

The empowering influence of travel and fiction



Wangechi Mutu

New York-based Kenyan artist Wangechi Mutu's collages manipulate traditional images of beauty to create often-disturbing creatures that the New York Times described as "Afro-futuristic... mingling Romare Bearden and Vogue." She describes her work as "making explicit the mutilations that occur due to war or rights of passage in a way that superimposes them with glamour." Her seductive and politically charged images are featured in *Looking Both Ways: Contemporary Artists from Africa*.

You were raised in Nairobi, went to school in Wales and New England, and now work in New York City. How do your cross-continental experiences influence your work?

I've lived in so many different places. Traveling is a 360-degree education, through sights, smell, hearing, taste. You're not only learning about yourself, but also how contextual and subjective everything is. Things are what we make them and culture is an incredible animal that we fuel with our own beliefs and understandings. I think that my work is not identifiably from any one region. I have a real love of disguise and of the various things I've been allowed to be. It's empowering to be in a new place every so often, away from family, for example, who might say, "What happened to these things you used to do or these interests you used to have?"

Machinehead from the Fungus series, 2003, Wangechi Mutu, United States. Courtesy of the artist.



You started out in the art world as a sculptor. What influenced your move to two-dimensional art?

I always liked the idea of making objects that were supposed to inform you about a people. That was the most intriguing thing for me about the Museum of Natural History, seeing gourds and stools from our country informing people about who we are. These poor little objects have to carry so much weight.

But even when my pieces were sculptural or performance-based, they always began with drawings to see what I could do with colors and textures and fabrics. In that way, collage and drawing have always been there, like an illegitimate child of what I thought of as my main work. After graduate school, I planned large ambitious projects and created drawings for ideas that never manifested. Those drawings are what I did, what I now do. The materials were inexpensive and accessible, and it fueled my artistic impulses at a time when my resources were really low.

How did the idea for *People Who Live in Glass Towers Shouldn't Imagine Us* develop?

This piece has more painting than any other type of drawing that I do, but it allows me to get a little bit more epic. I consider myself more a person who draws [than a painter]. I don't get into forming shape and light and these things that painters are obsessed with. I'm interested more in gesture and line and collage, the textures and effects that come from juxtaposing images. This piece refers to various attacks including those that have happened in my country, the terrorist attacks of 9/11, and especially those perpetrated by superpower nations. It's a message, a metaphor that we're all in this glass space together.

There is a strong narrative element to your art, which has been described as storytelling. How does the narrative tradition influence your work?

I think that in [the vocabulary of] Western visual art, "narrative" is the only way to describe some of the ways that I think. It's not abstract; there are these figures and gestures clearly evoking a story. But narrative is much more expansive where I come from. In Western culture, storytelling is not necessarily taken very seriously. In Africa, it's how histories are told, how politics happen—through stories, through oral discussion.

I do have a true love of fiction and its ability to allow for radical new forms of behavior. You can invent something in fiction that doesn't happen normally. [In fiction] women can be completely in charge of their destiny without ignoring family and ornament and things that have been considered to hold us down and leave us subordinate. You can do that through fictional tales, and then people begin to see it as possible. It allows for transcendence. I'd like to see these boundaries and presumptions completely blown away. ■