

Exhibition Reviews



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 WANGECHI MUTU: *INTERTWINED*
 New Museum
 March 2–June 4 2023

Where are we now, and how did we get here? Wangechi Mutu's exhibition *Intertwined* poses this inquiry in a vast survey of her artistic practice over the past quarter-century, consuming the entire New Museum from the basement to the top floor. From smaller-scale works on paper, large collages, video, and performance, to early sculpture and recent bronzes, the retrospective chronicles migration—both her own, from Nairobi to New York, and as a social phenomenon more broadly—addressing histories of colonialism and resulting globalization, Africa and its diaspora, and the twin prongs of destruction and creation.

In the lobby installation *Sick Planets* (2007–2013/2023), small vinyl appliqué bearing images of cellular structures sprouting hair and splayed women's legs are scattered across the foyer, adhered to the windows and walls above the elevators. A creeping sense that all is not well pervades. A floor above, the installation *Sleeping Heads* (2006) sprays the pristine baby blue gallery

walls with painful-looking red sores, which explode like an infection; their surfaces marked with indentations, as though pockmarks have been created by bullets. Overtop of these wounds, eight collages of prostrate human heads line the walls: A brutal reminder of bloodshed in the Rwandan genocide of Tutsi ethnic minorities in 1994. Death hangs heavily in the air, lingering and gesturing towards the middle of the room where outsized sculptures of viruses stand (2016–2022). Mutu has modelled the common cold, Zika, Hantavirus, mumps, dengue fever and measles from paper pulp and covered them in volcanic soil found in the highlands of Kenya—a material the artist uses in many of her other three-dimensional works. Ushering illness into three-dimensional space, the artist makes visible the invisible by comically exaggerating viral forms to convey their level of threat. Supported by metal bars, like bodiless heads staked in a bed of red soil, their violence becomes more explicit. Together, the works are inextricably bound up in human suffering, the impacts of colonial biowarfare, and a virality borne of globalization, where colonialism is a disease that spreads to and infects even those fighting it. Shrouded in contagion, the mood is mournful.

But one room over, the funereal atmosphere lifts. Mutu's earlier mixed media collage works hold court, where their titles read as tales of defiance and resilience, perhaps even resurrection. The sizeable collage *You Tried So Hard to Make Us Away* (2005) features two womanly figures; one standing, bent over backwards, while the other sits triumphantly across the larger body's torso. Tendrils evoking tree branches wildly sprout from the bodies in every direction, and a closer look reveals the figures' skin is composed of inky, squishy octopus tentacles, magazine cut-outs of blingy cocktail jewellery, and choruses of glammed-up legs. Around them, leggy and serpentine pinwheels with patches of black, artificial hair jettison off into space and echo the organisms that greeted the viewer in *Sick Planets*. As sovereign beings, they flourish and grow despite adversity; they do what they will.

Up another floor, the fantastical three-channel, animated video *The End of carrying All* (2015) chronicles an African woman who carries objects in a basket on her head, the volume of which multiplies as she trudges across the land, her back bent under the weight, until she eventually bears the burden of a small city. Under the literal and figurative weight of these things, she foists the world upon her back before transmuting into a pulsating, glowing blob at a cliff's edge, ultimately becoming one with the land and impregnating the earth with green magma. Nearby, a selection of collages and sculpture turn towards the Afro- and African futuristic, among them Mutu's *Sentinels* series of powerful female figure statues. But most striking of all is the slithering *Sleeping Serpent* (2014), a long, snaking fabric form that stretches across the gallery. Belly bloated, she rests her blue ceramic head on a delicate white lace pillow, encircled by a group of small, ceramic totemic objects and vessels. She has consumed too much, lulled perhaps by the poisonous contents of the surrounding bottles.

The penultimate floor of the exhibition commands its space most concertedly. Substantial bronzes originally displayed at Storm King Art Center and Met Fifth Avenue generate a powerful and serene stillness in the airy space, a kind of anti- or alternative monumentalism. Heavy and leaden, the seemingly unmovable sculptures take up space and attention, some of them containing water

features which quietly burble away. A series of four works shaped into huge baskets have been organized into a quadrant. Among them is *Heads in a Basket* (2021), in which three large charcoal-textured and coloured "eggs" sit in an inky pool along with a resting woman's head, and *Nywele* (2022)—Swahili for "hair"—which holds thick coils of braided hair streaked with red. The bronzes, rendered in hard alloy, juxtapose the pliability and softness of basketry; as load-bearing sculpture, a basket's strength is made possible through a collaboration of woven materials. This can be read as unification, a thread drawn through Mutu's practice—an interconnectedness between the artist's visions of futurity with the cultural and historical. But such ideas of togetherness also root humans in the land. While the images and beings she crafts appear extraterrestrial, they are born of the Earth, linked and nourished by an invisible umbilical cord.

Throughout, Mutu's studies in anthropology—a difficult discipline birthed by colonialism—make themselves known in her acute visual analyses of species in these constructed living worlds. In her hands, however, she repurposes the discipline's scientific methods for self-determination, quashing any entombment of African cultures in the past. A sense of recovery and resistance permeates *Intertwined* and rises with each floor from bottom to top, drafting an autonomous narrative open with possibility, with each work presented in various stages of becoming. As though sentient beings unto themselves, Mutu's images gain strength together through amalgamation, pushing back against the confines of history and breaking out of a bondage to illusory concepts of time. What is more, the earthly yet sublime organisms she depicts—human, animal, or otherwise—inhabit a distinctly feminine sphere, where their syncretic beings form symbiotic relationships between earth, sky, water, and fire. Her mythological transfigurations contain all these faces and forms of woman, never fixed nor singular. From early collages, where muddy-inked blobs engulf magazine clips of women's bodies, to chimerical shapeshifting women-creatures on screen and in three dimensions, Mutu's Black and African feminine figurative continuously transitions through time and space. Wherever and whenever they exist, they are travellers moving from one place to another. They have only just begun. 🌍