

THUS SPOKE WANGECHI

By Anne Gregory, artist, Durham, NC USA



The End of eating Everything (still), 2013. Animated video (color, sound), 8:00 minute loop, edition of 6. Courtesy of the artist. Commissioned by the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, Durham, North Carolina. © Wangechi Mutu.

Originally from Kenya, and now based in Brooklyn, Mutu uses her singular Afrofuturist vision to confront issues of race, colonialism, consumption, and the objectification of the black female body. Her large scale collages combine images clipped from fashion and porn magazines, medical books, hunting catalogs and machine manuals, as well as found objects, bling, and her distinctive paint splotted paper. The emotional content of these mixed media works can be overwhelming. She serves rage, female sexploitation, brutality, indulgence, and repulsion in unbearably large doses. Her work is not easy to look at; however, it's impossible not to stare.

A gigantic creature, half woman half animal, stands guard at the entry to the exhibit in the Nasher Museum at Duke University. She aims an exploding motorcycle/gun at furry sprites flying behind her in close pursuit. Once upon a time she said, I'm not afraid and her enemies became afraid of her The End. The title alone is enough to make you want to shout. This is just the beginning -- you are about to enter the world of Wangechi Mutu.

In the diptych *Yo Mama*, Mutu gives a shout out to Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, the trailblazing Nigerian women's rights advocate who fought against British colonialism. A female with luminous, mottled skin, kneels, legs splayed, on a planet. She holds the body of a white snake entangled on a distant sphere. Her stiletto heel jabs its decapitated head. Little black orbs, representing the African Diaspora, float off into the pink sky. She knows how to tell a story.



Family Tree is a series of 13 collaged portraits arranged to show the lineage of a couple. In this family, all the members are female -- including the original parents. Behind these strange amalgamated faces the message is

loud and clear -- a feeling of empowerment is palpable.

Mutu explores the theme of over consumption in two films. The video *Eat Cake* shows her sitting in a swamp setting. Her hair is wild. Her fingernails are like claws. She eats a chocolate cake with her hands.

Viewing this video is like watching a feral animal consume something it doesn't need.

In her first animation, *The end of eating Everything*, an Egyptian-eyed woman (played by recording artist Santigold) with medusa hair and a body as big as an island, lumbers through space. Her characteristic mottled skin glows like molten lava.

Straining from her bulk, she gorges on a flock of birds until she explodes into lots of little heads that spiral away. Is it the end of a cycle or the exponential beginning of more?

Wangechi Mutu's work can be read as an epic Afro-feminist manifesto. Wrestling with one political and cultural stereotype after another she rewrites the script and the victim becomes the victor. We are not spared the terrible struggle, the blood, the anguish, but in looking we share in the triumph.

WANGECHI MUTU : A FANTASTIC JOURNEY, will run at the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, March 21, 2013 -- July 21, 2013. The exhibit travels to the Brooklyn Museum of Art in September 2013, the Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami in April 2014 and the Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art at Northwestern University in September 2014.

The Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Australia will host the largest international survey of Mutu's work May 23 -- August 14, 2013.



From left to right

1 *Family Tree*, 2012. Suite of 13, mixed-media collage on paper, 41.28 x 31.12 cm. Collection of the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University. Image courtesy of Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects. © Wangechi Mutu. Photo by Robert Wedemyer.

2 *Once upon a time she said, I'm not afraid and her enemies became afraid of her The End*, 2013. Mixed media, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist. © Wangechi Mutu. Image courtesy of the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, Durham, NC, USA. Photo by Peter Paul Geoffrion.



Artist Wangechi Mutu in her Brooklyn studio, 2012. Photo by Kathryn Parker Almanas.





Yo Mama, 2003. Ink, mica flakes, pressure-sensitive synthetic polymer sheeting, cut-and-pasted printed paper, painted paper, and synthetic polymer paint on paper; overall: 150.2 x 215.9 cm. The Museum of Modern Art, New York.. © Wangechi Mutu. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, New York. Photo by David Allison.