



WANGECHI
MUTU

Flesh in the Machine: *She's Egungun Again*

Jennifer A. González

A Medusa's head of human limbs explodes in a shower of gold, while the extended tentacles of hands and feet float, soft and sticky as sea anemones or weightless as the finest feathers. We are seduced and repulsed by this voluptuous female figure, with her Cleopatra eye and serpent armbands. Her semi-liquid surface is the colour of coral, the colour of jade, the colour of violence; she is a chameleon of octopus flesh mottled with suckers. Leaning on one knee, back arched and arms outstretched, she is poised and even powerful, yet her knee rests in a wooden crutch which balances on a fragile point. *She's Egungun Again* towers above and seduces her viewers with a festering image of exploitation and erotic desire syncopated in a warm rhythm of flesh on flesh.

The reference that immediately comes to mind is Josephine Baker, the African American nightclub performer who created a sensation in Paris during the 1920s with her erotic nightclub performances and wry humor. Mutu has referenced Baker in other works, notably *I Shake a Tail Feather* (2003). Classic photographs of Baker depict the dancer topless, dressed in revealing briefs decorated with plumes of feathers, one knee lifted, back arched, looking over her shoulder. Baker was playful and ironic, crossing her eyes and clowning when performing the stereotyped postures that exaggerated her buttocks and titillated her audiences. Her dark body served as a screen for the projected fantasies of her white audiences, and as her popularity grew, her original American dance training (which included steps such as the Charleston) gave way to more improvisational "savage" dances choreographed by the Europeans to suit their needs. By the 1930s Baker had received requests to perform as Inuit, Indochinese, African, Arab and Caribbean, becoming a symbol of not only the "black woman" but a host of colonized women.¹

Wangechi Mutu, *She's Egungun Again*, 2005, ink, acrylic, collage contact paper on Mylar 221 x 133.4 cm. The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. Partial and promised gift of Dallas Price-Van Breda
Photo: Joshua White





Lucien Walery
(French, 1863–1935)
Left: Josephine Baker:
Girdle of Bananas, 1926–27
Right: Josephine Baker in
La Revue des Revues, 1927

In Mutu's image, the projected sexual fantasies of the colonizer are legible in the pornographic images worn around the figure's hips composed of fleshy body parts sutured in an uncanny and disjointed way that echoes some of the surrealist compositions of Hans Belmer's *poupées*. Dismemberment has multiple connotations here beyond sexual delectation; the artworks of many Dadaists and Surrealists responded directly to the mutilated and amputated bodies that resulted from new forms of warfare such as aerial bombing in World War I. At the same time modernization on all fronts, including factory labour and mass consumption, created a condition in which the body became a discontinuous object, routinized, distorted, and disjointed. Prostheses and amputees figure prominently in the works of painter George Grosz while the photomontage technique used by Hannah Höch signalled a world in which the "new woman" was as much a slave of the machine age as its new flesh-object. Indeed, the formal ties between Mutu's collage works and Höch's series "From an Ethnographic Museum" have been noted by other scholars.² Less has been said, however, about this particular moment of the early twentieth century and its significance in the construction of race discourse. European forays into the aesthetic and cultural

traditions of the African continent, informed by a combination of ignorant exoticism and genuine fascination, shaped major movements in art for several generations including such canonical works as Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)* (*The Young Ladies of Avignon*). The same fascination with cultural difference that motivated Dadaists and Surrealists in the early twentieth century could be found—perhaps reversed—in the misguided logic of eugenicists who were hard at work on theories of racial descent that would ultimately result in the systematic horrors of the Holocaust and apartheid in the decades to follow. Mutu's choice of referents invites us to consider these historical links, but also invites a comparison of more recent genocides and dismemberments in Rwanda and Sierra Leone. Flesh must once again feed the appetite of a war machine. "It's very easy to be on the wrong side of the weapon," the artist has commented.³

In the end, however, *She's Egungun Again* is not merely a victim of circumstance. In the Yoruba tradition of West Africa, the Egungun represents the collective spirit of the ancestors with whom priests and initiates communicate. During festival periods, masqueraders stage mock performances to demonstrate both ethical and amoral behavior in order to expose the strengths and weaknesses of a given community as an act of spiritual cleansing. The small anthropomorphic sculpture with two bulbous eyes turned upside down on the tip of the crutch is also a depiction of Egungun.⁴ The crutch may also double, therefore, as a ritual staff used in the masked dances. With this information we can read Mutu's figure as a lively spirit medium perhaps in the midst of an ecstatic revelation. Unlike the traditional Egungun, who has always been male, this one is female and she turns the tradition on its head.

As a multi-layered feminist gesture, Mutu's work places women (rather than men) at the center of historical transformation and interpretation. Women are objects of sacrifice (Cleopatra and Medusa were both powerful women betrayed by men), ongoing sites of fantasy, palimpsests upon which the horrors of racism and the horrors of war are written, not once, but again, and again, and again. This trans-historical and mythic figure is also a powerful masked performer who survives beyond death to enact and interpret the moral errors of the past for the sake of the present—and the future.

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