

Brooklyn Museum

Teaching Resource: Special Exhibition

Wangechi Mutu: A Fantastic Journey

October 11, 2013–March 9, 2014





Wangechi Mutu: *A Fantastic Journey*

About the Artist

When asked about how she became an artist, Wangechi Mutu said “I was seventeen years old studying at an international school in Wales. I had a phenomenal art teacher who treated pupils like artists. He gave us studios and sketchbooks and told us that whenever something inspired us—watching a film, or finding something on the street—to install it into our imagination. It was liberating to realize that everything we do as human beings can be incorporated into our art and that really switched me on.”¹

Mutu is best known for her collages, which are constructed using fragments from diverse sources, including fashion and travel magazines such as *National Geographic*, pornography, African art books, automotive schematics, and science fiction, as well as hand-drawn and painted elements. The fantastical, hybrid creatures she creates with these materials most often feature feminine forms. Her focus on female protagonists also began when she was a teenager. “To me the female figure is enchanting and power-filled, it astounds me, it baffles me,” she says. “When I was nineteen I saw middle-aged women in Nairobi protesting their children’s detention at a notorious torture prison. They slowly put a curse out—by disrobing and exposing their bodies—causing the riot police to freak out and flee. I’m interested in how the female body is enhanced and contorted for historical and cultural purposes.”² Mutu’s artwork also explores themes related to colonialism and displacement, war, religion and ritual, consumerism and environmental degradation, and international perceptions of Africa.

Born in Nairobi, Kenya, in 1972, Mutu was first educated at an all-girls school, Loreto Convent Msongari, before moving to Wales as a teenager to study at the United World College of the Atlantic. In the 1990s she moved to New York City, where she attended the New School for Social Research, Parsons School of Art and Design, and Cooper Union for the Advancement of the Arts and Sciences. She received her M.F.A. from the Yale School of Art in 2000. Her work has been shown at the Johannesburg Biennale; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Miami Art Museum; Tate Modern, London; the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York; Museum Kunstpalast, Düsseldorf; and Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris. Her first solo exhibition at a major North American museum opened at the Art Gallery of Ontario in March 2010.

About the Exhibition

Wangechi Mutu: A Fantastic Journey features fifty works made between the mid-1990s and the present, including collages, drawings, installations, sculptures, and videos, as well as a new multimedia wall composition and never-before-seen sketchbooks. The exhibition explores the artistic process through which Mutu creates her simultaneously alluring and unnerving beings that are part human, animal, plant, and machine. Her combination of materials, cultural references, and images—her own “mashed-up Afrofuturist vision of the universe”³—takes viewers on a disturbing yet enchanting, transformative journey to confront real-world contradictions and complexities.



Description of the Artwork

Riding Death in My Sleep depicts a feminine being, crouching on a curved, dark purple surface. She is bald, with pale skin, a broad nose, dark brown, almond-shaped eyes, and large, full red lips. She cocks her head to the side and looks directly out at the viewer. Her brightly colored body is mottled with dark blue and white blotches, which may represent her skin or a skintight bodysuit. Her wrists and breasts are covered with a cheetah-like print, and she

wears brown, knee-high, high-heeled boots with featherlike yellow-and-brown fringe. Accompanying her are five small fantastical beings: an elephant-headed, feather-winged creature with a long, eel-like tail and a flower-winged spotted rabbit (see illustration, p. 5), both flying above her head; an insect with lizard and scorpion features, crawling along her left shoulder; and a bodiless bald eagle and an animal with the torso of a tabby cat and butterfly wings, standing near her in a field of plain and spotted mushrooms.

About the Artwork

Riding Death in My Sleep (2002) is an early example of the artist's investigation of cultural hybridization and displacement, employing the symbols and strategies that have become part of her ongoing artistic vocabulary. The facial features of the central figure combine bits and pieces associated with different ethnicities in order to complicate notions of racial identity. Mutu has explained: “I was interested in this ethnically unrecognizable character whose body gesture is poking fun at the prevalent squatting pose used when photographing black women. There's still such an emphasis on racial profiling and the remnants of other forensic and cultural means of determining someone's racial identity from their face. It's one of those bogus sciences that has grown and coagulated into an institution of oppression and hierarchization. But I'm a big believer in putting an enticing trap leading myself and the viewer towards a questioning, and perhaps understanding, of the definition of beauty.”⁴

Stiletto heels also appear frequently in Mutu's collages: “I have contradictory reasons for using them,” she says, adding that “they're weapons, prosthetics, embellishments, armor, and obviously, titillating power symbols” that at the same time “constrain and deform the body.”⁵ Mutu describes the setting for *Riding Death in My Sleep* as a “mysterious, unknowable terrain.”⁶ The mushrooms dotting the landscape also carry symbolic meaning, as Trevor Schoonmaker observes: “As mushrooms are fleshy, fruit-bearing fungi that have no roots, do not require sunlight, and are neither plant nor animal, Mutu uses them in her work as a metaphor for immigration, as people separated from their own countries often settle—whether by necessity or force—in areas seen as intolerable by others.”⁷ The bodiless bald eagle is recognizable as a symbol of the United States.

Questions for Viewing

Take a moment to look silently.

Zoom in on the main figure. What do you notice about her? Describe her facial expression and pose. What details did the artist include to tell us more about this figure?

What do you notice about the setting?

Describe the creatures that accompany the main figure. What do they all have in common? How are they different? How might they feel about one another? What do you see that makes you say that?

The artist Wangechi Mutu is interested in hybrids (things made by combining at least two different elements). What examples of hybridity can you find in this collage?

What mood does the collage convey? How does it make you feel? What aspect of the artwork gives you this impression?

What title would you give this artwork? Why? Why do you think Mutu chose the title *Riding Death in My Sleep*?

For older students: The curator and art critic Okwui Enwezor describes Mutu's art as "at once alluring and menacing, attractive and repulsive, poetic and monstrous, figurative and vegetal."⁸ Do you agree or disagree? Support your argument with visual evidence.



Activities

Art-Making

Invent a hybrid creature made from animal, plant, human, and machine parts. Cut out images of different plants, flowers, trees, insects, mammals, birds, fish, motorcycles, cars, and humans from diverse magazines such as *National Geographic*, *Cycle World*, *Vogue*, *Essence*, and *Latina*. Combine details from each image and assemble your collage on a piece of card stock.

Create your own sketchbook to record observations about the world around you. Use recycled paper, cardboard, or card stock, and either staple the sheets together or punch holes and tie them together with yarn or string. Take your finished sketchbook with you wherever you go: to school, to the supermarket, to the park, on the bus or subway. Draw or write about the people, places, and things you see, hear, touch, taste, and smell that inspire or strike you. When you have several entries, choose one to use as a seed idea for a poem or artwork. Visit <http://bit.ly/1bw95b9> for more sketchbook ideas.

Art and Writing

Create a story starter based on a detail from *Riding Death in My Sleep*. Exchange your idea with a partner. Now use your partner's story starter to inspire your own creative writing.

Imagine that you are the author of a graphic novel with a fantasy- or science fiction-theme, and that *Riding Death in My Sleep* illustrates the main event in your story. Prepare a story map that includes a description of setting, main characters, and plot (including a problem and resolution). Now write a paragraph to describe what's happening in this scene.

Imagine you encounter the protagonist from this artwork as she starts to recite a poem or monologue that begins, "Riding death in my sleep . . ." What might she say next? Write a poem or monologue that records what you think she might share with us.

Art and Society

For older students

Artists make art inspired by the important and enduring ideas, concepts, issues, and dilemmas they care about. For Mutu, two recurring themes in her work—women and violence—stem from a tragic event that took place when she was a teenager. At that time, acts of sexual violence were committed against Kenyan girls at a school, and the young men involved were not held accountable for their actions. "It was then that my place as a woman hit me and I understood that there was a difference between women's rights and human rights," Mutu says.⁹

Research other contemporary artists whose artworks explore and comment on injustice and oppression. Select one work of art to share with others. Be sure to think about the ways in which it conveys the artist's point of view. Discuss the role of art as a form of activism and healing for the artist and for others. You might consider works in the Brooklyn Museum's collection by the following artists: Hank Willis Thomas, Kara Walker, Mounir Fatmi, Michael Richards, Hew Locke, Fred Wilson, Kehinde Wiley, Judy Chicago, and Shirin Neshat.



Resources for Teachers

Enwezor, Okwui. "Cut & Paste." *Arise* (Feb. 2011). <http://www.ariselive.com/articles/cut-paste/87416/>

An article by Okwui Enwezor including an interview with Mutu in her studio.

<http://nasher.duke.edu/mutu/>

A 2013 website for *Wangechi Mutu: A Fantastic Journey* by the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University.

<http://www.pbs.org/art21/films/protest>

An Art21 documentary investigating how contemporary artists explore politics, inequality, and the many conflicts that besiege the world today.

Joo, Eungie, Joseph Keehn, and Jenny Ham-Roberts, eds. *Rethinking Contemporary Art and Multicultural Education*. New York: Routledge, 2011. See especially pp. 160–62, 276, 394–96.

An accessible and practical book for teachers about teaching with contemporary art.

Schoonmaker, Trevor. *Wangechi Mutu: A Fantastic Journey*. Durham, N.C.: Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, 2013.

A richly illustrated, full-color catalogue for the exhibition of the same name.

Singleton, Douglas, ed. *Wangechi Mutu: A Shady Promise*. Bologna: Damiani, 2008.

A survey of Mutu's artwork and introduction to her visual ideas.

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Notes

1. Okwui Enwezor, "Cut & Paste," *Arise* (Feb. 2011), <http://www.ariselive.com/articles/cut-paste/87416/>.

2. Wangechi Mutu, interview by Kirsten Fricke, "Sex Sells," *Beautiful Decay* (Dec. 2005), http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/feminist_art_base/gallery/wangechi_mutu.php.

3. Exhibition label, *Wangechi Mutu: A Fantastic Journey*, Brooklyn Museum, 2013–14.

4. Douglas Singleton, ed., *Wangechi Mutu: A Shady Promise* (Bologna: Damiani, 2008), 85.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

7. Trevor Schoonmaker, *Wangechi Mutu: A Fantastic Journey* (Durham, N.C.: Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, 2013), 22.

8. Enwezor, "Cut & Paste."

9. Ibid.

Wangechi Mutu (Kenyan, b. 1972). *Riding Death in My Sleep* (p. 3: overall; pp. 1, 4, 5: details), 2002. Ink and collage on paper, 60 x 44 inches (152.4 x 111.76 cm). Collection of Peter Norton, New York. © Wangechi Mutu

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