

CORRESPONDENCE 005

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Schoonmaker: It is always a pleasure to talk to you about your work. Would you start by describing the impetus behind your new installation titled *Will Honey Flavoured Milk Soften that Pig Fed Rage?* at the MCA DENVER?

Mutu: In this new piece, I've chosen to re-enter terrain I was exploring when I began working in sculpture and site-specific installation. I was interested in creating experiences built out of contrasting moments and mediums; offering viewers varied sensations that they encounter as they navigate through the many dimensions of the artwork.

The tableaux I've created at the MCA DENVER are part landscape, part body, part altar, part heaven and part hell. The idea was inspired by the space, which is basically a gorgeous hallway with no symmetry, an avenue for art-viewer traffic. I wanted to make this "river" through a space that was somewhat vague in its identity. I'm not sure if I can point out every single moment that the different parts occurred to me...the packing tape, the animal pelts, the dead pigs, the milk, the stripper heels but somehow they've all communed together and created this harmonious moment.

Schoonmaker: I am intrigued by the idea of moving the viewer through the space like navigating a river. Your installations often have a certain theatrical presence to them. They sometimes read like environmental sets

for the stage or film that on the one hand help to transport the viewer to another time and place, but on the other, are very self-consciously rooted in their artificiality, giving them their theatrical quality. Can you speak about your history in performance and how it feeds into your site-specific installation?

Mutu: One of the most important parts about working in a process-oriented manner is that every decision and every mistake becomes such a marvelous part of the whole image. This way of working is similar to a life journey, an adventure or a relationship and I suppose that's why I was inspired to create a landscape. I don't believe in covering up my tracks too much. I'm not very convinced of, nor invested in, a completely polished finish and the pretense that we are all-knowing or fully aware before we go somewhere. The façade that comes from removing the hand and the human print is related to the very problem that I'm trying to point out in this work, the problem that comes from disassociating ourselves from nature, refusing responsibility for those things that we create and destroy. So, movement, the passing of time, body remnants, light, smell, memory, humor...all play a very important role in this work.

Will Honey Flavoured Milk Soften That Pig Fed Rage? is a piece made so that the viewer (and I, the maker) discover as we move along. The work is built against a long wall of light which is the Museum's east window...it's a little off the beaten path and I know that some people have missed it because of where it's located...so in essence the question in the title is also a call, a summoning, and possibly a question that will never be answered. This pathway I accentuated, this river I created, was a way of guiding people and submerging them in this narrative; making them and myself complicit in the making, the discovery, the unraveling of the journey.

I was speaking to another artist in the exhibition about placement of work in the Museum and in the institution and how relevant that is; and how instead of fighting it, one should embed that meaning into their art since it's not coincidence or unintended. So, making people look harder and

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walk further to see a work is very relevant, very loaded, very interesting, and even very problematic. Choreographing people's movement and guiding their eye and their movement by triggering their interest and curiosity through smell, composition and odd juxtapositions is very much a part of this installation.

Schoonmaker: So by inviting us to step into the environment that you have created (in this case, sort of a science fiction meets mythological, ritual practice) you turn the passive viewer into an engaged participant and we are all implicated by the work. From the high heels to the dead, bloodied, hybrid pig collages, there are loaded images and materials at work that help generate a feeling of both critique and participation. The work seems to shift between poles: from elegant to raw, seductive to violent, beautiful to grotesque, grave to humorous. Without being too literal, one could read critique of a great many things here, from consumption, privilege and colonialism, to perceptions of gender, race and culture. Would you say that your work has to be alluring and provocative, enticing the viewer with forbidden desires as much as it rejects them in order for it to be effective, for the knife to really be able to twist in the flesh, so to speak?

Mutu: I'm not sure whether the work has to be alluring but I know that curiosity and learning can be triggered in different ways. I'm personally better at laying traps and trails with sweets as opposed to breadcrumbs. I guess you run the risk of giving everyone a stomachache by the time they get there but part of my exploration is that of questions of beauty. I find it to be a word that is incredibly problematic and fascinating and historically dubious. So as I explore materials, sensual versus vile, synthetic versus biotic, as I'm ripping into images of idealized women or turning hardcore pornography into whimsical abstract flesh gardens, I'm picking at the deeply problematic foundation of who thinks what is historically viable, interesting and visually stimulating and why. The installation *Will Honey Flavoured Milk Soften that Pig Fed Rage?* was constructed out of flimsy materials, with curves built out of straight lines using plastic to sculpt soft rolling "hills" and "valleys". I try to bind and create new relationships

between ideas and materials that are somehow incongruous. The dead pig image is multiplied and placed on the wall in such a way that it looks lightly tossed, imitating an explosion of petals, or a flurry of butterflies. This environment that I'm leading the viewer through is a world that I am simultaneously creating as I explore, relishing as I critique, embellishing as I desecrate. I'm making the map as I trudge through it so the imagination is as important as actual facts; the primal reactions are as critical as the analytical ones.

Schoonmaker: Since so much has been written about your collage work and figurative representations of the female body, I would like to instead ask about a sculptural object that is a recurring element in your installations. I am thinking specifically of the hanging bottles that you have been using since at least 2000 when you graduated from Yale. These bottles have been filled with everything from indigo blue ink to red wine, and now, milk. In their various incarnations it seems they might reference many things – a sacred medium, sacrificial matter, veneration, pouring of libation, letting blood, intravenous medicine, or a mother's life-giving nourishment. In this work, with time, the white, sweet, dripping milk will eventually spoil and what was once perhaps seen as being pure in form will become a smelly, sticky mass. With all that milk connotes, this functions on many metaphorical levels and I know that you must really enjoy the irony and humor here. But thinking of the object itself and its slow drip brings your work back to process and ritual for me. Could you say a little about the hanging bottle as a device in your art and how your personal and cultural history may or may not be reflected in this work?

Mutu: I often find questions that refer to cultural history very difficult to answer and it's probably the reason why my work is about that tension and that search for history and home, as well as the misrepresentation and the re-writing of one's cultural history relative to their personal history. The fractured figures, the morphing, mutating creatures and the displaced, wandering, lonesome, wild girls in the collages bespeak a cultural crisis and a loss that is characteristic of a lot of my generation. The fluids are

related very much to the idea of body as a metaphor for personal, historical conditions and ideas.

When I first used the dripping bottle it was in an installation that had many references to language disintegration, mistranslation, the horrific and uneven romance between the colonized and the colonizer. I created a wearable sculpture that was a "dialogue enhancer" ...worn by two individuals. The "machine" took one person's mouth movements as they spoke and directly translated them into the other person's mouth. An intentionally crudely-made mechanism, it dissolved all clarity and any decipherable language was lost. In that same installation I turned the wine bottle into an inverted "inkwell" and alchemically or just by simple waste it became this rhythmic language that stained any floor it was applied to. Marking space in the form of cave paintings and rock symbols are some of the oldest recorded human art forms and probably the most basic way of asserting a presence beyond one's own time and space. This inverted, ritual inkwell was my way of subverting familiar language and recoding it into something very personal, enigmatic and permanent. I was staining and tagging the institution.

In spite of the fact that I was using a wine bottle, it was not until 2004 when I was in Texas working on an installation utilizing several wine bottles that I decided to use actual wine. There was something about being in San Antonio --- a very Catholic Mexican enclave of Texas --- being next to the Alamo during election time, during a war that made the use of wine and all its reference to sacrifice, Christianity, affluence, libation and even menstrual blood relevant. I was also looking up many different facts on Texas including its execution statistics and its border patrol politics. The inverted weeping wine bottles became these very silent, odorous reminders of human failings, conflicts and loss. I installed them in such a way that the viewer had to navigate the space carefully to prevent from being splattered or from slipping. One of the most magical moments was unintentional; the smell of rancid vinegary wine morphed into the smell of freshly baked bread. The exhibition space shifted from the smell of an old

sour wine-bar smell, to the fragrance of plump life and nutrition.

Will Honey Flavoured Milk Soften that Pig Fed Rage? has six bottles filled with rich whole milk. They drip onto a beautiful basalt-colored floor leaving a sweet, sickly milk/bird shit mark. The viewers explore this udder of a landscape following their noses, eyes and the curved fjord-like soft sculpture. Milk is the most organic living material I've worked with thus far. It speaks to the inert and static nature of art in the institution louder than any other material I've used.

Schoonmaker: Do you feel that this work is a departure from previous work? While this is an installation, you are an artist who works across a variety of other media...drawing, collage, sculpture, video and performance. Do you see any of these media as primary to your practice, and more importantly, how do they play off one another?

Mutu: I suppose at this point I'm not very concerned about what to call myself as far as media, material or art making forms. In secondary school in Kenya the worst imaginable art teacher taught me. He made us draw still-lives week after week, month after month for four years. One week he'd move the vase here, next week he'd add a patterned fabric, and next time he'd replace the dead flowers. We did however learn how to render and I suppose if anything, he taught us discipline and restraint. The little I learned about art and painting at that age made the notion of "becoming" an artist very unappealing to me and yet ironically thinking artistically and creatively was very second nature to me: I played music, I acted, I even did synchronized swimming. I constantly made things and wrote surreal stream of consciousness poems and letters. It never occurred to me to "become" an artist, because I suppose I always was one.

It's not until I received art school training that I began to consciously cobble together various types of art forms and art histories and subsequently researched and learned more about those that had been eradicated or marginalized by different colonial obliteration. From quite

early on I was interested in cross-referencing different languages and unearthing or suturing contemporary imagery with remnants of what I knew as classic or traditional forms. However, as a city raised girl, there was not much that was passed on from the older generation to the young urban dwellers. The crisis of confidence that post-independent African countries experienced was toxic, and most well-meaning parents wanted desperately for their kids to grow up well assimilated, competent and employable within the new yet unfamiliar infrastructure. This is a very long way of saying that object-making, video, dance, ritual and multisensory materials are all closer to my heart, and homage to art histories that don't regard painting as a form of religion.