

# A NECESSARY MADNESS

## THE ART OF WANGECHI MUTU



by  
**Anne Makepeace**

Wangechi Mutu, **Family Tree**, 2012. 13 individually framed collages, Overall size variable, Seven works 16.25 x 12.25 inches, Five works 14.25 x 10.25, One work 17.25 x 11.75 inches, paper size. Image courtesy of the Artist and Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects. Photo Credit: Robert Wedemeyer. Collection of the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University.



Wangechi Mutu, *A Dragon Kiss Always Ends in Ashes*, 2007.  
Ink, paint, mixed media, plant material on Mylar, 92 x 53 inches.  
Image courtesy of the Artist. Collection of Jerome and Ellen Stern, New York.

## INTRODUCTION

### *A Dragon's Kiss Always Ends in Ashes*

**A Necessary Madness** will be a feature length documentary exploring the life and work of the internationally acclaimed African artist Wangechi Wathira Mutu. Born in Kenya forty years ago and schooled in Wales, New York and New Haven, Wangechi currently lives and works in Brooklyn with her Italian husband and two tiny daughters. As a young African woman artist, she has won unprecedented recognition in the western world for her explosive, unsparing and complex explorations of race, gender, the ravages of colonialism and the eroticization of the black female body. Her art has been described as grotesque, erotic, angry, surreal, diabolically beautiful, seductive and repellant, Hieronymus Bosch for the 21st century by way of Hannah Hoch and Louise Bourgeois.

Mutu's star has risen steadily since 2000 when she finished graduate work at Yale, with recent solo shows as far flung as Sydney, London, Venice and Berlin, and at prestigious American galleries like the Gladstone in New York and Susan Vielmetter in Los Angeles. A Fantastic Journey, her current show at Duke University and the first comprehensive solo retrospective of her work, will move to the Brooklyn Museum in September. She received the inaugural Deutsche Bank's Artist of the Year award in 2010, and in 2011 she was honored with Cooper Union's St. Gaudens Distinguished Artist Award. This year she received the Brooklyn Museum's Artist of the Year award, and she was also the youngest artist featured in a recent exhibit at the National Academy of Art called Seismic Shifts: 10 Visionaries in Contemporary Art and Architecture.

A member of the Kikuyu tribe, Wangechi grew up in Kenya hearing stories of colonial brutality and oppression, of Mau Mau resistance, blood oaths and ritual prayers for the return of tribal lands. She saw the repercussions of post-colonial self-hatred erupting in inter-tribal conflicts, rape and carnage, and was especially sensitive to the sufferings of women. While her art springs from the issues that obsess her, it is never pedantic.

Rather its dense beauty seduces the viewer into looking at very difficult subject matter: gorgeous women with amputated limbs evoke violence in Kenya, Rwanda, Sierra Leone and Congo; pornographic images of black women festooned with cutouts from motorcycle, porn, fashion and ethnographic magazines emanate power and vulnerability; installations like *Exhuming Gluttony: A Lover's Requiem*, shown in New York, Bilbao, Baden Baden, and Sydney, invites visitors into a banquet replete with animal pelts and bottles dripping blood-red wine as dazzling collages of powerful, wounded mutants glow from the walls. Wangechi has likened the effects of her work to a Venus flytrap: "Draw them in, then bite."



In sharp contrast to the often mad violence of her collages, Wangechi is a charming and gracious young woman who radiates warmth, intelligence, and generosity. Her calm outward demeanor masks an inner world teeming with conflicts and dissonance that erupts in gorgeous and disturbing imagery. She has called collage "a necessary madness, a meditative, calming obsession, a way of both demonstrating the brokenness of the world and putting it back together again." With her art, she is "fusing languages, which is actually a good way of talking about what Kenya is, in fact what Africa is... I feel that's very alive in the work, this intense desire to bring it all together."

Wangechi Mutu, *She Seas Dance*, 2012. Iridescent, white and gold PVC, Louver styrene, 3 channel projections, 176 x 342 x 305 inches. Image courtesy of the Artist. Photo credit: Robert Wedemeyer.

Wangechi left Kenya as a teenager to study abroad, escaping from what she describes as a constricted, patriarchal post-colonial society where there was no place for a young woman to live a creative life. She studied art at Parsons, Cooper Union and Yale, supporting herself with menial jobs and living in immigrant neighborhoods. From the very beginning, themes of exile, alienation and longing for home have erupted in her work, from the lost interplanetary alien mutants that populate her collages to her *Immigrant Nightmare Series* with its brutal images of grief and loss, to videos like *Amazing Grace*, where she stands on the shore singing the song in her native tongue. Her recent

show at the Susan Vielmetter gallery in Los Angeles focuses solely on this theme of exile and return. It is called ‘Nitarudi, Ninarudi,’ which translates as “I plan to return, I will return,” the latter a willed promise. The works in the exhibit range from a video installation of giant eyes watching a larger-than-life black dancer imprisoned behind filaments of gold; a circle of kitschy African masks on posts silently regarding each other; a series of collages called Family Tree connected by a genealogical diagram; to Blackthrones, a group of kitchen chairs on stilts sitting in silent conversation, evoking the secret hush arbors where slaves in the American south gathered at night to mourn their captivity, their exile from Africa. She is currently working on her ‘alien series,’ featuring siren-like water women who emerge from the sea to trick, seduce, and instruct those who fall under their spell.

The overarching theme of exile and return, of broken pieces coming together to form a new whole, pervades Wangechi’s work. It is this theme that will provide the narrative arc of the documentary. Fortunately for Wangechi and for our film, after more than a decade of frustrating encounters with U.S. immigration, she finally received her green card a few months ago and is

planning to return to Kenya with her young family in August. There, we will film her with her sister, a journalist, her mother, a nurse and midwife, and her father, a folklorist who is researching Kikuyu culture. Most importantly, we will film her beloved 93-year-old grandmother, Wangechi’s role model from whom she inherited her middle name.

Footage with these relations will reveal the familial, cultural and historical roots that have shaped Wangechi and her art. The family’s history is charged with grief and dissonance. Her grandmother remembers the British removal of her whole community from their homelands. She and Wangechi’s parents vividly recall the Mau Mau uprising that terrorized the British and helped lead to Kenyan independence. Tensions between Wangechi and her parents about the role of women and the subject matter of her art remain unresolved, forcing Wangechi to raise these issues if she is indeed to find wholeness in her native land.



Wangechi Mutu, **Kibaba masks** (Kibaba Peacock, Kibaba Blackeye, Kibaba Maroon, Kibaba White Hair, Kibaba Ochre, Kibaba Cow Gourd, Kibaba na Blue, Kibaba na Gaga, Kibaba Original, Kibaba Alien, Kibaba na Unicorn, Kibaba Bucket Head), 2012.



Wangechi Mutu, **Kibaba masks** (Kibaba na Gaga, Kibaba Blackeye, Kibaba Maroon, Kibaba White Hair, Kibaba na Blue), 2012.

Mixed media, dimensions variable, series of 12 works.  
Image courtesy of the Artist and Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects; Photo credit: Robert Wedemeyer.

Wangechi has invited our crew to film her first family journey home, giving us the unique opportunity to capture this dramatic and hugely important moment on camera, to film with her family and with many others including the famous paleontologist Richard Leakey, Wangechi's mentor and 'godfather.' In Kenya, Wangechi will explore ways to realize her long-held dream of creating a "hybrid life." She will be looking for places to found a center for artists where she can live and work for half the year. She quotes Edward Said's description of exile as "the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home...its essential sadness can never be surmounted."

Will the prodigal daughter find acceptance and peace among her family, or only further alienation? Will she be able to connect with a community of artists there, or encounter only discord and competition? She has already bought property, sight unseen, in the rolling grasslands near Nanyuki at the foot of Mount Kenya. There, she hopes to find ways to integrate the parts of herself that have been split asunder for so long, to heal or at least address the loneliness and alienation that has fed her art but also wounded her soul. It remains to be seen whether Wangechi will truly be able to go home again, but her determined and valiant attempt to try will be the dramatic resolution of ***A Necessary Madness***.



*Wangechi Mutu, **blackthrone series**, 2012. 12 individual works: wooden chairs, plastic, hair and tinsel, dimensions variable. Image courtesy of the Artist and Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects. Photo Credit: Robert Wedemeyer.*