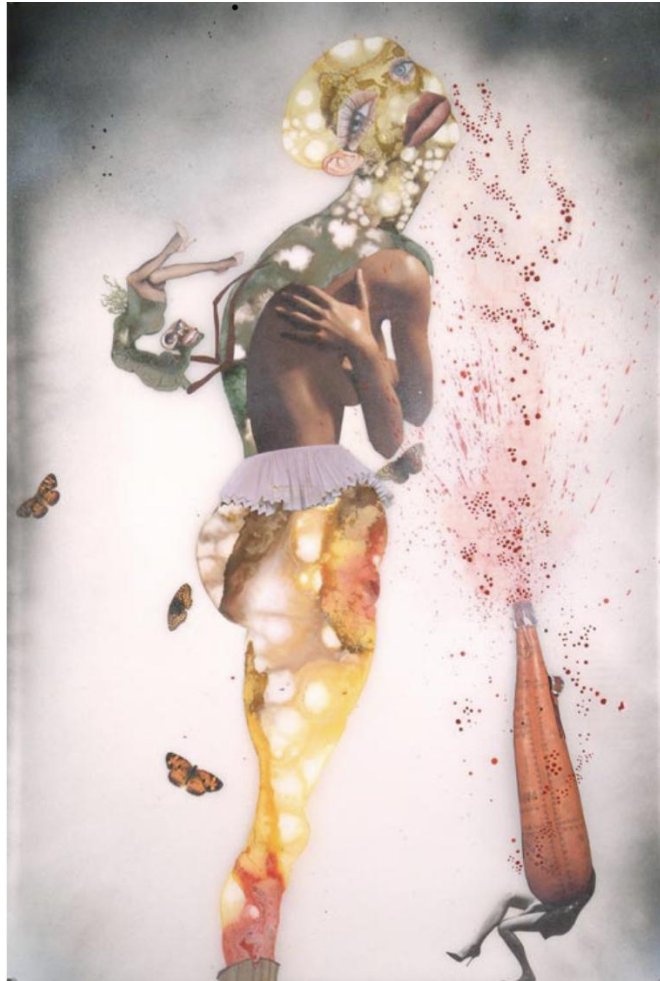


Professor Lazevnick

Art After 1945

10 March 2022

Visual Analysis Paper: Wangechi Mutu



Wangechi Mutu

Ghouls on my Back Celebrate Murder, 2003

Mixed Media on mylar

90 x 61 cm

Ghouls on my Back Celebrate Murder (2003) by Kenyan female artist Wangechi Mutu presents us with a monstrous figure who gazes down yearnfully at her viewer. Mutu's careful, but subtle, consideration of content and composition allow us to understand this as a representation of Africa subjected to western colonialism. Mutu not only calls upon tools of Surrealism, Pop Art, and spirituality to communicate ethereality and other-worldliness, but blood spewing and female anatomical commodification to communicate her home continent's distraught.

Mutu develops her mutant with iconography familiar to the western world. She combines symbols of westernized female sexuality: slender legs, high-heeled feet, white skin, blue eyes, a lack of a nose, and pouty lipsticked lips. By combining these images with violence and uncanniness, she averts her viewer from the attractiveness these forms typically have. Much like the collages of Pop Artist Richard Hamilton, Mutu is reflecting consumerism through appropriation, copy and paste, and a flattening of the picture plane; however, any consideration that the work is at all a celebration of consumerism is quickly disputed by the stoic and dark tone of the title *The Ghouls on my Back Celebrate Murder*. Instead of appropriating familiar forms for a parody or comedic function, Mutu is confronting us with the idealized white female body. The figure staring painfully towards us is demanding the viewer to consider these perpetuations of beauty as a tool of erasure. The Eurocentric forms appear to be replacing what may have once been distinctly African, revealing a hollow shell of African femininity and womanhood.

Her body is entirely composed of small, separate cells of negative space among the swirling colors of the Pan-African flag. Is Mutu referring to the dissonance and war between African countries? These cells may represent the separation, colonization, murder, and industrialization of Africa that has not been reconstructed or received financial compensation to this day. Are

these issues caused by the parasitic creature on her back? The demon is composed of Eurocentric features and insect anatomy, smirking and holding firmly on the enormous back of the large figure.

The background of this work is white and desolate, much like the desert emptiness of the backgrounds in Surrealist paintings by Frida Kahlo or Salvador Dalí. Mutu has, however, stripped us of any background context but a caging, black vignette. The emptiness elaborates upon the dream-like quality of surrealist backgrounds, implying that this scene exists beyond the confines of an earthly context. Gravity-defiance and mutated creatures, the parasite on the large figure's back and the blood spewing figure on the right, may remind the viewer of the ethereal and horrifying paintings of surrealist Francis Bacon. Mutu, like Bacon, is communicating a damning and painful ethereality in her mutants—particularly in combined anatomical forms and the desperate expression of the subject.

Mutu is also gently referring to Kenyan spirituality in her work but is mostly inventing her own. The orange butterflies represent transformation, beauty, and change among Sub-Saharan folklore. The goddess is powerful and damning like the gods of both major religions of Kenya: Islam and Christianity. Tension is created through compositional tangents and closeness, her direct gaze at us, and her giant scale. Despite the similarities to established spirituality, Mutu is creating her own unique literature to represent Africa in this piece. The butterflies may imply hope and prophecy, the parasitic creature is named “demon”, and there seems to be some kind of giant transformation happening to her. As a result, her work is suggesting that we try to interpret, empathize with, and fear her beautiful personification of Africa.

Works Cited

- 1.) East Africa Living Encyclopedia, <https://www.africa.upenn.edu/NEH/kreligion.htm>.
- 2.) van Huis, Arnold. "Cultural Significance of Lepidoptera in Sub-Saharan Africa." *Journal of Ethnobiology and Ethnomedicine*, BioMed Central, 13 June 2019, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6567547/>.
- 3.) "Wangechi Mutu." Wangechi Mutu - Artist - Saatchi Gallery, https://www.saatchigallery.com/artist/wangechi_mutu.