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Wangechi Mutu's *Backlash Blues*

Wangechi Mutu is a Kenyan whose artwork involves African or Kenyan themes. She was born in 1972 and educated both in the United States and Great Britain (Artnet). Her work is mystified by the Western's perception of Africa in terms of traditional culture. Her artworks solicit various extremes such as appeal and disgust from the audience. Wangechi creates her artwork with clippings from fashion magazines and National Geographic. I will apply iconographic and stylistic methods to analyze Mutu's *Backlash Blues*. The stylistic analysis will help me appreciate the art and understand its historical context while iconographic analysis will help me interpret the subject matter of the art and give it a meaning in contemporary society.

In her collages, Mutu addresses the stereotypical manner in which the society instructs women to conduct themselves. In the art, *Backlash Blues*, she utilizes various techniques that give the piece an unnatural luminosity. Mutu applies a myriad of detailed brushwork, controlled spills, and stenciling to demonstrate how disjointed the dissimilar aspects of the art are (Saatchi Gallery). *Backlash Blues* features a woman whose back is turned away from the focus of the image. The lips of the anonymous woman are thick, which indicates her African roots. The medium of art is collage. The artist utilizes collage as a technique of creating the art to intrigue the audience conceptually and physically by using the layered depth within the piece. From the

artwork, it is clear that Mutu is trapping her audience with layers of visual metaphor to force them into the question of the beauty of African women. *Backlash Blues* is a painting. The art is painted on mylar with the paint suspending on the plastic vellum-like surface (Saatchi Gallery). The art takes the context of African culture.

The subject matter of art is the power of the female body. The artist paints the limbs of the woman with different colors to give the viewers constant speculation concerning the female body. The woman looks stripped, therefore, she crouches down in a position conceals her modest aspects. The image's deteriorated appearance enables the viewers to understand the truth of the matter. The audience can visualize the life of the anonymous lady represented in the image. Her skin has empty white bubbles, which exemplify that she has been physically stripped of her privacy. The true inner self of the woman is represented by the white spaces all over the collage. In addition, her positioning shows that the woman was not ready to display her privacy to society. She has crouched down the bush to hide her naked body from the society.

Mutu's *Backlash Blues* was created in 2004 in the feminist art style. Mutu was motivated by the infamous sufferings of African women. African society views women as properties, thus, subjecting them to abuse. Women experience a high rate of domestic violence, unequal opportunities, and rape. Domestic and physical violence have deprived women of the opportunity to achieve their full potential by threatening their freedom and safety. After relocating to the United States, Mutu was motivated to use her artistic skills to show how women can protect their rights. Mutu bases her painting on the understanding that the female body is created in a way that rules men's lives by influencing social hierarchy and sexual selection. To change men's view of women as sexual objects, women can practice control over their bodies by maintaining their

privacy. Wangechi Mutu paints the image of the woman in a way that conceals her sexual organs to show her disinterest in men and the urge to maintain her sexual purity.

My interpretation of the artwork is that it hides a woman's privacy to show her dissatisfaction with the patriarchal society's view of women's body as an object. Inasmuch as the society is stripping women of their rights, they can still find protection from nature. The audience can see the bush providing a good hideout such that no one can see the most private parts of the woman. The hiding of the woman is a silent way of speaking for herself. It shows that she has rights over her body, and she opposes being used as an object. But my question is how long she will hide naked. Women must take long-term actions to get their voices heard in society. The body of a woman rules the world. Their breast, curves, and buttocks are a direct lure of males (Bainbridge 76). As a result, women have used and continue to use their bodies to attract the attention of men through the outrageous, suggestive, and provocative dressing. This limits their ability to change society's view of them. Bubbles in the collage may demonstrate a lack of seriousness in women's fight for their rights on their bodies. Just the way bubbles are transparent such that viewers can see the unknown woman through them, the majority of women today wear transparent provocative dresses, also known as see-through dresses, which show all their internal selves. To me, women are their own barriers to fight against society's negative perception of them.

In conclusion, Mutu's *Backlash Blues* collage is a representation of women's bodies in society. The painting tries to change the cultural belief in the African society that women's body is an object and that women can be subjected to sexual abuse. The art shows a woman hiding her privacy in the bush as a way of expressing her dissatisfaction with patriarchal mistreatment. However, covering the body with bubbles exemplifies a weakness in women's efforts to get

respected. They have failed to take serious actions such as modest dressing to win the respect of society.

Appendix



Art: *Backlash Blues*.

Artist: Wangechi Mutu.

Date: 2004.

Genre: Figurative.

Style: Feminist Art.

Source: Saatchi Gallery.

Works Cited

Artnet. "Wangechi Mutu Biography." www.artnet.com/artists/wangechi-mutu/biography.

Accessed 12 Apr. 2020.

Bainbridge, David. *Curvology: The Origins and Power of Female Body Shape*. Portobello Books, 2015.

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