

2014

Wangechi Mutu: A Fantastic Journey, by Tevor Schoonmaker, Kristine Stiles, and Greg Tate.
Nasher Museum of Art, Duke University: Durham,
2013 (Book Review)

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Colaizzi, Vittorio, "Wangechi Mutu: A Fantastic Journey, by Tevor Schoonmaker, Kristine Stiles, and Greg Tate. Nasher Museum of Art, Duke University: Durham, 2013 (Book Review)" (2014). *Art Faculty Publications*. 11.
https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/art_pubs/11

Original Publication Citation

Colaizzi, V. (2014). Wangechi Mutu: A Fantastic Journey, by Tevor Schoonmaker, Kristine Stiles, and Greg Tate. Nasher Museum of Art, Duke University: Durham, 2013 (book review). *Woman's Art Journal*, 35(2), 47.

Wangechi Mutu: A Fantastic Journey

by Trevor Schoonmaker, Kristine Stiles,
and Greg Tate
Nasher Museum of Art at Duke
University, 2013

Reviewed by Vittorio Colaizzi

The exhibition for which this book is the catalogue opened at the Nasher Museum at Duke University before travelling to Brooklyn, Miami, and Evanston, Illinois. The show and book feature Wangechi Mutu's (b. 1972) signature collages, in which she places imagery from fashion, porn, mechanics, and "ethnography" alongside drawn and painted elements in order to deconstruct colonialist fantasies of the black female body as a site of exotic sexuality. By juxtaposing accepted signs for nature versus technology (tall grass and motorcycle parts, for example) and performing in her videos the ritualized actions of eating, cleaning, and destruction (most notably in the gripping and poignant *Eat Cake* of 2012), Mutu is able, according to art historian Kristina Stiles, to "expose the ideological social function of images" (55), and to "dismantle visual regimes that contribute to repression" (53). Stiles's thesis is that Mutu's is an activist art, because if representation is a form of control, its hijacking and mutation offers liberation. Examining Mutu in light of postcolonial theory, Stiles finds that her fragmented narratives and totems accomplish "intersubjectivity," or the simultaneous validation of and empathy for various perspectives (31–32).

The full scope of her practice is also on view, including installation, video, and sketchbook drawings in pen and watercolor (2011–12; Fig. 1), many with collaged accents. Early in his essay, curator Trevor Schoonmaker announces that the drawings are on view for the first time. Accordingly, they are given pride of place in the catalogue, where full page reproductions act as prelude, coda, and punctuation for the text. Julie Klugman Braude's book design communicates the diversity of Mutu's work, particularly through a generous set of installation

shots that are faithful to the sense of the exhibition as a "fantastic journey" through the artist's freewheeling and sharply critical imagination. Stiles, Schoonmaker, and Greg Tate make apt connections to post-colonial theory, music, surrealism, science fiction, and sci-fi's ancillary, Afro-Futurism, an amorphous term applied to black artists, musicians, and writers such as Sun Ra and Samuel R. Delaney who infuse their work with fantasy and social commentary.

Given Mutu's sensitivity to the politics of images, it is curious to find a couple of carefully orchestrated photos of the artist amid furs, fruits, and other exotica, projecting the very tropes of celebrity that her work problematizes. Although she is quoted as rejecting "clear cut binaries" (51), it seems a tall order to undercut the glamour machine simply by inhabiting it.

Such multiplicity and indefinability, however, are key to Mutu's aesthetic activism, as she not only "wrest[s] control from representations that threaten to obliterate one's sense of self" (63), writes Stiles, but also, through her drawings, wrests control from the regimes of art history and criticism. Traditionally, collage interrupts what had been a naturalized and authoritative pictorial order. Its cuts target the gesture, severing the controlling hand of subjectivity. But Mutu shows that no technique is bound to a position. The individualism of modernism, whose universalist ambitions conceal white male hegemony, is not the individualism that Mutu claims with her pen and brush, an individualism that takes its stand against the stereotypes that she finds and re-configures. Schoonmaker, Stiles, and Tate argue passionately and astutely for Mutu's artistic actions on behalf of selfhood, but do not tie this aspect explicitly to these newly visible drawings' disruption of established strategies. This is a minor complaint, and it is only due to the artist and authors'



Fig. 1. Wangechi Mutu, *Sketchbook Drawing* (2011–12), pen, ink, and collage on paper, 11" x 8 1/2".

complexity that it is raised. The images, texts, and lengthy interview will surely make this book a vital resource. •

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