Blue Greenberg: Mutu’s woman both gorgeous and monstrous

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“Wangechi Mutu: A Fantastic Journey,” Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, through July 21. Hours are Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday, Saturday 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.; Thursday, 10 a.m. to 9 p.m.; and Sunday, noon to 5 p.m. For information, call 919-684-5135.

Wangechi Mutu’s (b. 1972) heroine is the primordial goddess, half woman, half beast. She is inextricably bound to nature; she is part of but is master of the animals. She is one with the fruits and flowers of the fields and she is a meld of seductress, Amazon, vampire and redeemer. Throughout time woman has been demonized, objectified and idolized; just look at Greek mythology, the Bible or Hollywood and contemporary fashion. Mutu merges all those influences with her African culture and presents a woman who is beautiful, erotic, mysterious and powerful.

Born in Kenya, Mutu moved to New York in 1992 and has lived and worked in Brooklyn since 1997. She has exhibited across the United States and in London, Dusseldorf and Paris; the show at the Nasher is the first survey of her work in the United States. Trevor Schoonmaker, the Patsy R. and Raymond D. Nasher Curator of Contemporary Art at the Nasher Museum, organized and curated the show, which will travel to the Brooklyn Museum of Art, North Miami’s Museum of Contemporary Art and the Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art at Northwestern University.

At the exhibition entrance Mutu has created a site-specific mural. The subject is a centaur-like creature, female not male, with a head enveloped in the fur of a small animal and arms and legs covered in collages of patterned snake skin. Dangling from each arm are tiny found images of machines; she is one with the 21st century. The title, off to one side, so the visitor must confront the image first, is “Once upon a time she said, “I’m Not Afraid and Her Enemies Became Afraid of Her-The End.””

Dominating the first gallery is the diptych, “Yo Mama,” 2006. Here a woman wears a jeweled-patterned body suit; she bends on one knee while the other leg, clad in a stillette heel, grinds into the severed head of the snake. Caught up in one of her arms, the snake’s body coils through both panels where the background takes on the pinkish red of snake’s blood and is filled with small floating suns and spheres. The wall text tells us this is an homage to Furumayo Anikulapo-Kuti, a famous female activist; it also refers to Genesis 3:1-5, but with different consequences. Moving on we walk through the installation, “Suspended Playtime,” 2008, where balls of torn blankets, twine and garbage bags hang from gold string reminding us of the improvised toys most Kenyan children have. The surrounding walls have more portraits of Mutu’s woman including “Misguided Little Unforgivable Hierarchies,” 2005, where the crouching goddess, whose feet, which end in small wheeled machines, are solidly planted in the land. She supports a smaller figure in high heels that does a backward bend while a female Liliputian, with the head of a small dog, sits astride her.

In Funkalicious Fruit Field” she paints a landscape filled with strange plants that are at once beckoning and frightening. On another wall is a new series commissioned by the Nasher called “Family Tree.”

Mutu uses her heroic woman to explore issues of gender, race, war, globalization and the eroticization of the black female. With her collaged elements she makes mysterious figures that are part human, animal, machine and monster. She mines African traditions, international politics, fashion and science fiction and creates creatures that are amazingly original. Her work addresses a myriad of issues. In some her black heroine confronts a white counterpart; here she refers to colonization.

The show covers her work from the 1990s to the present and includes examples from her enormous multidisciplinary expertise: collage, drawing, sculpture, installation and video. Besides all this Mutu agreed to share her personal sketchbooks, which fill four glass cases, and offer a close-up of her creative processes.

Also included are three videos; two deal with consumerism as we see it practiced in the world’s richest nations. “The End of Eating Everything,” commissioned by the Nasher, is animated and a collaborative effort between Mutu and the actress Santigold. The video begins with a Medusa-like woman who flies through a polluted atmosphere pulling her jeweled body behind her. As she moves she gorge herself on the birds that come near until her body swells and implodes spewing clouds of yellowish matter. This is Mutu’s take on society’s insatiable desire to own more than it can ever use.

The artist’s paintings are as beautiful as they are strange. She draws with a delicate line and uses a palette which is neither garish nor cloying. Her fascinating woman is gorgeous but also monstrous. Feminists will find her a role model, liberals can call her their ally, sci fi aficionados understand every added appendage. Traditional men may find her woman repulsive, conservatives will not like her politics, but no one who sees this show can walk away and forget it. Mutu pushes a lot of buttons; what a great gift she has.

As we move into a world where no one listens because everyone is talking, art may be the only answer. The viewers must stop and look. Whether they change is not the point; at least they have heard another side. Mutu’s themes are not new, but her language is so original it is as if we are hearing them for the first time.

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