

## Original Research Article

**An Analysis of Postmodernism in Wangechi Mutu's Paintings  
(A Contemporary African-American Artist)\***Zahra Pakzad<sup>1\*\*</sup>, Mina Foroughi Dehnavi<sup>2</sup>**1. Assistant Professor, Department of Painting, Faculty of Art, Alzahra University, Tehran, Iran.****2. M.A. in Painting, Department of Painting, Faculty of Art, Alzahra University, Tehran, Iran.**

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**Abstract**

**Problem statement:** The definition of artistic postmodernism has always faced challenges. However, it is possible to obtain a tool for analyzing the postmodernism of artworks in this period by considering components such as eclecticism, pluralism, deconstructionism, and the importance of micro-narratives and subcultures, as well as the identity crisis. In this regard, this research seeks to answer these questions: What are the features of Wangechi Mutu's works? What similarities and differences can be found in the works of this artist? How are approaches to Mutu's works' associated with postmodern keywords?

**Research objective:** The purpose of this study is to search for and analyze the characteristics of postmodernist art in the works of Wangechi Mutu, a Kenyan female artist living in the United States. Considering the characteristics of her works, this study uses postmodernist tools to interpret them.

**Research method:** This research described and analyzed a part of Wangechi Mutu's paintings based on the theoretical foundations of postmodern art through a qualitative study.

**Conclusion:** The results show that the artist has achieved an eclectic and plural expression, both in the structure of her works and in their content, by using visual and conceptual collages and, in general, a collage worldview. In this way, she has succeeded in breaking the foundations of macro narratives and subcultures of women, black people, and immigrants, and was consequently able to relate to the issue of an identity crisis. Mutu's works are her socio-political statements in which she expresses and critiques the issues of racial and class discrimination in the contemporary world.

**Keywords:** *Postmodernism, Eclecticism, Pluralism, Wangechi Mutu, Collage.*

**Introduction**

Postmodern art is a controversial idea in contemporary art that includes artistic trends from

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\*\*Corresponding Author: z.pakzad@alzahra.ac.ir, +989196838898

the 1960s onwards. This movement has always presented liberating values and ideas to the art world compared to the past, which was innovative in its kind. In general, one word, phrase, or even paragraph cannot be enough to define postmodern art, and this arises from the indefinability and uncertainty that is one of the main foundations

of the postmodern movement. On the other hand, during this period, several changes were made in the artist's attitude, artistic subjects, media, artistic expression, presentation, etc., which also affected the structure and content of the works. With this introduction, the present study intends to achieve a postmodernist analysis and interpretation of Wangechi Mutu's works by defining some features of postmodernist art in her paintings. Mutu is a Kenyan artist who immigrated to the United States at a young age and completed her academic studies in sculpturing. In addition to sculptures, she uses other artistic media such as paintings, videos, etc. to express her artistic ideas and concepts, and as a new generation of African artists, she presents a different image of this continent, especially African women, to the world.

### Research Methodology

By studying the concept of artistic postmodernism and some important components in structuring this phenomenon, in the next step, a part of Wangechi Mutu's works, an artist of this period, was analyzed. It should be noted that among these components, the items that can help in reading the artistic text were explained. From Mutu's artistic media, her paintings and, in particular, her sculptures were selected. Five artworks were selected as purposeful samples that are more related to the theoretical framework of the research. In each work, its structure and content are examined based on the parameters of postmodern art that are described at the beginning of the article.

### Research Background

In "Art after 1960", Archer (2009) generally deals with artistic movements from 1960 to the present. He refers to the tendencies and movements created in the second half of the twentieth century in a categorized manner, and according to the geography of their emergence, and mentions postmodern art as one of the tendencies of this period. He distinguishes post-modern art from other contemporary art movements. Also, various dissertations and articles

have been written in this field. Among them, we can mention a master dissertation entitled "Components of postmodern art" (Nazari, 2017), in which the characteristics of postmodern art are studied in various artistic fields, including literature, architecture, cinema, and theater. Among the studies that have dealt with postmodernism in painting more specifically, we can mention the article "Characteristics of postmodernism in painting" (Razi Oliyai & Hassanvand, 2006). Authors believe that the prevalence of characteristics such as eclecticism, skepticism, ridicule, discourse, humor, meaninglessness, and ambiguity have distinguished this period from its predecessor. On the other hand, from the 1970s onwards, there is a resurgence of colors, sentimentality, and decorative elements, and artists return to traditional painting tools; the same things that had been completely abandoned in previous years.

In his M.A. dissertation entitled "Destabilizing the Sign: The Collage Work of Ellen Gallagher, Wangechi Mutu, and Mickalene Thomas" Swami (2013), as is clear from the title, addressed Mutu's collage works. Swami believes that fragmented images from various media resources have led Mutu to create hybrid figures who are at the same time beautiful and grotesque. Swami sees Mutu's collaged faces as a sign of the difficulty of classifying individuals or cultures, especially in a world where globalization is on the rise. Gueorguiev (2011) in her article "Reflections on Wangechi Mutu's Art" published in the 2011 collection of "Metropolitan Survey", considers the convincing visual combination of collage and assemblage techniques in Mutu's works reminiscent of the works of Dadaists, such as Hannah Höch, Romar Birden, and Chris Ophelia. She also puts the poetic explorations of experience in relation to culture, femininity, race, identity, gender, the body, and beauty. Above all, Georgiev shows in her article how concepts and approaches have been used in Mutu's colorful and fascinating works. Among Persian language studies, authors did not come across an example in the study

of Wangechi Mutu's works. This article intends to look at some of the works of this very prominent and well-known artist in the international art community from the perspective of artistic postmodernism and achieve a deep and comprehensive analysis.

### Theoretical Foundations

#### • Artistic postmodernism

To genealogize and clarify the concept of postmodernism, the meaning, and principles of modernism are discussed in advance before addressing the postmodernism-related concepts. In fact, understanding postmodernism depends on a clear understanding of modernism. If one tries to define modernism in a short and concise sentence, it means that "Modernism is the awareness and self-awareness arising from the conditions of the modern age, and it is a kind of rational defense of these new conditions and a logical justification of the new age" (Khalaj, 2007, 21). One of the most important features of the modern era is the victory of human wisdom over religious and traditional beliefs and the development of scientific and critical thought that overlooks all social, cultural, and artistic fields (Nazari, 2017, 13). Due to the complexity and confusion of meanings, its meaning has often suffered from multiplicity and ambiguity, and the theorists of this period each have different yet at the same time common-rooted interpretations of this term; "For example, it is known as a new aesthetic movement, a situation, a culture, a dominant cultural element, a group of artistic movements that use a contradictory (imitative) method of conscious representation, a period in which man has reached the "end of history", or even as an unfortunate mistake" (Malpas, 2007, 22 & 23). In most sources, postmodernism is recognized as a reaction to the latest trends in modernity and late modernism. "The general interpretation of postmodernism by many theorists is the concept of the anti-modernism movement. Although postmodernism internally calls for innovation in artistic tendencies and movements and other theoretical issues, it rejects the criteria and

goals of modernism to prove itself (Shad Ghazvini, 2013, 169). From this point of view, it can be said: "Postmodern is almost an evolved form of modern thought, which is influenced by the critical thinking and freedom-seeking of modernity and measures and evaluates modern art itself and its philosophical and aesthetic ideas, principles, and ideals" (Razi Oliyai & Hasanvand, 2006, 46) and thus modernism has lost its application at this time (Hasanvand, 2018, 13). There is still controversy as to whether postmodernism is a follower of modernism or a movement against its ideals, but what is certain is that postmodernism is (historically) more recent than modernity. In any case, "postmodernity can be considered as a stage beyond what modernity is" (Nozari, 2009, 453). Postmodern art, unlike the modern period, pays attention to the concepts that are expressed in the work of art, and in a word, it pays attention to the content, and it owes this strategy to the approaches of conceptual art. "The field of presenting an artwork in conceptual art is far beyond the field of visual and performing arts and includes the subject of light, sound, movement, diagram, film, photo, and even performance" (Shad Ghazvini, 2013, 175). "Conceptual art does not accept conventional art media such as traditional painting or conventional sculpture, and instead chooses other expressive outlets, such as performance, photography, film and video, events, body art, media, new ready-made works, and mixed media" (Soheili Rad, 2014, 123). Sometimes this idea is expressed in the form of words, numbers, or symbols; sometimes it is summarized in the screening of a film, or it becomes a work of art from the arrangement of homogeneous or heterogeneous elements. Conceptual art flourished in the United States and influenced the artistic period after it in various aspects. In addition to the importance of content, the role of the audience both in the creation and in the interpretation of the work was also based on this movement, and in the following years, this became the main pillar of postmodern works of art, especially conceptual works. If the issue of mentality

prevails in modernism, in postmodernism it is the opinion of the audience and its key role in reading the work that finds a special and fundamental place (Ghaedi Heidari, 2007, 18). This goes so far as to find, in the field of postmodern literature and art, "critical theorists who emphasize that when you study and analyze a work of art, you are not merely addressing the intentions and goals of its creator. But you also actively and creatively participate in the creation of meanings or messages that are embedded in that work. In this way, you are also considered to be the artist and creator of that work" (Nozari, 2009, 90).

Postmodernism in various fields of art, such as painting, sculpture, architecture, etc., can include certain exclusive features. The medium of painting continues to exist in the era of postmodern and post-conceptual art but in a new and different form from its past. In postmodern painting, "what to say" and "how to say" are important. In general, it can be said that postmodernism leads painting towards irrational and free-thinking qualities, and in many cases, towards incomprehensible and discrediting artistic values" (ibid., 14). Considering the importance of the artist's idea in relation to the way it is expressed, the structure of a work of art, such as a painting, may be influenced by the idea in this new age. Despite the wide range of meanings in the field of artistic postmodernism, there are common features that can be used to provide a comprehensive definition of postmodernism in the field of visual arts, especially in paintings. This study uses these common features to define postmodernism in our case study, namely Mutu's paintings, which will be discussed in the following section.

#### • Eclecticism and Pluralism

"The first thing that attracts attention about today's art compared to even a few decades ago is the unprecedented plurality of styles, forms, experiences, and programs" (Archer, 2009, 9). "Postmodernism is a collection of puzzle pieces, each of which has been borrowed from somewhere and something" (Razi Oliyai & Hasanvand, 2006,

53). Also, "it is an eclectic mix of any kind of tradition with past traditions." The main features of postmodern works can be found in multiple, ambiguous, ironic, and humorous codes, satires, and various scattered choices, contradictions, and non-continuity or rupture in traditions. The postmodern works' diverse and varied style is at odds with the minimalism of the late modern ideology and all other competitors, which rely on exclusive dogmatic tastes or principles" (Nozari, 2009, 99). Eclecticism in postmodern art can be considered both in terms of the structure and content of works. On the other hand, the eclecticism of media, styles, techniques, topics, etc. can also be considered as another part of the emergence of the eclecticism of postmodernism in art. The concept of eclecticism is closely related to pluralism. In Persian, for pluralism, the equivalents of *chandganefgi*, *chand-bavari*, *changaneh-bavari*, *takasor* and *kesrat-bavari* have been used (Qarabaghi, 1999, 46). Any attempt to understand the age of postmodernism requires several basic preconditions: to question the project of modernity and having disbelief in it, having the spirit of pluralism, having a deep skepticism about any traditional orthodoxy, denying the view of the world as an interconnected, coherent, all-encompassing whole, and finally denying the expectation of any definitive solutions and definitive answers (Nozari, 2009, 232). Pluralism, like eclecticism, can be pursued in the form of a combination of schools, cults, etc. in postmodernist art. The originality of the work of art is thus called into question, and as a result, artists resort to adapting and borrowing works of art, or even non-art, as we will see in the works that follow. As stated, one of the main features of postmodern philosophy is "the plurality of theories and concepts, and the ambiguity of definitions with different values, which, as an expression, leads to the presentation of relative and uncertain solutions. This variety and breadth in narratives have replaced metanarratives; therefore, it destroys certainty and finality" (Zadmehr & Mohammadi Vakil, 2019, 2). Pluralism can be considered as a feature that has

caused other postmodern features to be connected like a chain and enables each of them to give meaning and existence to the other. This is because, in the shadow of this concept, one cannot criticize subcultures, theories, styles, or any other issue, and count them as mistakes or deviations. Pluralism can make sense in both creation and reading. Pluralism did already exist in the reading of these works, but it is now recognized. It can be so that each audience encounters a single work and gives different interpretations according to its temporal and spatial context and characteristics. Therefore, it can no longer be claimed that two readers read and received the same at two different times and two different places, or even at one time and place. These two factors, namely eclecticism, and plurality disrupt the formal and semantic unity, breaking the foundation and thus allowing the narrations to be expanded upon. In this way, a non-white immigrant woman (Mutu) seems to be three steps away from mainstream art. But by creating the right context in the postmodern era, she can use her artistic expression not only to refer to micro-narratives but also to question the pre-established macro-narratives.

#### • Skepticism in metanarratives

Lyotard writes in the article "Report on Knowledge": "If I want to simplify the term postmodern as much as possible, I define it as distrust in the metanarrative" (qt. in Cohen, 2017, 461). "The first principle of postmodernism is that what is valid in modernity is invalid and obsolete in the postmodern era." Modernity was placed in a framework that the jargon of cultural studies calls the metanarrative, or the great narrative. That is, great ideas such as reason, truth, tradition, ethics, and history that determined and gave meaning to the course of life... . Therefore, postmodernism viewed all sciences and their sources with a kind of equal skepticism" (Qarabaghi, 1999, 45). In fact, the basis of "uncertainty" in postmodernism was the same skepticism and the arbitrariness and relative nature of things. "The term postmodernism describes a

state or situation in which there is a lack of any kind of certainty, and there is a kind of self-conscious and humorous skepticism about the certainties of personal, intellectual, and political life" (Zadmehr & Mohammadi Vakil, 2019, 3). Most postmodern thinkers have emphasized its declassification and deconstruction nature, and consider it the basis for the formation of other keywords in the art of this period. At the same time, deconstruction is one of the basic concepts and strategies of postmodern art in going beyond the normal and ordinary aspects of life, objects, and buildings to create new, and at the same time, strange and unconventional spaces and shapes, the understanding of which will lead to more knowledge of contemporary art (Razi Oliyai & Hasanvand, 2006, 49). One of the deconstructive aspects is raised in the field of macro-narratives and dominant cultures. In the social arena, with the transition from modernism, attention to cultural pluralism and the struggle of cultures to declare their existence have allowed subcultures to have a place to express their views in society. Thus, postmodernists used all their mental, intellectual, and physical power to serve movements such as feminism, environmentalism, the Greens, peace activists, and the disarmament of nuclear weapons. The central task of postmodernism here is to use deconstruction as a questioning or measuring process to evaluate or create gaps as one that is destructive and disruptive (Ward, 2014, 144). In the postmodern period, with the emergence of new ideas and various values that were finding their origins, the validity and certainty of the metanarrative, which had previously been emphasized in the modern period, disappeared and was replaced by sub-narratives (or sub-narratives), and a kind of eclecticism and pluralism.

#### • Identity crisis

In a sense, characteristics such as eclecticism, pluralism, relativism, and uncertainty in this period caused the concepts of identity, subject, or self to be crushed and, in a sense, to experience crisis. Postmodern human beings, especially women, who, for example, must appear in society simultaneously

in the roles of woman, mother, employee, spouse, member of small and large communities, etc., are more likely to hesitate in the face of their roles, and seek answers to questions such as "Who am I?" Or "What am I?" This questioning is posed when man seeks to become aware of the truth of his existence and, in fact, seeks "self-awareness." In the postmodern situation, the macro, prescriptive, integrated, and unified identities gradually fade away, and they lose their determination and dominance in the context of pluralistic, dubious, relative, and constantly evolving relationships. They decline and give way to micro-, indigenous, local-, regional-, diverse-, different-, and formerly marginalized identities, as well as identities that have never been seen before and have been thought to be anti-identities. In addition to these micro and plural identities, new and novel identities also show up, and at the same time, future and emerging identities, and countless other diverse ones, will find the space to turn up" (Nozari, 2006, 137). Following the issue of an identity crisis, postmodernism also faced new issues such as otherness, challenging personal relationships with others, and objectification or commodification. "Postmodernity is an era in which separateness or otherness is more and more evident" (Nozari, 2009, 85). "Pluralism in the humanities discourse generally relies on the logic of "difference," a discourse in which the other consciously becomes one of the main actors in culture" (Mohammadi Vakil & Balkhari Ghahi, 2017, 10). Hence, multinational and multi-identity relations emerge in the field of art and artwork, including Mutu's works. This is to the extent that some refer to Mutu as an artist seeking identity.

### Analysis of Wangechi Mutu's Works

Contemporary African art did not emerge suddenly and from behind the scenes in the late colonial period, but people often look at it that way as a response to the bombardment of foreign cultural forms or as the result of colonialism; Plainly and obviously, "Digestion of Western Culture" by Africa

But in fact, contemporary art in Africa was created through a kind of bricolage process on the structures and scenarios that came before it, in which the older, pre-colonial and colonial genres of African art flourished. It is in this structural sense, and in the habits and approaches of artists to the production of art—not in commitment to a particular style, tool, technique, or subject spectrum—that this art can be recognized as "African art" (Kasfir, 2007, 13). Wangechi Mutu (1972) is a contemporary African (Kenyan) artist who moved from Africa to New York in the 1990s. In 1996, he received his BFA from the Cooper Association, as well as his Master of Arts in Sculpture from Yale University in 2000. She moved from Africa to New York in the 1990s and has lived and worked in Brooklyn ever since. Mutu's works can be divided into the categories of collage, sculpture<sup>1</sup> (Fig. 1), installation, and video art<sup>2</sup>. Her works have been exhibited around the world; Mutu's



Fig. 1. Wangechi Mutu, Seated, Bronze, Metropolitan Museum, 201\*85.1 \*113. Source: www.metmuseum.org.

solo exhibitions include the Deutsche Guggenheim in Berlin, the WIELS Center for Contemporary Art in Brussels, the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Mutu was named Artist of the Year by Deutsche Bank in 2010. The award also included a solo exhibition at the Deutsche Guggenheim in Berlin.

With the spread of the independence movement in many countries in the late colonial period, there was a tangible tension between identity and education. One of the consequences of this tension is "schizophrenia in the arts." African artists also sought to present themselves on the world stage to show that Africa, too, can play a role and is not just a spectator. At the same time, they were interested in presenting an identity that was not only non-European but both African and anti-colonial. This situation has led to a dilemma in which both the uncertainties of postcolonial identity and the uncertain and un-sure education of the colonial-style played a role. This situation, in its simplest form, as expressed in the 1960s, was the child of a two-world conflict over the struggle between tradition and modernity - Africa and the West (*ibid.*, 183 & 184). These meanings have appeared differently in the minds of various artists since then, and they are manifested in Mutu's works in the form of subjects like gender, race, art history and personal identity, women and social attitudes towards women, the commodification of the female body, racial and minority discrimination, colonialism, and the consumerist culture of contemporary society. She "imagines the new mutations of humanity and creates a new ecology, "rich in utopian facilities," that reflects and boldly critiques the racial, spatial, and gender order of our present world" (Frazier, 2016, 60). In the following, we will analyze five of her paintings based on the theoretical framework of the article.

#### • Artwork No. 1: "Untitled"

##### - Structure

In this work (Fig. 2), Wangechi portrays the body



Fig. 2. Wangechi Mutu, 'Untitled', 2004, collage and painting on velvet, 47.5 \* 47. Source: Holzwarth, 2009,170.

of a seductive yet terrifying woman. This figure, which is floating in the center of the painting, has deformations in some parts of its body. It seems to show a pregnant woman who is now giving birth, and the result is a butterfly coming out of her womb. This butterfly is attached to the body of the figure through a narrow trace of blood, which can be reminiscent of the umbilical cord. Parts of the female figure are formed by collage, and other parts are painted. The most important parts of the face that Mutu cares about and collages on the face are the lips and eyes, which are extremely large. Both eyes look at the audience, but each eye seems to belong to a different character. Parts of the shoulders and legs have also been replaced with images of mechanical devices such as motor wheels. The collaged legs of the figure are smaller than the body and appear to have been taken from the figures of a pornographic magazine. The skin of the body is painted with watercolor in brown color tones (referring to the black race) and is transparent with the ability to show the internal organs. The background space is painted in neutral colors with watercolors.

##### - Content

Due to the heterogeneous elements that Mutu has combined with the female figure (both collage as a

technique and as a conceptual collage), the totality of the image has become symbolic and metaphoric (referential). The untitled nature of the work also multiplies the uniqueness of the interpretation of its content, just as collage leads to its semantic multiplicity. In this case, by studying other works by the artist and creating an intertextual relationship between her works, as well as considering the theoretical framework, a proper analysis can be achieved. The main focus of the work is the figure of a black woman, which has been made eclectic, hybrid, or combined with the help of collage technique, thus approaching the ritualistic and mythological mysticism that originates from her homeland. This feature can also be observed in the components of the image, including the newborn butterfly. On the other hand, Mutu, by adding machine tools, makes the body look like a half-human, half-machine creature.

In this way, form and content collages create multiple dichotomies between forms and meanings. For example, the contrast between the legs with the help of shiny varnish shoes and lace socks, as well as the hands that have been made up and trimmed, with the rest of the body, which is in a state of disintegration, suffering, etc.; the mechanical contrast against nature that is one of the elements of culture, that is, the butterfly, naked body, blood, etc.; and the bulky and physical nature of mechanical collages in contrast to the watercolor style of other parts, etc. By creating these dichotomies and deconstructing the traditional female/feministic iconography in paintings that would end up as aesthetics, it deconstructs their past concepts, thus approaching a critique of gender discrimination. Mutu, on the other hand, portrays the body of a black woman as part of women's society as an eclectic being created by the contemporary culture; A machine that, from the perspective of a capitalist and racist society, has been assigned to produce offspring and satisfy sexual needs, and **has** forgotten his human identity. The existence of a butterfly, which is itself a hybrid like the body from which it was born, is a symbol of sexual and gender

freedom in Mutu's works, and its birth and flight can convey the concepts of hope for the future, liberation and rebirth for women in society, and gender equality. Considering this explanation, the technique of the work, i.e., collage, is related to the conceptual expression of the works, i.e., pluralism, and, on the other hand, deconstruction. In this work, too, she relies on the eclecticism of postmodern art to create a hybrid being; From a feminist perspective, she critiques the contemporary identity crisis in terms of gender and racial expression and shatters the media foundations of the past.

#### • **Artwork No. 2: "Cervical Hypertrophy"**

##### - **Structure**

The collection "Histology of the Different Classes of Uterine Tumors" (Fig. 3) contains twelve portraits with a painting-collage technique, which focuses on gender, female organs, and diseases. Mutu created this portrait, called "cervical hypertrophy," from a collage of illustrations from an old medical textbook. The collage pieces in this work are a collection of uncoordinated body parts (portraits).



Fig. 3. Wangechi Mutu, cervical hypertrophy, 2005, from the Histology of the Different Classes of Uterine Tumors collection (2004-2005), 45.7 x 32.4. Source: Holzwarth, 2003, 173.



However, by combining them, Mutu creates a new harmonious collection to finally achieve the original image, which is a portrait. Unlike other images in this collection, Mutu has used the collaged image of a man's head as the basis of this work. Above the exaggerated lips of the portrait, which is both a reference to the race and the sexual attractions defined in the beauty market, a bird (bat) in the opposite shape has replaced the mustache. Each ear belongs to one race. One is white and the other is black. The number of eyes in this portrait reaches three, one of which has thick make-up. The drowsy state of the eyes also conveys a morbid feeling to the viewer. Each of these eyes seems to belong to a different person, and each is staring at a different point. On the forehead, there is a medical guide illustration depicting a female organ. In the hair part of the portrait, Mutu uses a dark dot-like texture that moves from the top of the forehead to the upper corners of the painting, reminiscent of an animal-like horn that is also seen in the masks of the primitive African tribes and symbolizes power.

#### - Content

In this collection, Mutu presents a new perspective on the female gender in general, along with collages and excerpts from medical newspapers and magazines, expressing the concepts of gender-femininity; A perspective that goes beyond the image of women appearing in the most idealistic or artificial forms in advertising magazines, pornography, or other media. The main concern of the structural system of this work is the presentation of a conceptual portrait. The use of masculine faces for the collage of a face on the female genitals creates a contradiction in the whole work. The contradiction between the two sexes, male and female, can be a symbol of gender discrimination and the issue of bisexual people; on the other hand, it can be referred to in the movements around them, such as gender freedom and homosexuality, as well as the identity crisis that is nowadays manifested as the issue of each individual's gender and the inquiries that have been made about these issues. The use of a colored face

in most parts and the addition of a white ear (a racial issue) are other examples of addressing the identity crisis in her work. The title of the work refers to diseases and gynecological disorders that are often caused by sexual intercourse and cause destruction and disease to the female body. Mutu questions the artificial and idealistic views of society on the female face and body, as well as their application in a patriarchal society through visual and conceptual collages in this work. This work, like the previous work, by combining incompatible elements, such as man and woman, human and animal (horns and bats), and different parts of several human beings, such as the combination of three eyes with the help of the collage technique, is close to conceptual collage and shapes its special aesthetics.

#### • Artwork No. 3: "Mask"

##### - Structure

This work (Fig. 4) belongs to the collage collection of photographed images called the "ark collection." The emphasis on photography in this collection of Mutu's works creates a documentary aspect that presents a different atmosphere from her other painted works. This collection is, in fact, a study of the ethnographic and anthropological documents of

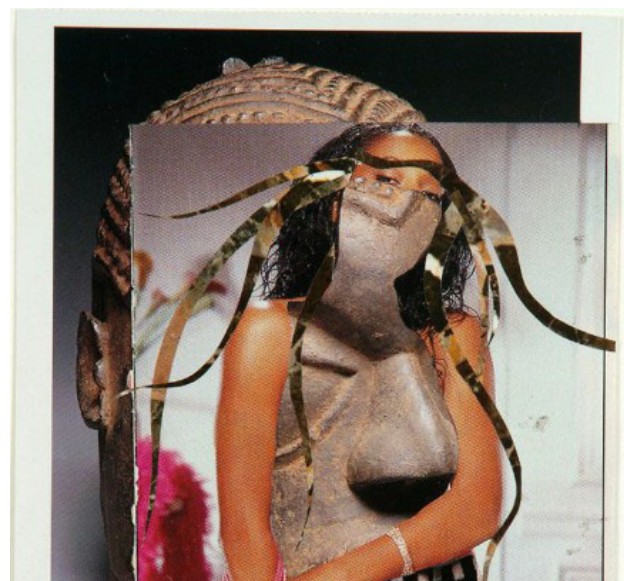


Fig. 4. Wangechi Mutu, Mask (part of), 2006, from the Ark collection; 16.5 \* 24 cm. Source: Holzwarth, 2003, 176.

African culture. The “mask” shows a woman that more than half of her body is covered by a mask. This photomontage is also attached to another statue or bust related to the ancient civilizations of Africa. The method of montaging the figure of a woman between these two busts brings to mind the concept that it is as if the body of the woman has been captured, imprisoned, and crushed between these two volumetric works. The first bust, which is in the foreground and on the woman’s body, is collaged on the woman’s body from the face just below the eyes to the top of the thigh and covers the sexual and female parts of the body. However, this figure can still be considered sexually seductive according to the pretext that it is taken from, namely the pornographic magazines. Mutu has collaged thin pieces of textured paper alongside other hairs as decoration or the hair itself.

#### - Content

The collage of a mask and a large and heavy bust of ancient African civilization on the front and back of the body of a modern African woman in a state that covers her upper body has several concepts and symbols, including repression, captivity, and seeking freedom (freedom of speech, thought, practice, etc.) for women, especially black women, in today’s world. In this case, the work has a wide semantic similarity with its title, i.e., mask, which means to cover, and in fact, it tells the audience that the image of a black woman that you see in the media has no reality and no external existence. So this is a critique by Mutu on the issue of commodification and the gendered view towards black women and the profits that the media takes from the naked bodies of this minority. Mutu emphasizes the figure’s hair and decorates it with collage, paying attention to the artificiality and objectification of the female gender. Mutu herself believes that these mere propagandist faces of African-American women, which are presented by the West, are false illusions, and are all the result of Western domination, power-seeking, and colonialism over these lands. Using ancient

sculptures as a cover, Mutu can recall the concept of a woman’s African identity or show her in search of her identity. In the works in this collection, Mutu deals with the concepts of gender, sexual use of female organs, identity crisis, colonialism, and racial discrimination. Mutu turns her work into a text to critique such views and approaches and tries to break this artificial and false facade. This breaking is not possible except by breaking different images and combining them through collage and creating an eclectic and plural image.

#### • Artwork No. 4: “The Bride Who Married a Camel’s Head”

##### - Structure

This work (Fig. 5) by Mutu shows the half-naked figure of a black woman. The bride’s head is decorated with dark snakes and a bouquet. It seems that this is an exaggerated set of decorations, hats, or crowns for the bride. Below the feet of the figure are tall, needle-shaped green grasses. In the background,



Fig. 5. Wangechi Mutu, *The Bride Who Married a Camel's Head*, 2009, Composition of Materials and Collage on Mylar, 1066\*76.2 cm<sup>3</sup>. Source: Holzwarth, 2003, 180.

there are two hybrid butterflies. The background also has a foggy atmosphere that turns dark gray on the sides. In the bride's hands, a separated camel's head (jaw) can be seen with blood squirting out from the cut part. The body has deformities in the face (big eyes and lips) and the limbs (thin and outstretched hands). The technique used to paint the body is watercolor and comes in a range of dark and opaque colors. Mechanical tools and instruments can be seen on some parts of the body (especially on the hands and feet). At the top of the head, in addition to snakes and flowers, there is a collage of a bony skull of an animal, as well as the head of a hunting crocodile. Furthermore, small and large pearls are installed in the hair of the figure and above the ears, which further decorates the bride. Among the grass, a collage of three flower buds can also be seen. On the face of the figure, a small blackbird is collaged in such a way that the right eye of the figure is also placed on the bird's body. At the bottom of the waist, on the back part of the figure, there is a female hand in a clinging style, and a very small body of a sitting man is collaged below this hand.

#### - Content

This work by Mutu has several collages and additional parts, each of which has a sign and a reference to more concepts. The watercolor technique in the execution of the background and the body itself has strengthened the illusion, ambiguity, and grotesque concepts. The clusters of stray snakes, in the form of narrow lines with needle-shaped grass beneath the body of the figure, amplify and double the violence caused by the beheading of camels and the eruption of blood. A bride with different shapes and decorations; the howling snakes above her head are reminiscent of the Greek myth of Medusa<sup>4</sup>. Contrary to the conceptual and visual background of this image, Medusa is a black woman, and she is not beheaded; she beheaded and sacrificed a camel belonging to the desert geography and then married it. The thinness and weakness of the muscles of the limbs, and the vagueness of the female genitals, as well as the face of the figure, suggest that the bride

is an immature girl, as such marriages may happen in African cultures and third-world countries. But at the same time, her Medusa-like power in sacrificing the ruling power, which is displayed here in the form of a camel's head, is undeniable. The collage of mechanical devices, like in other works by Mutu, can be seen in this work, too. However, these collages in this work that are at the ends of the figure's limbs evoke a kind of captivity in the machine world and the rulings issued by this machine world. But as it can be seen, this captivity could not overcome the struggle against these rulings and defeat them. Also, the small bird that is collaged on the face of the figure shows the inner enthusiasm and feeling towards escaping and fleeing from captivity and the set frames of the character in the painting, which is a representative of women, especially black women and those who have been overlooked.

#### • Artwork No. 5: "The Last Grower"

##### - Structure

At first glance, rather than finding the creature in the image as a human body (Fig. 6), we will have a strange perception of this work and will find ourselves in the face of a combined creature; a cyborg<sup>5</sup> (the figures in the first and fourth works also have some similar features). The painting of The Last Grower is a picture of the figure of a 'combined' woman, and it is a collection of collage pieces that have been put together with great elegance. This black figure is holding a flower seed and is planting it in the ground. In general, the body has many details. In particular, the head of the figure contains particular decorations such as large earrings, the body of a snake, part of a statue, and a kind of plant with elongated leaves. The muscles of the limbs of this figure are out of normal shape and are very weak. Also, parts of the body are injured, and the blood splatters in parts of the background are signs of these wounds. The figure has the traditional make-up of an African tribe. Among the components of the face, according to her visual style, Mutu only pays attention to the eyes and lips. She has also been extreme in showing the size and makeup of the lips.



Fig. 6. Wangechi Mutu, *The Last Grower*, 2015, combining materials (collage-painting) on two asymmetric linoleum canvases. 7.66 \* 6.75 cm.  
Source: Holzwarth, 2003, 182.

At first glance, we feel that the right eye is the same as the snake's head, but as we observe more closely, we can see that Mutu used the collage of the image of a roaring tiger instead of the eye. A red snake is also moving above the figure's head and in the background. A collage of a bird (a parrot belonging to the tropics) can be seen on the head of the figure. In this work, Mutu has also used mechanical devices in two parts of the collage, and the location of these collages refers to the female sexual organs. The background has been painted in most parts using the

watercolor technique, and collage has been used in some places.

#### - Content

A collage of multiple visual elements shows the imposition of elements and details on a black farmer woman, who now has dissolved them in herself and carries them. On the other hand, a collage of mechanical tools as commodities has made her, like mechanical devices, a commodity for consumption in the contemporary period; she has essentially become a human machine and a cyborg. It can be said that these elements have changed her main identity.

Injuries on the woman's body also emphasize this claim, that is, the imposition of systems, situations, and beliefs that have tarnished the identity of today's black woman. The snake in Mutu's work generally refers to the nature and geography of Africa as part of the identity of African women, and it is a symbol of power that can be transformed into a new being after each time of transmutation and metamorphosis. It can be said that Mutu in this work shows a black woman who has lost her original identity due to destructive external forces, such as colonialism, gender, and racial discrimination, anti-feminist culture and social systems, etc., and has given in to a new being. It has become like a machine serving the current racist and colonial society of the West, and yet, with all its wounds, it continues to plant seeds that refer to fertility, which is a sign of hope for the future and rebirth; the title of the work is also semantically related to such a symbol. The almost sci-fi atmosphere of Mutu's works has placed some of her works in the realm of the grotesque. In this way, Mutu challenges human identity, sometimes penetrating the realm of cybernetics, and displays combined or multiple identities in the characters of her works; "Mutu portraits, by combining beauty and grotesque, break down the duality between human and non-human, primitive and modern, and violence/empowerment as a way of accepting mixed identities" (Swami, 2013, 32).

Mutu uses only one figure in the structure of her works, but the elements and details she adds to it can be the historical narrators of an event, a culture, the story of a minority, or a critical movement. As can be seen, this part of Mutu's paintings is a collection of pieces, each of which has been borrowed from somewhere and reassembled together, thus displaying an eclectic mix. Each of these components has its codes and meanings. So, together they create multiple and multi-layered contextual codes. Thus, the nature of eclecticism and pluralism has been created in the structure and then in the content of the works in the form of collage. Examining five paintings by Wangechi Mutu, we realize the

importance of collage in her postmodern artistic expression as a powerful tool in demonstrating and criticizing the abovementioned issues. Apart from features such as pastiche (humorous imitation of different styles), collage is one of the main artistic techniques of our time (Nozari, 2009, 68). This is due to the characteristics of collage in displaying the features of postmodern art. "Collage is a loan that looks more like a heterogeneous shape than anything else. Like a quote in a text that disrupts its convergence and is an optional sign of discontinuity and inconsistency in a text (Namvar Motlagh, 2020, 31 & 32). On the other hand, "collage can also challenge the unity of voice, and especially the dominance of one voice. Because some additional texts can be considered as representing other voices but also as the dominant anti-voices" (ibid., 33). In examining the collages in these works, we find three types of intermedia and in-media collages (which can be generally referred to as visual collages), as well as conceptual and content collages. Intermedia collage includes mainly non-artistic paintings and photographs (advertising magazines, pornography, medicine, mechanical machines, masks, busts, etc.). In-media collage in these works includes paintings of heterogeneous elements taken from different contexts. The content collage includes a collage of concepts such as men and women, men and women and gender minorities, white and black, nature and culture, center and margin, man and machine, primitive and contemporary, violence and stupidity, and so on. These types of collages, as tools of expression, lead to postmodernist pluralism and eclecticism, which criticize the unequivocal dominance of the patriarchal, white, central, etc., macro-narrative. Through eclecticism, pluralism, challenging identity, creating intertextual relations, etc., these works have been able to break the foundation of the structure of gender as a mere biological condition and give importance to sub-narratives and sub-cultures. They can criticize and challenge the social, economic, and political implications that gender has for them to understand

their identity and gain self-awareness through this path.

### Discussion

According to data collection and analysis, research questions can be answered and final results can be obtained. Many factors were involved in the creation and formation of postmodern art. Disregarding the historical and social events, the basis and roots of postmodernism can be considered in the recent trends of modern art. The postmodern painter was influenced by movements such as conceptual art, neo-expressive tendencies, and pop art, and thus the media, concepts, presentation, and artistic expression in the painting genre were revolutionized; however, at certain times, painting is no longer followed in the style and context of the past, but this does not mean death and the end of painting. Rather, it should be said that the face of the painter has changed. Painting in postmodern art breaks the rules and traditions of the past, and it becomes intermedia art. Sometimes, they are presented in an installation, sometimes they are manifested in a video, and sometimes they become conceptual placards to express the artist's intentions and approaches. Painting does not manifest itself only on the canvas, and emerges in every field of opportunity, regardless of past constraints. This is the postmodern painter's eclectic trait of breaking the foundation. This style of expression has been able to adequately portray and critique postmodern issues such as social movements and activities (such as feminism), identity crises, gender issues, minorities and racial discrimination, and so on.

Wangechi Mutu is among the postmodern artists who took full advantage of the revolution and the transformation of new manifestations of painting in this period. Relying on the principles of eclecticism and pluralism, she creates works of art by combining different methods and techniques. Mutu emphasizes the issue of postmodern identity crisis by choosing the bodies (especially black women) as the main axis in her works and combining

unfamiliar collages with these bodies. This question of identity by Wangechi Mutu is rooted in her race, and her feminist and libertarian approaches. In her work, Wangechi discusses the effects of racial discrimination and colonialism on the body (body and mind) of black African women, and this is done through collages that are placed in specific parts of the work, each with a specific concept that refers to a meaning beyond the structure and shape of the artwork. Mutu uses only one figure or portrait in the structure of her work, but the elements and details she adds to it can be the historical narrator of an event, a culture, the story of a minority, or a critical movement.

Considering the symbolic presence of Mutu's works, it can be said that in her works she has also paid special attention to the text of the artwork and the sub-narratives (minorities, feminism, libertarianism, gender, etc.). The main concern of Wangechi Mutu, who grew up in the African social space and later migrated to the postmodern American space and pursued her career there, is more about expressing the social, political, and cultural issues of her time in a sign-based language. The results show that Mutu is influenced by postmodern ideas and theoretical foundations, and the keywords of this artistic movement can be seen in her works. These words have an impact on both the structure and the content, and even more on the artist's approach. Mutu's works are her socio-political statements through which she addresses issues and discrimination in the world. She is a political and cultural activist seeking truth, justice, and humanity through symbolic expressions in her works.

### Conclusion

Wangechi Mutu emphasizes intermedia art in her work, and even in one medium, painting, she demonstrates this eclectic and therefore pluralistic state in both structure and content. As can be seen, Mutu, by choosing the body (especially women and black women) as the main axis in her works, aesthetics, and collage, most of all, shows the

issue of identity crisis in the contemporary era. Her questioning of identity is rooted in her race, her gender, her immigration, and her feminist and liberal approaches. In her works, she discusses the effects of racial discrimination and colonialism on the bodies (body and mind) of black African women. Considering the symbolic aspects of her works, it can be said that Mutu has paid special attention to sub-narratives (minorities, feminism, gender freedom, etc.) in her works. These keywords influence both the structure of the work and the content. Mutu presents her works as socio-political statements in which she addresses issues and discriminations in the contemporary world; In fact, she is a cultural activist who tries to show the true face of man, humanity, and contemporary society to her audience in a postmodern way of expression in her works.

### Conflict of Interest

The author states that there was no conflict of interest for them in conducting this research.

### Endnotes

1. In some of Mutu's sculptures, there is a tendency to make mythical creatures of Africa; Mutu has also dedicated the subject of some of her works to rare and endangered animals, but she has not acted realistically in their representation, but indirectly refers to the life and issue of the extinction of those animals by changing their forms.
2. Like "The End of Eating Everything" video, which is actually a critique of consumerism.
3. Medusa means ruler in Greek mythology. She could turn anyone who stared into her eyes into a stone. Medusa was eventually beheaded by the mythical hero Perseus. Perseus used the cut-off head of Medusa several times in battles and conflicts as a weapon until he dedicated it to the goddess Athena.
4. The work was exhibited at Wangechi Mutu: A Fantastic Journey at the Brooklyn Museum of Art in New York in 2014-2015 and is now housed in the Deutsche Balic Collectioil in Germany. A creature with both organic and mechanical parts.
5. A creature with both organic and mechanical parts.

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