



Fig. 1 *A Headresting Moment*, 2006. Mixed media on Mylar, 89 x 54 in (226 x 137 cm)

# THESE ASSEMBLAGES: AN INVOCATION

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A spectacle, a tribute, another comprehensive survey of twenty-five years of artistic genius, of works that provoke, disturb, and illuminate the mind and heart, that gesture to uneasy beauty, are generative, and “speak story.” Mythological grandeur. Wangechi Mutu, the first Kenyan to have a large-scale museum survey in New York, puts together a “story” of practice: painting, collage, drawing, sculpture, film, and performance. A conversation of and between worlds; a visual commentary on things that have made our age so restless: ecological angst, woman-being, Africa, history, myth, presence, futures, interspecies symbiosis, story, metaphor, totemic ideas, nature custodianship, technology, identity, belonging, historical correction, feminism, art, and meaning (fig. 1).

For a world aching for new lexica capable of carrying the times in which we live, Mutu boldly traverses the threshold territories of a transcendent imagination. She plunges into the labyrinth of possibilities, the recondite underground of the unknown, mystery, and seductive danger, and reemerges with limitless artistic bounty. Through her art, she offers, at the very least, a salve—proposing another way of seeing and being in and with the world, nature, each other, and ourselves.

I first heard of Wangechi Mutu when a mutual friend—the late, iconic, big-souled catalyst of a great African artistic burgeoning, Binyavanga Wainaina—summoned me sometime in 2006 (as he used to) to the pub where he was holding forth. When I walked through the door, he hollered from his seat, “Look at this!” “This” was a print of what I would later learn was titled *Backlash Blues* (2004; fig. 2).

I grasped it with a sense of the familiar and the uncanny. It was only a print, yet it intimated a sense of bioluminescence, a composite of our yearnings, as if someone had peered into the closeted, intimate spaces of our African unseeing. This was ours, true, and of the world, and the artist had dispensed of any conceptual shackles to head into the furthest galaxies, unburdened yet engaged.

After I asked who made it, Binyavanga replied: “Wangechi Mutu. Don’t you know her? She is a Loreto girl. Like you. Ex-Mso.” “A Kenyan?” I exclaimed. No wonder. Here was “Us” in our complexities of sensing, seeing, and being in and with the universe, beyond the overloud limited imaginations of powerful others. Here, too, was a woman, one of us, a contemporary who had dared to travel far to draw out what she most sought to express, whose boldness had pushed open the gates of the greater art world.

I was enchanted. Knowing our friend, his mysterious capacities and connections, I asked if he had met her. “We plan to meet soon,” he told me. And meet they did.

I would look out for Mutu’s works online. I would also look for and listen to her words, her mellifluous world-naming, world-crafting, world-etching. The gaps in the gentle clarity of her voice allowed fresh questions, ideas, thoughts, and musings to emerge. There was a grounded sense of being, an enviable rootedness.

To us—the Africans, the Africa-affiliated among us, and, indeed, many in and of the world’s alleged “peripheries”—Mutu’s works, with their infinite reaching, their play with the temporal, are a revelation of our unremembered plenitudes, our mythical endowments. There is a welling of the eternal in so many of these pieces, portraying eons that incorporate past and future, earth and constellations, shadows, ghosts, and hauntedness; the numinous ingredients of our being. How she has realized this, journeying into this fecund site of creating, is something only the various muses of art might deign to answer.

It is thrilling to enter the arena of Mutu’s works, as a human, witness, passerby, creature, woman, and African. There is the alchemist who creates her own material. She has worked with Mylar polyester film, “choreographing” ink and acrylic paint into her sense of color. She cuts up shapes and forms and liberates the “what might be” from the “what is.” She binds what is broken but in new ways so that, sometimes, a mythic humanoid appears. Shapeshifting myth-maker. Creating, recreating, and regenerating. The chimera-generator (fig. 3).

And the world takes her work to heart—there are few countries where it has not been exhibited or encountered. To stand before Mutu’s pieces is to be summoned. Viewers cross an unseen threshold, and lingering before each piece of art, painting, collage, and installation, they watch. Forms, shapes, lines, and colors come at us, textured, unexpected. Rewarding.

Hers is the vision of a prophet, a thaumaturge. She transmutes the questions of our era, country, childhood, city, struggles, politics, history, dislocation, feminism,

nature, environment, wilderness, social unease, representation, geography, woman-being, blackness, memory, and contradictions and turns them into art across media (including her recent use of soil). Range, depth, scope, complexity. A multidimensional entity, Mutu also entered her being and body as a laboratory for her art. She strides into threshold spaces that many have been taught to spurn (beauty, blackness, future, spirit, unknowingness), open-souled and vulnerable. The dimensions of spirit, of energy, are then able to freely collaborate with her and inhabit her work.

"I have different themes, and I mash them all together."

—Wangechi Mutu, Conversation with Trevor Schoonmaker, *Africa Is a Country*, 2012

A leitmotif of her art is connected to her quest to make sense of, interpret, interrogate, experiment with, explore, repair, reconstruct, deconstruct, form, re-form, reimagine, reconstitute, and burnish from the ruins and disorientations of woman-being, of the female form, its identities, struggles, and expressions. This pursuit has made her series of works a panegyric to the feminine, a fulsome revelation of its pluralities and heterogeneity.

In Mutu's conversation with Isaac Julien and Claudia Schmuckli, inklings of Mutu, the wordsmith, emerge. Word collages implant fresh notions: "Rebellious and regal . . . femininity . . . Extraordinariness of the underrepresented . . . The multiplicity of the African, of Blackness, and of human-types."<sup>1</sup> These were her paean to Grace Jones.

Yet these words can apply to Mutu herself and her expansive body of work. Her colors nourish the imagination; her works are bold, poignant artifacts of our time, our epoch, our dimension. They are glorious provocations that deposit residues of questions and sensations in viewers. Her representation of African pluralities nonconforming to a psychically embedded trope—a myopic stereotype structured from the cultural disorders of others—means that many of her art critics struggle to lock her work into a category they recognize. This is work for the ages, the avant-garde of a burgeoning movement, which, in time, will give itself a name. She is emblematic of the world in flux. An artist whose practice is provoked by and created for these times. The old descriptions no longer fit.

"Rebellious and regal femininity." Sensual, sexual, sinuous. The desired, the body inside and outside and in-between. In *Family Tree* (2012; p. 112–15), her installation of thirteen collages telling the story of a female-centered origin myth, Mutu turns us into witnesses of her revelation of Eros's potency in its feminine turbulence—uncontained, ruin-making, life-bringing, and world-building. Fecundities. Intimacies. Lusciousness. Yearning, longing, wanting. Indeed, absolutely, defiantly, powerfully beautiful.

"As a young African girl. I knew that we needed to talk about beauty, especially among artists. . . . My first little revolution then was to use the word 'beautiful' in unexpected ways."

—Wangechi Mutu, in Conversation with Marika Prejusso, "Is America Really Full," 2020

Disrupting assumptions. Here, also, is desire on display. Here is surprise and disgust. Here is awe. And loss and the grotesque. We, the viewers, also recognize some of the characters from our dreams and nightmares; the nomadic force, who show up where least expected. *There* is uncertainty and experimentation—with the Africas, within and without, with the world. The site of presence and meaning. *There* is a fragment of New York and that which is visible and not visible.

"I realized that material has its own impact, its own energy, its life cycle, its desire to be alive, its wish not to be dead."

—Wangechi Mutu, "Conversation with Isaac Julien and Claudia Schmuckli," *I Am Speaking, Are You Listening?*, 2021

Detail and depths. You understand you are in the presence of an artist who converses with matter and energy in its multiple dimensions, especially at its most basic, when it reveals its habits, mysteries, and properties. Mutu's art, proposals, suggestions,



Fig. 2 *Backlash Blues*, 2004. Ink, acrylic, photo-collage, and contact paper on Mylar, 78 × 47 in (198 × 119.4 cm)

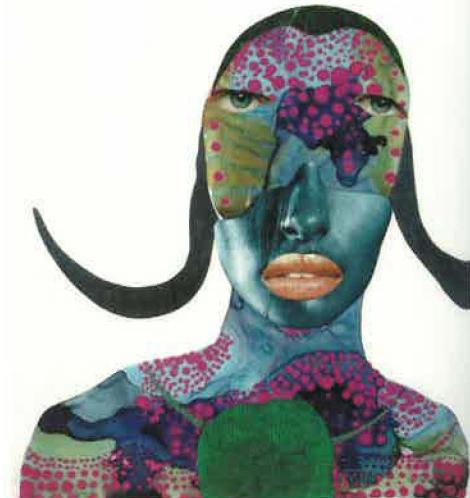


Fig. 3 *Untitled (Classic Profile Series)*, 2003. Printed paper collage, watercolor, foil, faux leather, contact paper, 22 × 17 in (55.9 × 43.2 cm)

1 Wangechi Mutu, "Conversation with Isaac Julien and Claudia Schmuckli," in *Wangechi Mutu: I Am Speaking, Are You Listening?* (San Francisco, CA: Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 2021), 38.

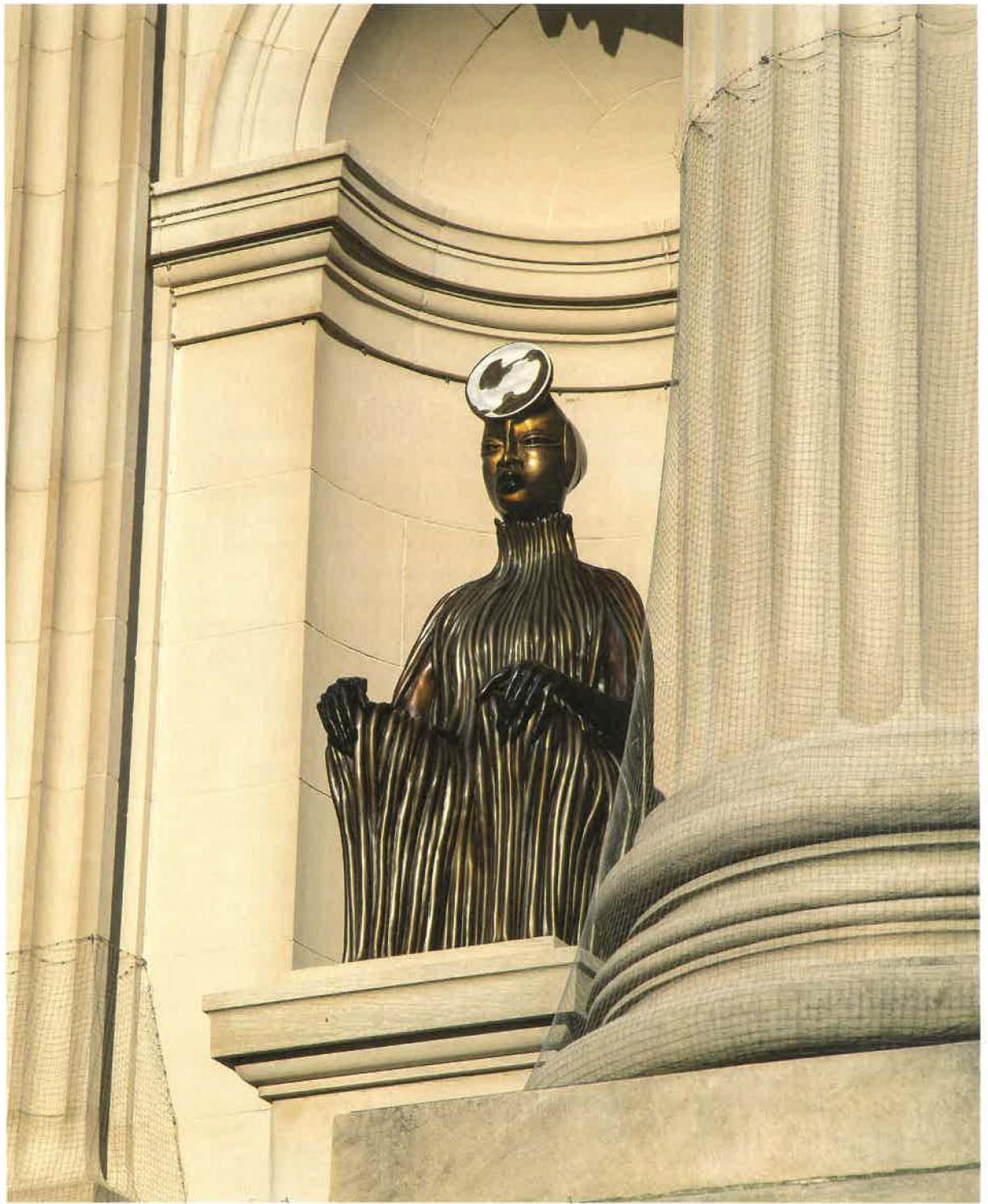


Fig. 4 *The Seated II*, 2019. Installation view: "The Façade Commission: Wangeci Mutu, 'The NewOnes, will free Us,'" The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, September 9, 2019–November 1, 2020

presence, insights, provocations are not mute. They bear worlds within and around them. Echoes of the mundane and the infinite. Viewers then wonder at the idea of an artist as a quantum physicist, who engages with matter even at its most infinitesimal. Mutu, the quantum artist whose work illuminates how objects also project their own sense of time-space. Quantum resonances. And just like that, infinity is breached.

Few artworks inspire contemplation of the dimensionality of time and instill an acute mastery of *trans-temporality*. I am awed by how Mutu seamlessly materializes “space-time” in her sculptures and installations, in particular. Her caryatids looked out from the Metropolitan Museum of Art niches with not only the worlds they showed up alongside and those the artist infused into them but also their time-being (fig. 4).<sup>2</sup> They entered their place and space in New York not as aliens but as characters in a timeless dimension of all our being.

## SIMULTANEITY

The Met caryatides were installed when the long season of Covid-19 began. Because of what followed, the caryatids extended their stay in the niches, transmuting the idea of limits in time and presiding over strange solitudes in a city trying to protect itself from a miasma of potential finalities. They became the symbols of something still unarticulated—impermanent holders of meaning-space in a time of our world and their own. They were the first to enter the Met’s niches, and when they departed, the resonances and reality of being “first inhabitants” haunt subsequent residents.

Extraordinary feminine presences—these caryatids were “here . . . present, and they [had] arrived.”<sup>3</sup> These world-bearers, adorned with the power artifacts and accessories of Africa, were remarkably self-possessed and “in place,” not displaced or dislocated, in the Met’s niches. Underscoring continuities of worlds, of histories, there was also something of the “what might have been” in these. What if the encountering of Africa by the rest of the world had been truer to our idealized humanity, more hospitable, and transcendent? Situated against the global rise of ethno-chauvinist politics, the cynical manipulation of consensus to lull humanity into a conflagration, there was something more that the sculptures projected out to the world from their actual and metaphorical niches. They looked poised to become the icons that will perch above our future ruins and look on, still unperturbed.

I am jealous that the caryatids set up their first base in New York. I wanted them for Nairobi. But the reality is that, at home, Kenya, we are still oblivious to Mutu’s singular feats. This is a challenge we will take up among ourselves, and it is only right that the city that gave power to Mutu’s *juogi*,<sup>4</sup> her second home, should benefit from her genius. It extended her national identity, hyphenated it—“Kenyan-American”—and New York made its most precious niches available for her sculptures.

Mutu occupies that pantheon of artist-thinkers re-inscribing Africa in the constellation of existences. It is no mean feat. For over five hundred years, a tragic, hegemonic force seized control of the histories and imaginaries of most of the world, their agency, art, and culture, and assigned some rather odd, dehumanizing tales to them. Usurping the power of deities, it declared, “Thus far, and no further.” As a result, when powerful contemporary art emerges out of Africa, or from an African person abroad, there is a struggle in the matrix (though less so now) to try to make it fit a predesigned box.

Mutu describes her art as “vandalizing the original narratives.”<sup>5</sup> Her various works quietly shatter gross historical stupidities as they sink deep roots and settle into their spaces in the universe. Mutu’s biography also infuses the content and materiality of her art, her methodologies, the elements, pieces, and parts she gathers to make her work, in the substances that call to her—like the soil, wood, and discarded fragments of life that abound outside her studio in Kenya.

“Collage, first and foremost, was the most accessible and impactful way for me to work,” Mutu explains.<sup>6</sup> Cut, paste, reimagine. An ontological imperative. Reimagining and redesigning connectedness. Media: magazine photographs, magazines, postcards fused with watercolors.

The artist storm-makers, including Mutu, have arrived. They insert their incomparable art into conversations and contemplations of meaning, belonging, making, reflection. They do this without having to conceal or apologize for their intrinsic

2 “The NewOnes, will free Us” was an exhibition of four bronze sculptures inaugurating the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s annual façade commission.

3 Wangechi Mutu, “Artist Interview—Wangechi Mutu: The NewOnes, will free Us | Met Exhibitions,” the Met YouTube, posted on September 13, 2019, 3:04, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MQg-CX7HZoW0&ab\\_channel=TheMet](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MQg-CX7HZoW0&ab_channel=TheMet).

4 *Juogi* is an internal wellspring that engages with individual consciousness, a notion in use among Africa’s Luo peoples to explain the character of ecstatic convergences of creative and not-necessarily-human forces and energies within a human being—to cause the person to birth, produce, generate a distinct expression of, usually, art. It is the protean guiding force that encompasses nature, existences, and time. It derives its impulses from, among various constituencies, a congregation of good and hearty ancestors. One of *juogi*’s superpowers is transmutation—as with most of Mutu’s offerings. For more information, see Enos Nyamor, “Juogi,” Untranslatable Terms of Cultural Practices: A Shared Vocabulary, Akademie Solitude, June 16, 2021, <https://www.akademie-solitude.de/de/online-publications/juogi/>.

5 Wangechi Mutu, “Inside My Studio: Wangechi Mutu,” Anderson Ranch Arts Center YouTube, posted on May 30, 2018, 9:50, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F5u4GGniG2I&ab\\_channel=AndersonRanchArtsCenter](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F5u4GGniG2I&ab_channel=AndersonRanchArtsCenter).

6 Wangechi Mutu, “Wangechi Mutu: Between the Earth and the Sky,” Art21 YouTube, posted on July 21, 2021, 14:42, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TaL8zDealmU>.

African soul. Their art secures their place in galleries around the globe, spaces that would never have contemplated its existence before. Yet art, when it is good (yes, “good”), is also truthful. And truth entrances. It beautifully disarms old nonsense. When Mutu’s artworks inhabit old gallery spaces, they begin exorcisms, extricating and disentwining from the many peculiar ghosts that still try to cling to and distort the many “othered” non-Western selves. Healing worlds. Healing the imagination.

## WORLD-BUILDER

Mutu and her works stride across the world as potent emissaries from a recondite, protean Africa that cannot be pinned down. A mythic being, like her art, she sits at ease in any corner of the planet and speaks as one who knows its pulse, moods, idiosyncrasies, and secret aspirations. There is an unconstrained texture to Mutu’s artistic seeking, a glorious freedom that does not avoid struggles, paradoxes, provocations, guilt, shame, atrocities, or refusals. She roams the interstices of what we see and imagine, weaving disruptive, terrifying beauty into the gaps of representation and offering herself as a healer-intermediary between and for amputated, disconnected worlds, peoples, women, bodies. Her art is also an intercession forged in Kenyan humus.

If you are born Kenyan, you are intrinsically pluriversal. You are a “plurality,” a code-switching shape-changer born to adapt to eight different ecosystems found in one tight geographical zone. A touch of camouflage; a lot of metachrosis. The world as the home of dissimilitudes is not unfamiliar to those born in Kenya and raised in Nairobi—that crossroads city of confluences, that promiscuous place of untethered, mutable loyalties.

For a long time, Wangechi was “exiled” from home, yet worked in New York while coming of age as a visual artist. The city offered her the freedom of experimentation and creation, as well as a community of artist-seekers also wrestling with the world. At the core of Mutu’s journey are myriad questions. Her works are her assorted answers to those riddles. The questions have much to do with the state of things in humanity and the world: the madnesses, mutations, and melancholies. The piercing through of African nightmares and dreams derived from an age of atrocity euphemistically described as “colonialism.” Her work enters the breaches of infinite silences, the gaslighting and whitewashing of facts and realities, especially as they were written into, or deformed, the human body, the female body. But also the re-dreaming, re-inscribing, and future-making that encompasses a re-visioned cosmos.

Mutu offers a visual lexicon for this age of uncertainty, climate angst, and the intimations of multipolarism. Her pieces are also infused by spirits of misplaced,

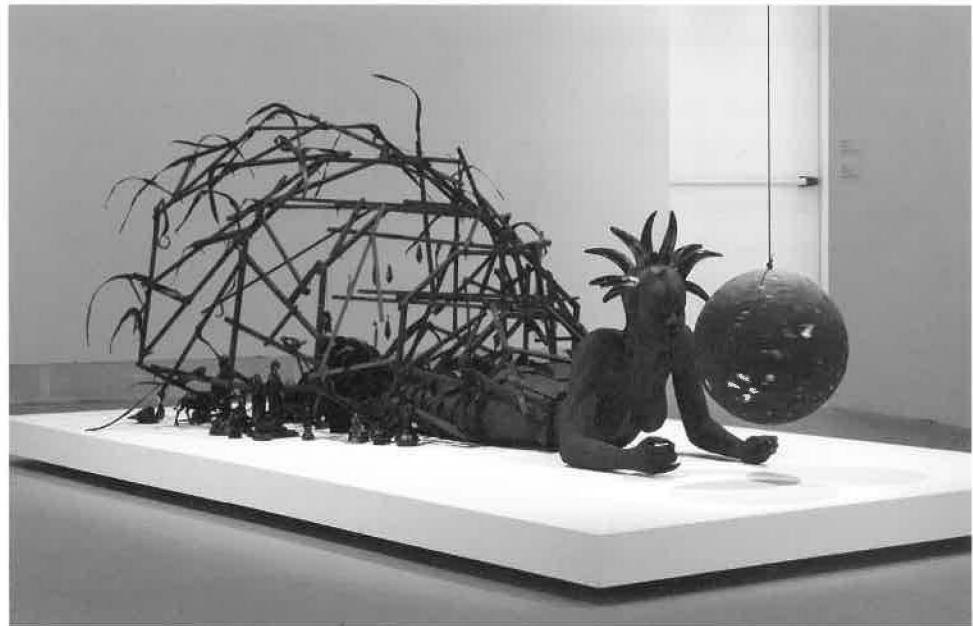


Fig. 5 *She's got the whole world in her*, 2015. Mixed media, 108 x 60 x 42 in (274.3 x 152.4 x 106.7 cm)



Fig. 6 *MamaRay*, 2020. Installation view: "Wangechi Mutu: I am Speaking, Can You Hear Me?", Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, Legion of Honor Museum, May 7–November 7, 2021

multi-African icons and archetypes, which include the nations of non-peoples (zebras, leopards, and red-billed ox-pickers)—species that endure in an Eastern Africa that has maintained space for the thriving of nonhuman life forms. Mutu's work, like the artist herself, roams across geographies, boundaries, and temporalities with ease. It ignores absolutes about things that, on third and fourth consideration, do not really matter. Identity? Race? Creed? Nationality? What?

So many echoes in Mutu's pieces: the themes of the world, the melanges, geometries, textures, hues, conjuring the future, opening into polyphonic histories, revelation, speculation, and alt-life formations (fig. 5).

And then there is Mutu and her relationship with history. History as palette, as inspiration. Malleable history. History-crafting. History lessons:

I think the retelling of history is one of the hardest things to do. In my case, in some ways, I'm saying, "Well, if some of the history has been completely destroyed, or doesn't even exist because it was carried in the minds and the mouths of the people who knew it best, then I'm just going to make it up. And I'm going to make it extremely powerful and convincing." And that, in and of itself, is creating history.<sup>7</sup>

Glimpses, too, of Mutu, the Nairobi creature, the Kenya-infused cosmic form that similar entities recognize immediately. A convent "girl" who tapped into and drew from the powerful undercurrent of a human-forming school run by, inspired by, and dedicated to women in devotion to a woman: the Virgin Mary—a microcosmic site of learning-inspired woman-being, a complication of more recent, single-note stereotypes of "bad nuns." Being in these schools gave something intangible to many of us convent-formed girls. We inhabited, however imperfectly, a domain where feminine energy crafted our worlds, directed our thoughts, and gave room to imaginations that often flourished.

We sometimes meet in the world, we ex-Loreto women. Perhaps our faces are now as lined as the women with bright eyes who did not teach us "impossible" but cultivated a sense of the world that felt much bigger, more tolerant, and soul-nurturing than the real one turned out to be. When we meet, we invariably observe how much smaller, crueler, and pettier the world is than in the capsule of schools where some quietly wild women, nomads dedicated to transcendence, governed—who did not tell students that there might be limits to the universe, for theirs, too, was the glory.

The rich, generative humus of the feminine permeates Mutu's pieces. Her work disarrays. Many struggle to fit it into a box—it spills right out. The word "hybrid" has

7 Mutu, "Conversation with Isaac Julien and Claudia Schmuckli," 37–38.

been dangled a few times. Soraya Murray, bewildered, wrote: “Alternatively illustrative and confounding, Mutu’s conceptualisation is peppered with references to everything from Romare Bearden and the automatous stylings of the surrealists, to rap videos, pop culture and radical plastic surgery.”<sup>8</sup>

To Mutu, the paradox between the veneration of the feminine and its being subject to numerous deeds of sacrilege is one of the struggles that feeds the nexus of her artistic interventions. “The *Sentinel* [is] the regal figure, who is standing, representing a . . . divine, feminine form,” Mutu expresses (see p. 173, 176–77).<sup>9</sup> She continues, “I want to make sure she is absolutely stable, that she is able to stand.”<sup>10</sup> Each piece is a force of life, of nature, and radiating provocation—sometimes subtly, sometimes overtly (fig. 6).

Mutu draws intentionally from the presences and forces that intertwine to create what we experience and then call “landscape.” To be Kenyan is also to be born into a sense of the biography of geographies. “I am from the lake,” we might say. Or, “She is from the mountain.” Lore and mores are immediately implied and assumed. Only encounter and heart transform the geography-induced prejudices and presumptions—encounter and venturing into the landscapes of our innermost being.

“Landscape is important, but I’m creating a fictional landscape, so it’s kind of a romanticization of certain aspects of nature,” Mutu has explained.<sup>11</sup> The “city girl with a nature brain” is also working on imagined landscapes.<sup>12</sup> Her devotion to trees, which Mutu refers to as “matriarchs,” is revealed in her nature-centered projects. A tree is a many-formed, many-shaped being with roots in the underworld, a trunk in the present, and branches that reach toward eternity. A distiller of the powers of nature: rain, wind, sun, moon. That Mutu would reconnect with the life of trees as elemental inspiration is not unexpected. Of all the earth’s institutions, although oppressed and exploited by blinkered humanity, trees have endured and outlasted the epochs of human vagaries. Like Mutu’s beings—the caryatids and sentinels—trees are symbols, archetypes, and metaphors of groundedness and fruitfulness. These bearers of boundlessness are not estranged in the spaces they find themselves. They, like so much of Mutu’s works, are trans-temporal beings.

“How incredibly important every single plant and animal and human is in keeping us all alive and afloat,” Wangechi asserts.<sup>13</sup> In Mutu’s geologic art, soil work, molding, making, shaping, tendering, there is a fecundity to her gestures. Rehabilitation. Restoration. Repair. We are uniquely sensitive and vulnerable to the anxieties of this age, our shamed awareness of nature in revolt, of the sudden threat of apocalyptic wars. There is a need we sense, of hearkening to beginnings. With Mutu, we reawaken our need for the humus (earth), also the etymological sibling of “humility” (on the ground) and “human” (of earth). With Mutu’s offerings, we are lured into daring to become vulnerable again to awe and beauty, to simplicity that might calm the unease. These works become time capsules. Here, too, is the mythic, the symbolic, the story-forming. Here is how worlds are formed. These Mutu assemblages. And we are grateful.

8 Soraya Murray, “Africaine: Candice Breitz Wangechi Mutu Tracey Rose Fatimah Tuggar,” *Nka Journal of Contemporary African Art*, no. 16/17 (Fall/Winter 2002): 92.

9 Mutu, “Wangechi Mutu: Between the Earth and the Sky,” Art21.

10 Mutu, “Wangechi Mutu,” Art21.

11 Mutu, “Wangechi Mutu,” Art21.

12 Mutu, “Wangechi Mutu,” Art21.

13 Mutu, “Wangechi Mutu,” Art21.