organs that communicate and seek contact. One of Mutu's nearly finished works glares out from the wall where it is hung, and this puzzle all seems to consummate, although in an equally enigmatic manner, in a one-legged cyborg-woman, with arms for a nose and motorcycles for limbs, who is suspended out from a plastic "canvas."

Born in 1972 in Kenya and now based in New York, Mutu has been creating these collage figures since she began her studies in the mid-1990s at Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art in New York. Instead of canvas, she prefers to work on Mylar, a translucent polyester plastic that was developed in the 1950s for the chemical industry. Although Mutu's hybrid forms are obviously not from this world, in any case they seem to be for the most part female. "I always look at how women are represented," the artist explains. Sourcing her work from a variety of media, including conventional fashion and lifestyle glossies, pornography, and automobile magazines, Mutu uncovers basic forms that society finds attractive and force-feeds them back to us. "I think it reflects not only how people feel about women," she explains, "but also how society feels about itself." In *This You Call Civilization?* (2008), a self-cannibalizing Medusa apparition

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emerges from both a pair of flesh-pink legs and a green plant stem with wheels for roots. At a first glance it looks extraterrestrial, but the composition concedes something undeniably proverbial upon closer inspection: The sexed-up gesture of a woman crossing her legs combined with another in a prostrated prayer position reveals that venerable psychoanalytic truth that our manifestations of both seduction and restriction are so intimately intertwined.

One could regard her indefinable figures—and perhaps her entire body of work—as a reaction to our impulse to allocate even the things we do not understand into definite categories and make them easier to control. Even Mutu's extensive use of botany and zoology, which could be likened to the taxonomic illustrations of German naturalist Ernst Haeckel, are in fact intended

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to question our understanding of science. "I like to lean on the sciences," Mutu elaborates, "because it's an instinct to categorize what we're afraid of." Mutu, whose father is a writer and history teacher and mother a pharmacy owner and midwife, developed an interest in natural phenomena in her youth, which she spent in the Kenyan capital Nairobi. "I've always gravitated to *National Geographic*," she muses, "because it's something I grew up with, and it's always had this language of authority in it that seemed to purport to understand nature. ... I often use plant life from catalogues that try to represent the jungle, the unknown place, the 'dark continent.' What is that place? It's 'mystery,' 'danger,' 'doom,' and I love to play around with that understanding." In this way, Mutu's use of nature is closer to that of the Italian Mannerist Giuseppe Arcimboldi, whose surreal portraits composed entirely of fruits, flowers, and fish, among other things, were never what they appeared to be. Just as much as Arcimboldi's work was a forerunning, 16th-century chapter in Surrealism, Mutu seems to add a 21st-century afterward to the erstwhile movement.

Mutu's work, however, doesn't stop at the rifts and ruses of consumerist or archival imagery; first and foremost, she is concerned with the historical implications of cultural inequalities, the effects of a world in which large numbers do not experience the advantages of capitalism and have not the luxury of gazing at images or existential preoccupation. Her exhibition for the Deutsche Guggenheim also addresses this theme of cultural and economic borders and is also inspired by Mutu's memories of Berlin: "I really wanted to unearth the feelings I had when I was in Berlin shortly after the wall came down. I went there while I was going to high school in Wales, with my school choir. I don't really remember the place where we performed, but it was right near the Berlin Wall. I remember how many things were sold from the Eastern Bloc. It was a crazy time, and it was good to witness the transition. Everything was breaking apart and forming anew at the same time. You almost felt like you were in a novel; nothing seemed real. Back then I was staying with a family in East Berlin. The choir toured, and each member stayed with a different guest family. I remember mine quite well, because the impressions were so graphic. They lived very modestly. They were not wealthy, and they had torn out all these magazine images of things that they wanted and put them on the wall. I was astonished to see this. You know how, as a teenager, you put your posters of rock stars or

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your idols up on the wall. In this case, it was an image of a designer jacket or a perfume, and it was torn out very roughly. These images were hanging in the living room and the kitchen, and I thought, 'Oh my God, this is so obscene.'"

Mutu explains her impression of this dichotomy in a single city, this invisible boundary between the people in the west and those in the east, an entire nation that apparently couldn't wait to finally consume name brands and fast food. "There's this desire everywhere. A person that doesn't live somewhere for some reason looks over the fence and sees that the grass is greener on the other side. But especially in impoverished places, there's this incredible fiction about rich countries and what they're like. Having thought about that, I also wanted to question this idea with the show and to think about how poverty, how not having everything given to you, adjusts your way of making things, your way of thinking about things, and how you go about creating beauty. And that's why the idea of shantytown came to me." For Mutu, these settlements and the ability to survive and to invent under

conditions unfit for human beings—building water pipes from found objects and trash, laying improvised electrical lines, and establishing systems of trade—are a mark of genius. "There are incredible amounts of things that look like collages to the eye accustomed to art, because people are constantly tying things together, wrapping them, solving problems, fitting things in, fixing things. They take things that other people have thrown out, and they make them work." Even while Mutu emphasizes how this method of working and thinking has inspired her own practice, she insists that the shantytown motif has nothing to do with romanticism. "It's not about turning things into something else in an unusual or innovative way; it's about having no choice, about

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eking out a living in times when your humanity is being constantly taken away from you. It's about trying to remain human, trying to make your home cozy even though everything outside you tells you that you should be a criminal or an animal. I'm not trying to make it look 'ghetto' for the fun of it. What I'm trying to do is investigate what is behind this impulse that is important for those of us who don't have to live that way. As a matter of fact, I'm convinced we can learn from that way of thinking."

© Wangechi Mutu. Courtesy Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects. Photo: Robert Wedemeyer

Mutu's exhibition at the Deutsche Guggenheim confronts the viewer with an array of contrasting sensations. Through collages, drawings, sculptures, and videos, she creates an evocative landscape reminiscent of an asylum or otherwise temporary housing: barracks and temples, overabundance in close proximity to poverty and want. The windows and walls of the exhibition space are cloaked in gray, feltlike blankets of recycled material. Attached to the ceiling are bottles that drip liquid, maybe milk, maybe wine, into enameled bowls, cheap imports from China that are used around the world. "I hope the visitors can smell it." Mutu adds that there will also be a quiet, spare video titled *Mud Fountain* (2010) that she has been editing for several weeks. The piece depicts a woman who slowly sinks to her knees. "I also wanted to think about how we accumulate images to remind ourselves of what we desire, all the way from icons and God to all the things we want to own and buy and become and look like. There will be one wall with collages that reminisce about things we long for. And there's this central icon of the woman that appears in the video. But it's an icon that is slowly being denigrated: she goes from standing to being pelted and finally going down."

It is too simple to interpret Mutu's exhibition as a pessimistic swan song, an acknowledgment of being defeated by Western consumerism, global exploitation, and the oppression of women. One would then succumb to the very categorizations she radically calls into question. "I have a theory that there's this incredible waste of resources, imagination, and ideas although they are right in front of us. Often you find in places you'd least expect, in areas with incredible poverty, people who seem to be the least educated, but who are actually quite ingenious because they're still alive despite the conditions they live in. In a way, my exhibition is an homage to their systems, to their way of working, to this kind of tenacity and ingenuity."

This vein of thought manifests itself in Mutu's artistic practice, in a working method that she herself calls "humble." This is

reflected in the choice of the relatively simple materials for her collages or in her refusal to use digital means to facilitate the process. While she has risen over the past several years to become one of the best-known young artists in America and could easily

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employ a whole factory of assistants to produce her work, she does as much as she can herself. Mutu relates how important the various different phases in the creative process are for her, from the endless and monotonous clipping of images, during which she listens to music and thinks about the work to the many intuitive decisions, when the themes and content begin to crystallize, bit by bit.

Mutu underscores the significance of a tactile working method: "I'm very interested in the physical activity of working with my hands. I'm good at it, and I learned it early, without even really learning. I was raised in the city, but we did a lot more things with our hands, of course. For me, shelling peas and sifting rice are some of the most beautiful, meditative things in the world. They make me love what I'm doing. In a way, I guess, we're all sort of chewing our cud. Work is a way of passing time, of making time valuable for yourself. For me, using my body in different ways to create, to make something happen that's real, to make an imaginary thing come forth—is very powerful. I hate to overuse the word 'magical,' but it really is."

At the same time, Mutu's technique is also influenced by her biography. She relates the defining experience of arriving from Kenya to a school in Great Britain and discovering that her background would be judged from a completely different perspective: "I remember trying to discuss what I considered to be art, coming from my Kenyan perspective. Colonialism has left these voids behind, for instance in art, because in Kenya it was eliminated in some areas and in others it became skewed into this cheesy tourist stuff. And I remember how difficult it was to compare different perceptions of art, especially when the comparison takes on a violent colonial attitude: 'Your history and your way of doing things are really minor, and actually, the way we do things is more

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important.'" She instinctively chose very simple and materially poor working methods requiring no more than a bit of string, fabric remnants, a sheet of paper, and a pencil and happened upon the collage form. "I didn't have a studio when I came out of grad school and moved to New York. I carried my sketchbook everywhere, and I drew the things that came to my mind. I kept my imagination in my hand, in connection to the brain. I think one of the things about being an artist is that your brain is in every part of your body that you use to create. You have to keep that organ constantly working. And I so appreciated the free magazines on the street and the free buttons I found. In the classes I taught, there would be leftover fabric, and I would stuff it in my bag and bring it back home and use it in my work. I knew these little things could be used to create tremendous ideas."