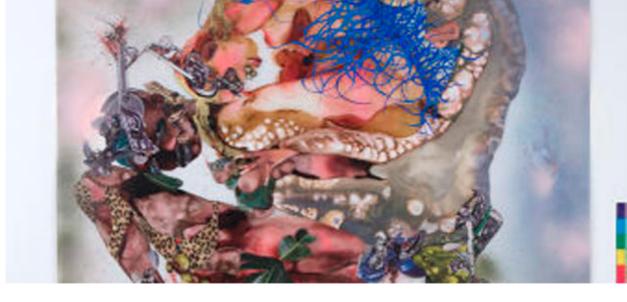


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### Wangechi Mutu: "This You Call Civilization?"

#### Finding civilization in Wangechi Mutu's anarchy

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BY DAVID BALZER March 10, 2010 21:03

#### EDITORIAL RATING:

To May 23, Tue, Thu-Sun  
10am-5:30pm; Wed  
10am-8:30pm. \$10-\$18 (free Wed  
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Art Gallery of Ontario, 317  
Dundas W. 416-979-6648.  
[www.ago.net](http://www.ago.net).

How do you solve a problem like Wangechi Mutu? The Kenyan-born, New York-based artist, whose "This You Call Civilization?" is currently at the AGO, makes collages, videos and sculptures that tend to combine in a type of installation wherever she shows. (Here, she even doctors the walls.) Her subject is the grotesque quality of the racialized other, labelled exotic by media both when presented as tribal and foreign, and when eroticized and fetishized.

Naturally, Mutu's two main print sources for her collages are travel/anthropological and porn magazines, applied to various surfaces that she mottles with ink or watercolour. All of these

elements combine, in Mutu's steady, purposeful hands, into nightmarish, beastly and anthropomorphic forms, which compel, repulse and, typically, stare.

The problem is not the disturbing nature of the images but the intention behind them. Mutu, a beautiful, well-travelled, articulate young urbanite (her Zadie Smith-ish artist photo, included on instructional paper boxes that populate the exhibit, attests to this) claims in an AGO-produced video that she in fact has a "problem" with the way African women are reduced in media. Sure, but is her primary goal, then, simply to condemn the source material that she cuts up – to bare the colonialist fangs that such media hide (or at the very least expertly decorate)? That would be a shame, and the weakest work in the show takes this goal to its brow-beating extreme. Cleaning Earth, part of a former show called "Cinderella Curse," is a video in which Mutu scrubs the ground with futile vigour, and which is projected onto a glittering screen. It is a failure in every respect: dull, obvious and, politically, nearly 20 years behind the times.

Mercifully, the rest of what's here – primarily the collages, in which Mutu finds her resplendent artistic ambiguity – leaves behind this PC reductionism. One panel of text explains that she is fascinated with "powerful images that strike chords embedded deep in our subconscious." That's better: it concedes to the strength of her sources, which, as glossy colour images, were made to mesmerize. Indeed, every collage casts a psychoanalytic spell, glittering, dancing, devouring and thus continuing the AGO's exploration of surrealist art. One cannot stand at a distance from these images, wagging a finger at their horrors. Mutu's is the implicating gaze of nature, under which nothing is fair or, rather, all is fair in sex and violence.

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