Engaging Art

Engaging Art:

Essays and Interviews from Around the Globe

By

Roslyn Bernstein

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Cover image. Mosaic mural by Anado McLauchlin,
San Miguel de Allende, Mexico. Photo by Shael Shapiro

For young artists working in today's politicized world

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PREFACE

LOOKING BACK ON MY LONG PROFESSIONAL CAREER in writing—as journalist, author, and professor, I would say that my first major piece of writing was a PhD dissertation on the ground-breaking and genre-inventing author Daniel Defoe (1660-1731), a man whose career encompassed long-form and short-form journalism, short and long works of fiction, and non-fiction works as well. By coincidence, my own work includes the same genres.

In the early 18th century, Defoe rose to national prominence as a journalist and was, according to biographer John Richetti, a "veritable writing machine." For nine years, Defoe had his own publication, the *Review*, which appeared three times a week. His writing drew upon myriad sources, some real and some not so real, as his intriguing subtitle for *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722) announced boldly: "being observations or memorials of the most remarkable occurrences, as well public as private, which happened in London during the last great visitation in 1665, and bore stamps of authenticity." It was, he wrote "written by a citizen who remained all the while in London" and it had "Never [been] made public before." Clearly, Defoe lived in an era when both the technologies of publication and the traditions of genre were being challenged and expanded, including a reach into new audiences.

The end of the 20th century and these opening decades of the 21st have seen even larger shifts in the technology and the content of mass communications. It was the creation of digital publishing that gave rise to the essays included in this book, and the imperatives built into web distribution shaped the reporting and the writing in them.

But unlike the books and journals published in the centuries since Defoe's time that have been preserved on paper in libraries, digital publications are not always preserved either on-line or off-line. That awareness prompted this collection of pieces as a book that that might be preserved on library shelves, the same shelves that have maintained continuous access to Defoe's books for several centuries.

During the ten years when these essays were being reported and written, the world was tensing up in fear of new terrorist episodes, a time following the breakup of the Soviet Union, the rise of the Arab spring, and the very slow and often uneven, loosening followed by tightening of autocracy. It was not a time of clear progress or regression, but of myriad kinds of change in different directions all at once.

In the art world, change was everywhere, as artists around the globe reflected on their planet. What could they say about the political, social, and economic turmoil? How could they cross traditional genres by mixing, sometimes merging, and sometimes juxtaposing, different genres in their artwork? How could they absorb history while lurching forward into the unknown**?**

In the worlds of journalism, media, and communications, the trends were clearer: the rise of digital media and the appearance of multimedia pieces that wove statistical research and data, video reporting, podcasts and social media into the fabric of their stories.

In my world of arts and culture reporting, print outlets were folding and merging, while online venues were blossoming. I embraced this shift and, while I finished two books at this time, a collection of short stories, *Boardwalk Stories*, and a co-authored history of SoHo in New York City, *Illegal Living: 80 Wooster Street and the Evolution of SoHo,* the majority of my journalistic work began to appear online in such venues as *Buzzine* (a West Coast magazine), *Huffington Post*, *Guernica*, and *Tablet.* When *Buzzine* folded, permanently removing all of their stories from the Internet, it was a sharp awakening to me that online journalism was particularly vulnerable to the pressures and whims of economics and technology. I decided to preserve some of my online publications as a cultural archive reflecting my deep involvement reporting on important art world issues, whether it was housing for artists, availability of studio spaces, alternative venues for exhibits or under-the-radar exhibits.

This volume includes about half of those stories which were reported and written as stand-alone articles and then, for this book, clustered into the following themes: artists at work, building art, denizens of downtown, picturing politics, and articles with a personal outlook.

It was a time of change but without a consistent direction, a mix of disruption and reassertions of tradition, in art as in politics. I hope that these pages reanimate snapshots of and insights into art and artists at work as viewed in their own milieux and, as fully as possible, in their own words.

Within each section, the essays are printed in chronological order. Each piece's original venue is cited but without the old URLs as they change too frequently. To find an original piece with its images if it has not evaporated, one can search the web for the author's page on the website of the publication. The original essays often included extended photographic slideshows in color.

SECTION I:

ARTISTS AT WORK AND THE POLITICS SURROUNDING THEM

IN MARCH 2019**,** walking through the exhibit, *Everything Is Connected: Art and Conspiracy,* at the Met Breuer Museum in New York City, I was a little taken aback when I read a wall text quote from a Nelson Rockefeller biography. "I learned about politics at the Museum of Modern Art," he said.

That may indeed have been Rockefeller's personal experience but my own understanding of the complicated relationship between art and politics has been drawn from all over the globe, and not only from major museums; from New York City, to be certain and from Pittsburgh, too, where I have done considerable reporting, but also from many other countries–from Costa Rica, Colombia, Cuba, Israel, France, Germany, Italy, Mexico, Morocco, Poland, and Vietnam.

Everywhere, I discovered that politics was woven into the fabric of art. It seems that it was impossible for artists, whatever their background, to keep the subject out of their artwork and out of their lives.

The 16 essays of this section illuminate issues of identity, inclusion, exclusion, and government censorship. All of these pieces reveal how art walks the tightrope; how artists and galleries struggle in challenging economic and political climates; and how some artists, galleries, and museums fight to survive under threats of punishment and censorship.

Art and politics: a difficult relationship. In a backroom of a Vietnamese art gallery, the director showed me *Nouveau Riche* (2011), a photograph by Phan Quang of a man sitting on the hood of a car; both are covered by a large wooden basket. It was one of seven images proposed for the exhibit that were not approved by the government. Elsewhere, in Tel Aviv, Israel, photographer Miki Kratsman spoke of a joint exhibit with the Chinese dissident Ai Weiwei that the Tel Aviv Museum had canceled for political reasons. In New York City, artist Wangechi Mutu, far from her home in Nairobi, Kenya, reflected on her life as an immigrant in America, and Chinese refugees in a Pennsylvania prison created art, freedom birds and other folded paper sculpture, during their detention.

Depending on the country and the context, of course, the solutions varied dramatically. Factors shaping the results were often economic, with many artists and arts organizations receiving minimal or often shrinking funding from the government. Success, it seemed, was dependent on the resourcefulness and the networking skills (both on-the-surface and under-the-radar) of the artists and arts organizations.

1. Spying on Reality: Larry Abramson Reflects on Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, and the Upcoming 45th Anniversary of the Six-Day War

Fig. 1-1. Larry Abramson, Detail from cutout. Photo by Shael Shapiro.

In 1961, at the age of seven, Larry Abramson emigrated from Durban, South Africa, to Israel. Rejecting apartheid, his family came as part of a group of public health professionals, to establish a community health center at the Hebrew University's medical school. They settled down in Beit Hakerem, a garden neighborhood established in the 1920's for teachers and academics. It was a moment when intellectuals argued the world in cafes on Ben Yehudah Street and Jerusalem had the feel and promise of a cultured

European city. After high school and study at the Chelsea School of Art in London, Abramson remained in Jerusalem, marrying a native, and raising his three children there. He loved the light and the city and he never left.

Not until September 2011, when he purchased and moved into his first studio in Kiryat Ha Melacha, an industrial area of South Tel Aviv that was built in the 1960s for light industry–printers, sweatshops and bookbinding. High city taxes had chased industry out and the neighborhood had deteriorated. Around ten years ago, artists saw an opportunity, and they began moving in. At that time, like in SoHo in the 1960s, lofts were cheap. City officials wanted to gentrify the area, which was rough, and there was a special low tax for the first 100 square meters of studio space, which encouraged artists to start renting and buying. Although the studios were officially only for "painters and sculptors," other artists moved in, too, keeping a set of paints handy, just in case an inspector arrived.

Abramson was thinking of moving to Tel Aviv then, but his political activism kept him in Jerusalem for three more years. "We lived in Kiryat Ha Yovel," he said, a neighborhood in southwestern Jerusalem on Mount Herzl. Built in the early 1950s to house new immigrants from Arab countries, its demographics changed over the years, with young couples gradually replacing immigrants and with the proletarian character of the neighborhood shifting upscale. Today, with a population of nearly twenty-five thousand, the neighborhood is in a fight for survival.

"Several years ago, the Bayit VeGan Rebbe gave the green light to his followers to buy apartments in our community," Abramson explained. Haredim began buying up cheap apartments and they began to demand changes to accommodate their orthodox lifestyle. "In a short time," he said, "they took over." Although Abramson and a group of residents took up the fight for their homes and their lifestyle, "Jerusalem was becoming a shtetl," he said.

Abramson had a distinguished art career in Jerusalem, starting as a printer and curator of exhibitions at the Jerusalem Print Workshop, teaching at the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design and then, for seven years, serving as the Chairman of its Fine Art Department and Head of the Bezalel Program for Young Artists. But long before the unsuccessful fight to save Kiryat Ha Youvel, Abramson realized that art and artists were migrating north. As a consequence, in 2002 he became a Professor of Art at the Multidisciplinary Art Department of Shenkar College in Ramat Gan, not far from Tel Aviv.

During his years there, he moved his studio from his home to the Artist Studios in Talpiot, with support from the Jerusalem Foundation, and finally to a floor in a building, where he and two colleagues built three separate

studios. He created his art there but, Abramson said, there was never an open exchange with other artists. “Jerusalem as a whole is a city of compounds, all enclosed, and that mentality is part of Jerusalem’s mentality. You bunker down into your world.”

For the last fifteen years, especially since the Second Intifada, which dealt Jerusalem a death blow, Tel Aviv has overpowered Jerusalem. Fewer and fewer artists come to study at Bezalel Academy of Art and Design in Jerusalem and, even if they do study there, they leave when their studies end. In Tel Aviv, there is a strong sense of community. “There’s a lot of contacts among artists, among galleries, among commercial spaces. For sure the scene is here.”

For the first time in his daily routine, Abramson finds himself meeting with other artists. Before he left Jerusalem, a friend warned him that in Tel Aviv he would have to maintain a social life, drink coffee, and sit in cafes. “I find myself actually talking about paintings, grounds and pigments now,” he said.

The walls of his 110-square-meter Tel Aviv studio (formerly a glass cutting factory) are covered with new work, destined for *1967*, his one-man show which will open at the Gordon Gallery on June 5th (the 45th anniversary of the outbreak of the Six Day War, to the day). “I am currently working on things more connected to the past—sort of a critical lament,” Abramson said. When his father cleaned up his Jerusalem attic and was about to throw out a collection of newspapers from the Six-Day War, Abramson took it. “It was asking me to do something.”

Abramson feels strongly that the Six-Day War was “the cancer that brought down the body.” So, his new work on the old newspapers incorporates several images—a modernist icon of a black square and a skull of death lurking in the Israeli arcadia. On a shelf over his desk, Abramson points to a skull that he brought to Tel Aviv from his old studio. There, the walls were taken over by things. “I threw out stuff when I moved,” he said, though he brought the skull and roses of Jericho with him.

Another new series involves creating black silhouettes of local flora from a botany book. “It is a connection to my childhood in the fields, picking wild flowers,” he said. “It is a reflection on the way Zionist culture bonded with the land.” For Abramson, though, it is also a lament, which he accomplishes by turning the flora and fauna into black silhouettes and putting them over the historically loaded newspaper.

Abramson reflects on the role of the artist in Israel. “I have a leading metaphor in my mind,” he said, “of the relationship between the artist and his studio. It’s taken from biblical spies—who came back with stuff (vine

branches). The artist is that kind of spy. You venture out and look at reality and then you come back and try to figure it out."

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2. Frank Moore's Dark Thoughts: *Toxic Beauty*, a retrospective at NYU's Grey Art Gallery, Brings Together Writing and Visual Work of a Socially Engaged Artist

Fig. 2-1. Frank Moore: *Lullaby* (1967). Photo by Shael Shapiro.

In his high-school yearbook (Roslyn, NY, class of 1971), the artist Frank Moore, then only 18, included a little line drawing and a self-description that began, "Failed first test in trig." It was a candid and whimsical admission from a deep thinker, whose career brought together his passion for nature and things green with his concern about genetically modified

food, his anger over environmental degradation, and his critique of the medical establishment and the health care industry.

The current exhibit, *Toxic Beauty: The Art of Frank Moore*, up until December 8th at New York University's Grey Art Gallery and the Tracey/Barry Gallery in the Fales Library, spans Moore's entire career. Curated by independent scholar Susan Harris with Grey Art Gallery director Lynn Gumpert, the exhibition includes 35 major paintings and over 50 gouaches, prints, and drawings. Based upon nearly 44-linear feet of archival material, sketchbooks and documents (56 boxes) housed in the Frank Moore Papers at the Fales's Downtown Collection, the show and its accompanying catalogue illuminate Moore's serious nature, his love of research, his love of drawing and sketching, and his talent for writing. "Frank Moore was multi-faceted," said Gumpert.

When Klaus Kertess's plans for a Frank Moore exhibition fell through, according to Gumpert, David Leiber and Michael Boodro from the Gesso Foundation (Boodro was a fellow Yale student and life-long friend of Moore's), approached Grey and Gumpert said yes. Not herself a Frank Moore scholar, she enlisted Susan Harris who meticulously scoured the archival material at Fales. "It took us almost two years, or three graduate curatorial assistants, one per semester," said Gumpert. Harris started with the exhibition template that Klaus Kertess had begun and "simply added, subtracted and refined the check list. And, then of course, we had to deal with the pragmatic realities of shipping costs, and permissions, etc." The most significant addition, she said, was the archival material, which "helped shape the texture and the personal tenor of the show."

Moore studied at Yale where he double majored in painting and psychology. It was the moment of abstract painting, but Moore writes that upon his graduation in 1976, "Abstraction fell away like a graft that didn't take." He started painting the figure. For the rest of his life, Moore, who much admired the Hudson River School, painted detailed figurative works, filled with images both real and fantastic: a self-portrait, his head bald from chemotherapy, exhaling butterflies; miniature buffalo roaming a landscape of bed sheets in place of prairie.

The Grey exhibit follows the 2002 retrospective of Moore's work, *Green Thumb in a Dark Eden*, a show organized by Sue Scott at the Orlando Museum of Art which was meant to be a mid-career retrospective. Frank Moore worked on the planning and execution of the Orlando exhibition, but his career was cut short when he died from AIDS in 2002, shortly before the exhibition opened.

Moore's own writing reveals much about himself as a man, an artist, an activist, and a socially engaged citizen. Reading through Moore's 100

notebooks, writings, poems, and drawings, Harris discovered his "emotional outpourings, confessions, protestations and deep, dark thoughts that were breathtaking, unexpected and extremely poignant."

In a 1994 interview with Holland Carter, Moore explained the origins of his love of nature. He was born in Stuyvesant Town on 14th Street in New York City, living there for four or five years before his parents moved to Long Island. But his father's family lived in the Adirondacks and "in the summer we'd usually be shipped up there. I had a lot or cousins and we congregated at my grandfather's house in an extended family situation. That place had a big impact on my esthetic. I loved it up there. I loved the landscape, the wilderness, the whole rustic thing, that colonial American sense of everything being handmade, earth-connected." His childhood love for the land and for nature deepened after he bought a country home in Deposit, New York in 1987.

Moore's sculptural frames, which incorporate twigs, birds, Adirondack lamps, books, and drugs, reflect his interest in the natural world and augment his paintings. Gumpert notes that Moore, who worked as a set and stage designer, "loved to create objects." In one frame Moore carved feathers and then cast them in resin. In another, the word *wizard* is spelled out in letters made of blue-filled syringes and surrounded by white bottles of Zovirax and other AIDS medications.

At the entrance to the exhibit, two fractured self-portraits from 1986 confront the viewer: reminders of Moore's art school training with its emphasis on abstraction, and a powerful documentation of a young artist's search for himself. *Easter Basket* shows Moore in a bright blue shirt and white T-shirt on a split screen, with a pink and grey basket-weave background. His head is cut in half vertically and his eyes appear on the left and the right, one about six inches above the other. In *Mehboy*, Moore experiments with four diagonal cuts, with one eye ending up dead center in the portrait, and the second appearing mysteriously just above his ear. The background here is a motif of white vines on green. "Both, said Gumpert, "show Moore trying to figure out how the parts will come together."

In 1987, Moore learned that he and his partner Robert Fulp were both HIV positive, and understandably his painting took on a more urgent message. *Aesthetic Impulse* (1988) shows a hand with long nails painted bright red grasping a scissors and about to cut the stems of two flowers—inside the flower two nineteenth century German glass eyeballs.

Two years later in *The Great American Traveling Medicine Show*, a large landscape reminiscent of Salvador Dali's surrealist dreamscapes, Moore fills the sky with the word placebo in skywriting. Below are the sick, stick figures clustered around a traveling salesman who offers up the cure

in a bottle. The landscape includes the severed trunks of redwoods, on one a gallows with a body swinging, on another a bloody syringe, a pool of blood collecting on the earth below. It is Moore at his most powerful, the painting shared by severed redwoods and suffering souls, with two taxidermy birds on twigs adorning the gilded wood frame.

Moore's lament for the poisoning of pure water, the deforestation of woodlands, the genetic engineering of seeds and plants, and the killing of wildlife runs like a leitmotif throughout the show. In *Wildlife Management Area* (1990), Moore hangs a red plaque around the deer's throat, merging the animal and the trophy. Although antlers and lamps are mounted on the artist's frame giving the work a quaint feeling, the overall effect is shocking as we stare at the deer wearing his own plaque.

Elsewhere, in a letter to Howard Stein, a financier and art collector who owned Moore's work, the painter wrote about his intent in *Niagara* (1994-5): "This painting shows a giant DNA molecule rising out of the mist at Niagara Falls, only this molecule is not made of organic bases ACGT that are so familiar, but instead is fashioned from chemicals which cause cancer and birth defects, 'heritable mutagens,' which are released on a daily basis in and around the Niagara Falls (which contains the famous superfund site known as Love Canal)."

Throughout this exhibit, we feel Moore's anguish over the toxic nature of AIDS drugs, the agonizing treatment AIDS patients endure, and the fragility of human life. In *Bubble Bath* (1990), AIDS is the metaphor. We see a used condom, an AZT bottle, and a toilet with Kaposi's sarcoma lesions on it; the artist's frame is composed of copper pipe with two metal faucets, echoing the bath theme. The result is a work that is the complete antithesis of a soothing bubble bath with men having sex drawn in white lines in black bubbles.

At the center of *Arena* (1992) lies a patient on a dissection table. Moore's partner of eight years, Robert Fulp had recently died and the work shows Fulp taking his last breath, a doctor close by. He is surrounded by skeletons, one on horseback. Outside the arena, in the top left corner is Moore's Buddhist spiritual guide, John Giorno, who is leading a group in prayer and on the top right, Act Up activists struggle behind a police barricade. One carries a sign asking "Who's in Charge?" Between the groups, Moore added silkscreened details including strands of DNA and various scientific formulae. The wall text tells us why Moore did so: "I silkscreen stuff to make sure people know I did not simply invent it. It is clearly coming from another source." In another painting from the same year, *Debutantes*,

Moore depicts himself and his friend, writer Hilton Als as children in a playground where slides and climbing gyms have been removed—in their place, historical torture devices for sodomites are silkscreened on the work.

The *Wizard* (1994), a large painting, 68 by 95 inches, is mounted in a clear resin artist's frame, filled with pharmaceuticals used to treat AIDS. A burning landscape, its vast and intricate terrain, reminiscent of the apocalyptic landscapes of Hieronymus Bosch, lies before us, with piles of pills and test tubes filled with blood. In the foreground, walks Dr. Jean-Claude Chermann (followed by four white mice), a doctor who, according to the wall text, "played a key role in the identification of HIV at the Pasteur Institute in Paris and in whose research Moore participated."

In *Freedom to Share* (1994), Moore paints a Thanksgiving table surrounded by a multi-racial group celebrating the holiday: their eating utensils now surgical tools, their glasses beakers, and the turkey on the serving platter, a mound of syringes filled with blood. AIDS, we see, is no longer just a gay disease.

Three years later, in *Lullaby* (1997), the landscape has changed dramatically. Now tiny buffalo roam across a bed, covered with white sheets, like a snow-covered plain. There are two pillows but the bed is empty. There are no needles, no pills, and no syringes. The painting, drawn from the artist's dreams, stands in dramatic contrast to the Bosch-like frenzy characteristic of *Wizard* and *Oz* (1999-2000). The label says that the work evokes an "American Arcadia" but there is a sadness, an emptiness to the piece. Are the buffalo resurgent as we are told or are they rather shrunken reminders of the past? Was Moore thinking back to his mother who sang him to sleep with "Home on the Range"?

The Frank Moore show continues in the Tracey/Barry Gallery at Fales where it is possible to see *Beehive* (1985), a 16-minute experimental film project that involved a collaboration between Moore and dancer/choreographer Jim Self as well as storyboards and studies for the film. Moore did all the sets, costumes, opticals, titles and special effects. For the exhibit, Fales Director Marvin Taylor restored the color in the film, which was shot in Moore's Crosby Street loft. "The Beehive is a masterpiece," said Gumpert. "It will be included in an anthology of the most important video performances of the 20th century."

Although Gumpert and Harris originally thought of mixing up the archival materials with the paintings in the two exhibition spaces, ultimately, it was not possible since Fales has no security guard and no climate control. Had there been more space and money, Harris would have liked to include *Yosemite*, a very large painting that they could not afford to bring to New

York from an island in the Pacific Northwest and earlier works to give viewers a better sense of the art Moore did in the 1980s when he showed at the Paula Allen Gallery. Still, despite the limitations, the resulting exhibit is an extraordinary one, especially resonant in these days of the debate on global warming and the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy. As Frank Moore wrote in 2002, "…As beautiful as our modern Arcadia may appear to be, it is a beauty that is alloyed with all the complexities and toxicities of modern life."

Lynn Gumpert's favorite painting in the exhibit is *With This Ring…* (2000). Gumpert believes that the work "is uniquely Frank, the disembodied hand, the silkscreened genetic codes, the octopus holding the ring, Jackie Kennedy in a wedding dress marrying the cricket, with the bee as the priest, and Moore's signature/initials on the white pill. There are mutant ants at work, too." While we see Bosch in *Arena*, here it is just Frank Moore, said Gumpert, "Totally bizarre and mystic and yet incredibly compelling."

Originally published on *guernicamag.com*, November 2, 2012.

3. EVERYTHING GROWS: INSIDE WANGECHI MUTU'S *A FANTASTIC JOURNEY*

Fig: 3-1. Wangechi Mutu reflected in mirror. Photo by Shael Shapiro.

I AM SIPPING TEA in Wangechi Mutu's Brooklyn studio. It is a bitterly cold day, with sunlight shining through the parlor floor windows, reflecting on shiny jewels that encircle the eyes and dot the Afro of an older collage work. "I keep that hanging there," she said, "to remind me of things that I did right and wrong."

Dressed in grays and blacks, Mutu's presence today is muted but her words shine, glittery, dazzling, colorful, most of all, serious, like the content of her art, her collages, her sculpture, and her video, all currently on display in *A Fantastic Journey*, up until March 9, 2014 at the Sackler Center for Feminist Art in The Brooklyn Museum.

It is her first survey exhibit in the US and she loves that it has traveled to her hometown. The show is rich, and detailed, inviting viewers to take a

journey through her work from the mid-1990s to the present, much like the journey her life has followed from Nairobi, Kenya to New York City.

Mutu, whose first name is pronounced *Wah GEH She*, left Kenya as a teenager to attend high school in Wales. “I couldn’t wait to get out,” she said. Although she had no family here, after high school she came to New York to study art at Parsons School of Design. Unhappy there, she transferred to the New School to study anthropology and cultural studies but found that she could not afford it. Then, she discovered a real New York treasure, Cooper Union, a school that does not advertise and where tuition is free. Since the school did not accept international students, she had to wait a year to become a resident. Cooper Union was followed by an MFA in sculpture at Yale.

Fig. 3-2. Wangechi Mutu’s studio. Photo by Shael Shapiro.

Leaving your homeland is one thing. Returning is another. At least that was what Mutu discovered when she wanted to go home. There was just no guarantee that she would be admitted back into the US. So, she stayed here, separated from her family and Kenya for 20 years, unable to attend the openings of exhibits elsewhere in the world. The whole situation was unfortunate and, given the tangles of immigration and immigration policy, it was only resolved fairly recently.

Despite, or maybe because of her exile, Mutu dug into her art, always working in multiple media including drawings, sculpture, video, site-specific installations, as well as her signature collages. Whatever the medium, she gave great thought to the subject of her narrative—feminism, colonialism, race–and to the artistic process that best moved the story forward. "I have a narrative in mind from way in the beginning," she said, explaining how she works.

Mutu picks a pose or a figure from a magazine or a photograph, and then draws it very small. Once she has done that, she enlarges it, changing the body and the original figure. "Sometimes, I make the figure fuller, less confident, dropping the shoulders. Once they are larger," she said, "they are transformed into a bigger story."

At every stage, Mutu thinks about what is going to happen next: "I ask myself, who/what is this person? Someone might be ornate, someone bare, someone nude. What will happen when I remove all color and experiment with ink and paint?"

Mutu began making collages, mosaics, and assemblages as a young child, cutting up paper and magazines, and crushing egg shells—so early that she cannot remember the time when she first made art. Early on, she was struck by the power of collage: transferring one image into another.

She was also attracted to and terrified by the medical journals that filled her house. Her mother was a nurse-midwife and the books included grotesque photos of all sorts of tropical diseases. "One of the reasons I treat the skin and the body the way I do," Mutu said, "is that I've seen Elephantiasis and Polio. With tropical illnesses, everything grows."

It's hard to tell how much these journals contributed to her later-in-life exploration of gender but, clearly, a powerful sense of femaleness pervades Mutu's work. While, at times, gender is not obvious and her women seem androgynous, often we see them in squatting positions—a posture she describes as "both exotic and erotic."

Mutu describes the evolution of *Riding Death in My Sleep* (2002), one of the earliest collages in the exhibit. The work originated with a picture of a woman squatting, taken from a music magazine. Mutu still has the original picture. In Mutu's collage, though, the woman, squatting on a dark mushroom-covered mound, is wearing high heel boots. She is primal and animal but at the same time, wearing a heel, "a signifier of modernity."

In addition to integrating the primitive and the modern, Mutu also messes around with ethnicity. Clearly, the woman in *Riding Death* is multiracial. Her head is albino and the rest of her body, except for the boots, is covered with multicolor leopard skin patterns. The effect. What world does

she come from? Is she ready to pounce or is it merely the tension of her body? Why is she crouching in this alien environment?

Mutu has answers to all of these questions. Her creatures, she says, are less about space and "more about an investigation of humanness and the interrelatedness of our species." To gain greater control over her creations, Mutu shifted from working on paper to Mylar in 2004 because watercolor was time sensitive and paper absorbed the paint much too quickly. It would become permanent even before she had decided what she wanted to do. But pools of paint stay wet on Mylar, allowing Mutu to work on the mixture for 24-48 hours. "Mylar is very inert, a very objective surface so that I can do my emotional things." Recently, she has been experimenting with working on linoleum.

Getting inside Mutu's emotions means deconstructing the colorful and complex elements that comprise her collages: their shapes, their textures, and their puzzling identities. We confront things that we recognize as having been something we once knew or thought we knew, now transformed into something unknown. Sometimes, cyborgs replace humans. Always, fantasies trump or, at the very least, transform realities.

Saisha Grayson, Assistant Curator at the Sackler Center, who helped install *A Fantastic Journey*, sees in Mutu's collages a reflection of her keen interest in science fiction and in Afro-futurism. Grayson notes several big themes in the show: extreme hybridity, with Mutu deconstructing and reconstructing collages through clippings from fashion, motorcycle, pornographic, and music magazines, pieces of contact paper, fake fur, and glittery jeweled encrustments. Mutu describes her work as an effort to keep "dissecting the female costume masquerade," a process that continues with her new work, not in the exhibit, where she uses hair from wigs and extensions in hairnets as her paintbrush, dipping them in ink and paint and creating her own paper to use in her collages.

To Grayson, Mutu's use of throw-away stuff—felt blankets that become tree trunks, packing tape with snakeskin imprint, and cheap jewels—intentionally undermines our expectations. The felt blankets that we recognize as packing blankets in the States are called rescue blankets in Africa where people sleep in them. In many of the collages, sequins and glitter add sparkle. So, especially in Mutu's sculptural work, materials are transformed but never entirely. She forces us to reconsider what we think we see and already know.

Mutu repeatedly raises issues of post-colonialism and race. She produces new family trees, new hierarchies, and strange evolutionary mashups. In *Family Tree* (2012), a work created for the show, there is a suite of 13 portraits, each with a different personality. Though the lines of lineage