Wangechi Mutu’s works have been displayed in galleries and museums worldwide, from Germany to Paris to London. For her first major survey in the United States, she’s brought her renown to the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University.

A “mid-career review of some of her best works from the past 18 to 15 years,” as Curator Trevor Schoonmaker puts it, A Fantastic Journey combines Wangechi’s popular large-scale collages with some disciplines she’s less known for, like sculpture and video. That includes a Nasher-commissioned animated video collaboration with recording artist Santigold. The exhibit is a prime example of the Nasher’s mission to bring all forms of art to the community.

“We are definitely a university museum,” Trevor explains, “but we strive to be that and much more. We strive to also be the de facto municipal museum that provides a service for Durham, the Triangle, for North Carolina, for the Southeast—enrich that hasn’t been done

These makeshift soccer balls in Wangechi Mutu’s “Suspended Play Time” are inspired by inventive kite toys in Kenya.

The Nasher helps museum-goers delve into complex work

By Amanda Mac Lemur
Photography by Brian Gordon
in this region, or, in many cases, in the United States. Sometimes, in the world.”

For those who may be unfamiliar with Wangechi’s art, or contemporary art in general, the Nasher hosts programs and guided tours for all its exhibits. The Nasher Museum’s education department invites visitors to create art based on a current exhibit at First Thursday events, presents free gallery talks and programs with art experts throughout the month, and, on select Sundays, families visiting the museum can enjoy live entertainment, create hands-on projects and explore exhibitions with a gallery hunt.

“In Europe, there’s this 200-year-old practice of working with contemporary artists,” Trevor says. “They are a museum-going public. In the U.S., it’s not really ingrained in the culture except in the major metropolitan areas. So we have to work a little harder to let people know that this is not the great ivory tower. Art is not something for the elite; it’s something for everyone.”

Along with her time spent installing the artwork, Wangechi took part in a three-day residency at the Nasher, made possible by Duke’s Council for the Arts. She interacted with students, educators and the public, walking them through her artistic process and explaining the meaning and techniques behind most of the pieces. “The dream for every museum and institution is to do a program that extends the comprehension and the digestion of the show when the artist is done installing,” Wangechi says before heading off to navigate a group of Duke students through the exhibit.

“If you want people to look at art, you do need to give them some tools, space and platforms to come in and ask questions. I do think that the Nasher has gone above and beyond most places I’ve been to in that regard.”

The exhibition closes July 21, then travels to the Brooklyn Museum of Art in September, North Miami’s Museum of Contemporary Art in April 2014 and the Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art at Northwestern University in September 2014. But thanks to the efforts of Trevor and Nasher staff, Durham is the first stop on the journey. DM