FEATURE

Artist interview

Mutable MONTAGE

One of the most dramatic artists to emerge from Africa in the past decade, Wangeci Mutu discusses the arts of immersion, identity, politics and collage. By Louisa Buck

Biography

Wangeci Mutu

Born 1975 in Kenya
Lives and works in Brooklyn

Education

Visiting Scholar, the Whitney Museum of American Art, 2013
Visiting Scholar, the Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 2012
MFA, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, 2004
BA, Nairobi University, 2000

Selected solo exhibitions

2014
Fake It Til You Make It: A Decade of Collecting Art, Brooklyn Museum, New York, NY

2013
Wangeci Mutu, Fowler Museum at UCLA, Los Angeles, CA

2012
Wangeci Mutu: The Order of Didi, The Africa Centre, University of the Arts London, UK

2011
Wangeci Mutu: The Order of Didi, Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, NY

2008
Wangeci Mutu, Museum of Contemporary African Art, Cape Town, South Africa

Selected group shows

2014
The Biennale of Sydney: Volcano, Sydney, Australia

2013
nr: 22 - An International Survey of Young African Artists, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX

2012
The Culture of Distance: Art and Globalization in the Age of the Internet, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA

2011
The Making of the Model, Museum of Modern Art, Miami, FL

2010
Gridlines, Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL

2009
The Kingdom of the Cylinder, Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, NY

Interviews

Louisa Buck

‘No, it’s not just about art’

The critic Louisa Buck talks to Wangeci Mutu about the political and personal contexts of her art, and about the challenges of living as an artist in Kenya.

M: I’ve always said that art is about challenging the status quo. Can you outline your intentions in terms of your work? What do you think your role is as an artist in Kenya today?

L: I think my role as an artist is to speak to the public, because as an artist, I don’t just want to be seen as a voice of reason, I want to be seen as a voice of change. And I think that’s what art is all about, it’s about changing the way people think about things. The way I do that is through my art, through my paintings, through my installations.

M: You’ve said that your art is at times a response to the political and social conditions of your country. How does this manifest itself in your work?

L: I think it’s important to understand the context of the work before one can fully appreciate its meaning. In Kenya, there are many social and political issues that are prevalent today. For example, there’s the issue of corruption and poverty. My art reflects these issues, and I try to use my work as a tool to raise awareness about them. I believe art has the power to change people’s minds and to inspire change.

M: How do you hope your art will influence the viewers?

L: I hope that my art will inspire people to think differently about the world around them. I want them to see the beauty in the chaos, the hope in the despair, the possibility in the challenge. I want them to see the strength in the vulnerability. I want them to see the possibilities in the challenges. I want them to see the opportunities in the barriers.

M: Your work is known for its bold use of color and forms. How do you choose the colors and forms that you use in your art?

L: I choose colors and forms that resonate with the themes of my work. I use colors that evoke emotions, and forms that suggest ideas. I believe that the way you present an idea is just as important as the idea itself. For example, if I’m speaking about the issue of poverty, I might use dark colors to represent the depth of the problem, and I might use forms that suggest a sense of struggle.

M: You’ve said that your art is a reflection of your own experiences and observations. How do you incorporate your personal experiences into your work?

L: I draw inspiration from my own experiences and observations, and I use them to create something new. I believe that personal experiences are a source of strength, and I use them to create something that is both unique and powerful. For example, if I’m speaking about the issue of corruption, I might incorporate my own experiences of corruption into my work, and I might use images that suggest the pervasiveness of the problem.
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working for me, but I rely on this process.” Mutu describes the actual making of her work as “an intimate day-to-day meditation—sometimes it’s not a calm meditation, but it isCALVITAL for me.” As I make the work, I learn who I am and I learn why they distress me, why they depress me, why they make me happy and why they turn me on. The exaggerated forms and the kinds of women and the nature of the world that they inhabit are crafted by a variety of things that I’m going through at a particular moment, and no one else can feel and interpret that process for me. I can’t hand over my language and my development as a human being to someone else.”

From collage to film

Alone, the collage figures that have become her trademark, Mutu also makes films in which she is always the sole participant. Appearing as an everywoman, often performing repeated, ritualistic actions. In “Cleaning Earth” (2006) she fully strips a bath floor; in “Cutting” (2004) she attacks a log with a machete, while in “Sustained Haunt” (2011) the中国 elaborately disemboweled hands in chocolate cake and trumpets it underfoot in high-heeled shoes. “I’m addicted to the process,” she says “I may only come up with a few ideas once or two years, but it’s a crucial part of my practice.” Mutu’s films are often shown as part of her visual, room-sized installations – an essential part of her work which “shares the same DNA” as her collages. For My Dirty Little House (2006), she used grey blankets and masking tape to transform the Deutsche Guggenheim into a suggestive environment that recalled both a protective cocoon and a squatter camp while infusing Guilty as A Lover’s Regret (2006/11), made in collaboration with the British architect David Adjaye, and shown at Salon 94 in New York and the Staatsliche Kunsthalle in Baden-Baden, presented a monstrous parody of a banquet, where red fluid dripped from wine bottles dangling over a huge wooden table, the room lined with animal paws and stuffed with bullets bowls. “I was thinking about the world as a ballooning place. I wanted to represent this perverse feast that we were engaged in, this overeating.” Mutu declares. “There are a lot of figures of speech in African languages that correlate corruption and greed with feasting and eating and excess, and I’m still obsessed with this idea. When a few are overeating there are many who are starving.”

While scenes of conflict and disaster zones are never far from the surface in Mutu’s work, her most direct engagement with reality was Mucah’s House, a project she began in 2008 as part of the Prospect.3 Biennial in New Orleans. Here she met Sarah Latie, who was a house in the historic Holy Cross Community in the hardhit Lower North Ward had been destroyed by Hurricane Katrina. She has been warned by a series of her settlement money by a construction company.

Mutu erected a poetical memorial in the form of a ghost structure of timber and lights where people can meet, eat and share stories of the house once stood and then sold limited-edition prints entitled Homeward Bound, which eventually generated enough funds to reconstruct the house using a local builder and volunteer help. “The project was such a task and so important and I’m proud of the fact that we were able to complete the house— it’s beautiful, it’s a real home and it’s a landmark,” says Mutu, while adding “I learned so much about being in art in the region of activism and dynamic political work, but I also learned a lot about being an outsider trying to do things with a naive and a clear conscience.”

Now, on the eve of her exhibition in North Carolina (21 March-2 July), and with a show in Sydney on the horizon (23 May-11 August) — not to mention the imminent arrival of a second child— Mutu is embarking on yet another avenue of exploration, as an animated piece with the working title of “Enough Eating Everything,” which is destined for the Duke University show. Mutu describes this new departure as being "like one of the collisions come to life... It's a new space for me. I'm looking at everything anew. I like to keep moving forward and the work to excite me every time I go back to it." On 2nd February, Wangui Mutu gave birth to her second daughter, Wambui, a sister for Nanna.