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Wangechi Mutu: The Mugumo Tree, Matriarchies, and International Mythologies

December 18, 2013 By [intsculpturectr](#) in [In the Studio](#) by [Jan Garden Castro](#)



Wangechi Mutu's "Fantantic Journey" exhibition originated at the Nasher Art Museum at Duke University in March, 2013 and is traveling to the Brooklyn Museum, the Museum of Contemporary Art in North Miami, and the Mary and Leigh Block Museum at Northwestern University through December 7, 2014. It features more than fifty works created between 1990 and the present. In addition to drawings, mixed media collages, and three videos, each venue has a site specific installation with Mugumo trees—a legendary tree from Mutu's Kikuyu culture—and soccer balls, both created from humble materials—packing tape, fiber blankets used for wrapping furniture and victims of disaster, and string. One wall of fiber blankets has silky and lacy red undies that seem entangled or embedded in the gray fibers. Mutu's films and collages feature compelling, unique, ferocious, provocative, mythic female creatures with exaggerated body parts; they often have umbilical or psychic interconnections with trees, animals, and symbolic objects.

The sculpture studio has an industrial floor, ten-foot high ceilings; large windows overlook an industrial Brooklyn neighborhood. One room is for installations, another for supplies, with an office island between. A disco ball hangs overhead. A cardboard guitar with silver strings is mounted on the white walls above a supply cabinet. One of the two round support columns in the space has been turned into one of Mutu's signature Mugumo trees—this one has its roots on the ceiling—which I take to be a spiritual sky direction. The tree and the far wall are composed with grey blankets (called "disaster relief") turned into trees and background for some "Moth Girls"—winged creatures with human legs and for collages that contain women's genitalia, hands, amid motorcycle parts, snake parts, traditional African masks, gauze, a butterfly, high heeled black boots, and open windows. A drainpipe has been turned into a bandaged, outstretched hand, palm up; a smaller bearded head is related to the hand. Gourds, berries, shoes, horns, and a bottle dripping milk figure in installations around the room. A plastic bag with discarded material inside hangs as a reminder of blood sausages made in Kenya from cow stomachs. The supply room has rolls of tape with different hues/designs, a costume room, a room for staging film shoots, a board listing new/upcoming projects and supply needs, paint, and untold boxed treasures. ^[1] The artist's website is www.wangechimutu.com.



Wangechi Mutu Studio



Wangechi Mutu, Sketchbook drawing, 2010. Pen, ink, collage on paper, 10.75 x 7.75". Courtesy of the Artist.

Jan Castro: Could you describe your sculpture studio space and the process for creating your installations?

Wangechi Mutu: This is the studio where I do my three-dimensional and time-based work. I do collage work on the parlor floor of my Victorian brownstone studio. This industrial space is much larger and allows me to freak out using materials and substances without fear of damaging anything. I store props, costumes, chairs, things I use in my work and also use this for photo shoots and things related to performance sculpture and installation. It has two halves, like a big heart. One has the feel of an installation because we had an event here and I tidied up in a way that made things quite visible. On the left, you can see images that relate to previous installations and inspirations. This studio can be turned into more forms and spaces; I spend more time in the collage studio.

Castro: Are any rituals and/or music part of your working process?

Mutu: I listen to a variety of types of music. Generally, when I'm conceiving an idea and working through the initial hump of creating a piece, I listen to nonverbal music. Words tend to influence my thought process.

Castro: Whom do you consider your artistic, literary and musical forebears?

Mutu: I love Octavia Butler, Gabriel García Márquez, Arundhati Roy's fiction, *The God of Small Things*, and also her more recent political work. Maya Deren is an influence of mine in film, performance, and the use of the female body as ritual – the cosmology of a particular tradition but also as an art language. I like very much Ana Mendieta's work and her love of the notion of what earth is and for the violence of ritual and body. I like Márquez's work for its surreal magic that is present in a lot of African history and storytelling – practices that are non-Western. His writing is also present in my visual language. [Ngugi wa Thiong'o](#) has written works (*Weep Not, Child*) – the world that he describes is one I'm curious about — the moment in

Kenya when the pre-Christian, pre-Western world had a deep confidence in its own heritage, its own space and place.

Castro: Did you read Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka?

Mutu: Yes, Achebe was fundamental reading in school — *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease*. Then he's written many essays and has spoken deeply in dignified ways about the dilemma of the contemporary African – we find ourselves having to find a new language or languages and new ways of speaking English because, in some cases, the languages are lost. We need to break English up into parts we want to utilize, which, in some ways, relates to collage if you think about it from a visual perspective.

Castro: Was there a turning point after Yale when you found your “voice”?

Mutu: The turning point had a wide circumference. It wasn't a quick whip around. The momentum was building up, and I was clear about the things I was enjoying doing, but I didn't know what was around the corner. I came back to New York with a sense of anxiety due to the logistical issues – where to live, getting a studio, and so forth. I was adamant about continuing making drawings, writing, and continuing my investigation. Because I'd come out of sculpture, it was hard to let go of the space, the objects, and the elements that allow you to think of things. I had to work in drawing, in my sketchbooks, in small formats to continue the ideas and the blood life that I had invested in while I was in graduate school. As a result, I created a body of work that is very distinct from what I had done in graduate school – very personal – the kind of work you do when you're not expected to justify anything in front of a classroom and a professor, and in some ways that was actually more my true voice than what I was doing in school.



Wangechi Mutu, *Suspended Playtime*, 2008.
Garbage Bags, twine, Varying dimensions, from 2-8 diameter inches.
Courtesy of the Artist and Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects.
Projects. Collection of the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University.



Wangechi Mutu, *Family Tree*, 2012. Suite of 13 individually framed mixed-media collages on paper, Various dimensions.
Courtesy of the Artist and Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles

Mutu: I was a little bit afraid of it. For a while, I was making a ton of experiments on paper but not really wanting to show people what I was doing. I would talk about grandiose installation plans and meanwhile didn't have a penny to scratch together anything aside from these drawings because they were affordable and accessible — and in my mind already. The voice was there, the confidence was there. I hadn't yet admitted to myself that I was going to be making two-dimensional work, because that was what I wanted to do.



Wangechi Mutu, *Once Upon A Time She Said, I'm Not Afraid and Her Enemies Began to Fear Her. The End.* Mixed media wall drawing. Dimensions variable. Courtesy of the Artist.

Castro: Could you discuss your materials? In addition to garbage bags and packing tape, of which you have an amazing range, I love your using disaster relief blankets to make the trees.

Mutu: They're rescue blankets, but in many parts of the world including Kenya and poorer countries, they're just blankets that people use in their house or shack. They're also used in other places – on the backs of rescued baby elephants; people use them as a shawl in the cold season. They're part of my visual memory growing up, so when they arrived in my studio around this art work that had been returned from somewhere, I remember being shocked. Using it to protect art work says a lot. What art means in one place versus a human life in another is so dependent on the respective value systems. That's also why they work; people understand their presence. Matter has a certain gravity, a certain cognitive pull. When the blanket stands for one thing here and you utilize it somewhere else, it takes its meaning and reattaches it to the new shape it's being used to address.

Castro: I also loved the early bottles you made with cowry shells around the necks and for eyes.

Mutu: They're small and fragile and there are not many left. I made huge number of them at Cooper Union; it was a testament to a time when I didn't have enough money to buy materials, so I used bottles because bottles are so common. I tried to unify their appearance: I would paint them white and use tar or asphalt from the print studio to give them this darkened or archaic look, so they felt ancient. I was playing with that notion, too; there are things that are considered or ascribed "authentic," "ancient," or even "African" in ways that are stereotypical and silly and reductive. I wanted to play with that and utilize that to force people to come to terms with why you think these objects have more meaning with the paint and the beads. I'm playing with a predetermined aesthetic vocabulary—the cowry shells, beads, and scale has this reverberation that makes you think about small voodoo items or objects that have been used for ritual purposes, but they're also not – they're clearly pretending. The fact that we don't know how to tell whether things are pretending or not is also part of the problematic history. This is also the problem of colonization and the loss of continuity in language. You lose your voice and ability to explain those things and you also lose the voice of the real objects that existed – how they're able to stand for something without everyone having to say what it is. You grow up around objects that have meaning. The bottle objects came from a time that I was dealing with my foreignness, my newness in the US, my dual cultural background. At that point, I was seeing myself as a Kenyan living in New York, not a New Yorker who is Kenyan like I might do now.

Castro: You use the same principle of showing up stereotypes in a more sophisticated way in your more recent work. Your women explode sexist, colonialist, racial, and other stereotypes. How did you figure out how to attack stereotypes using stereotypes – including body parts cut out of fashion magazines?

Mutu: (laughing) I don't know how I figured out how to do that. I'm always battling with this conundrum: how do you critique a culture when you are living within it? As much as you are aware of its wrongdoings, its failures, its inability to see itself, you are part of it. You exist within it. You are also attached to the problem because you eat the food that is created by that culture, you consume the ideas, you watch and think about the things that are offered to you. How do you make an assessment about what that culture could or should be like? One of the things that I do is I dismember this body we exist in and I reconfigure it. I try to make this argument that, first of all, we have created these rigid standards that are pure creation – that are not necessarily reality. Beauty is relative, and beauty is *so* profoundly different from one place to another that women and femaleness is a very hard thing to describe. The idea of gender is incredibly, I feel, conservative and limited, and so these roles that are assigned to people because they're from a particular gender, history, or time and place, need to be assessed. They need to be shuffled. In fact, they have often been shuffled in the past. We are at a time in history where we need to look at some of the archaic, limited, and traditional modes of thinking and *rework the model*. I don't go that far for my material. I go right to the source of the problems—this image bank that is cheap, accessible, unbelievably seductive. Even if you don't want to look at these images, you end up having to look at them because they're provocative and posed right in front of you, they're delicious and potent. So fashion photography and glamour pictures are this candy that I utilize, cook up. Out of it, I make this sticky caramel — I have found a way to stick my resentment of patriarchal, corporate, and national institutions. I make something for personal reasons which ends up being important for other people because they understand similar things for themselves. I don't know if that makes sense, but that's how I end up using magazines with

pornography, hunting, and motorbike imagery that is problematic and often encourages behavior that is inhumane and not kind to this planet.

Castro: That leads to the question: who is your audience?

Mutu: My first and foremost viewer is myself. I'm not making work if I'm unable to enjoy making it. I don't want to bore myself. Also, I then consider myself in different times of my life – when I was a young girl, what issues I had with my body, my world, my father, my church – and I use that young version of myself as a way to stimulate the discussion again. Then as I expand an idea and it gains a sense of itself as a piece of work, I open up the discussion beyond that. I let myself think about where the viewer is going to stand relative to this piece or the colors or the forms. Sometimes I throw things in that are booby traps – such as a flower pistil with a whole other world inside.
By [Jan Garden Castro](#)



Wangechi Mutu, Sketchbook drawing, 2010. Pen, ink, collage on paper, 10.75 x 7.75 inches. Courtesy of the Artist.
Wangechi Mutu, A Shady Promise, 2006, mixed media on mylar. 87.5 x 108.5 inches. Courtesy of the Artist.

[1] This interview took place in Wangechi Mutu's sculpture studio on 31 October 2013 at 12:22 p.m. Half will appear in "In the Studio" at sculpture.org and half will appear in *Black Renaissance Noire*, an NYU journal, in 2014.

Wangechi Mutu, Family Tree, 2012. Suite of 13 individually framed mixed-media collages on paper, Various dimensions. Courtesy of the Artist and Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects. Collection of the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke U.

