I, Kara Swami, hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Art History.

It is entitled:

Student’s name: Kara Swami

This work and its defense approved by:

Committee chair: Kimberly Paice, Ph.D.

Committee member: Susan Aberth, Ph.D.

Committee member: Morgan Thomas, Ph.D.

A Thesis submitted to
the Art History Faculty
of the College of Design, Architecture, Art, and Planning
University of Cincinnati
In candidacy for the degree of
Masters of Arts in Art History

Committee Members:
Dr. Kimberly Paice (chair)
Dr. Morgan Thomas
Dr. Susan Aberth

April 2013

by:
Kara Swami
B.A. May 2011, Bard College
ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the collage work of three living female artists of the African diaspora: Ellen Gallagher (b. 1965), Wangechi Mutu (b. 1972), and Mickalene Thomas (b. 1971). As artists dealing with themes of race and identity, the collage medium provides a site where Gallagher, Mutu, and Thomas communicate ideas about black visibility and representation in our postmodern society. Key in the study is theorizing the semiotic implications in their work, and how these artists employ cultural signs as indicators of identity that are mutable. Ellen Gallagher builds many of her collages on found magazine pages advertising wigs for black women in particular. She defaces the content of these pages by applying abstracted body parts, such as floating eyes and engorged lips, borrowed from black minstrel imagery. Through a process of abstraction and repetition, Gallagher exposes the arbitrariness of the sign—a theory posed by Ferdinand de Sausurre’s semiotic principles—and thereby destabilizes supposed fixity of racial imagery. Wangechi Mutu juxtaposes fragmented images from media sources to construct hybridized figures that are at once beautiful and grotesque. Mutu’s hybrid figures and juxtaposition of disparate images reveal the versatility of the sign and question essentialism. Her collaged figures demonstrate the difficulty in categorizing individuals or cultures, especially in the era of globalization. Finally, Mickalene Thomas photographs tableaux vivants in her studio and creates collage from photographs to emphasize the making of works. Thomas flattens the images, retains the blunt edges of collaged fragments, and decorates the surfaces of her works with rhinestones, all of which direct attention to the physical surface of works. Although many of her images are appropriated from the Western canon, Thomas’s works feature black women as sitters. Her images explore costume, dress, patterns, and other material objects as signifiers of identity. Overall, Gallagher, Mutu, and Thomas use their art to contribute to the ongoing
discourse concerning black (in)visibility. They use the collage medium to expose the versatility of signs and thereby demonstrate the fragility of representation.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A number of people have helped me throughout this journey. First of all, I owe my deepest gratitude to my advisor and friend Dr. Kim Paice for your support and guidance over these past of couple years. Your knowledge and wisdom is the gift that keeps on giving and I cannot begin to articulate all that I have gained from your brilliance. I also want to thank Dr. Morgan Thomas and Dr. Susan Aberth for serving on my committee. Your critical reviews and feedback are crucial to my growth and the development of my academic work.

I must also thank my fellow peers at DAAP with whom I share this accomplishment. Each and every one of you is extremely talented and I admire all of you for your unique insight and skills that I experienced during our time together. Our solidarity has been a crucial support system that made this journey that much more enjoyable. I also express my gratitude to Mickalene Thomas for graciously allowing me to interview her. My study deeply benefited from Thomas’s extensive responses and I am extremely honored that she took the time out of her busy schedule to aid my research through her correspondence.

A very special thanks to my mother and father for all your encouragement and faith in my abilities as an art historian. I would not be here today if it were not for all your endless love, support, and patience.

And finally, to the most patient man I know, my partner Jon. Not only were you patient with me, but with all my books, papers, and other research materials that often imposed on your space. I learn so much from you each and every day and I cannot thank you enough for all that you’ve sacrificed these past couple years. I’m sure at times it seemed like the end would never come, but I know I would not be at this point without your faithful love and support.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>List of Illustrations</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter One:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ellen Gallagher’s Process of Abstraction and Repetition</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Two:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wangechi Mutu’s Hybridization in</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the Form of Representation and Identity</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Three:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Role of the Surface in Mickalene Thomas’s</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three-Part Compositions</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illustrations</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1: Ellen Gallagher; Host (detail); 1996; oil, pencil, paper on canvas; 69 1/8 x 49 7/8 inches

Figure 2: Ellen Gallagher; Soma (detail); 1998; oil, pencil, paper, on canvas; 96 x 84 inches

Figure 3: Ellen Gallagher; Preserve (Karate); 2001; oil, pencil, plasticine, magazine page; 13 3/8 x 10 inches

Figure 4: unknown, Example of black minstrel poster; not dated; poster

Figure 5: Ellen Gallagher; Preserve (Medalo); 2001; oil, pencil, and pomade on magazine page; 13 x 9 ¾ inches

Figure 6: Ellen Gallagher; Preserve (Yellow); 2001; oil, pencil, and paper on magazine page; 13 ¼ x 10 inches

Figure 7: Ellen Gallagher; DeLuxe (detail); 2005; portfolio of 60 etchings with photogravure, spit-bite, collage, cutting, scratching, silkscreen, offset lithography and hand-building; 13 x 10 ½ inches

Figure 8: Ellen Gallagher; DeLuxe series; 2005; portfolio of 60 etchings with photogravure, spit-bite, collage, cutting, scratching, silkscreen, offset lithography and hand-building; 84 ½ x 179 inches

Figure 9: Wangechi Mutu; The Patrician’s New Curse; 2004; Ink, acrylic, collage and contact paper on Mylar; 72 ¾ x 46 ½ inches

Figure 10: Wangechi Mutu; Lockness; 2006; mixed media, ink, collage on Mylar; 92 ¼ x 54 inches

Figure 11: Wangechi Mutu; Blue Eyes; 2008; mixed media, ink, collage on Mylar; 45 ¼ x 73 ¾ inches

Figure 12: Wangechi Mutu; Le Noble Savage; 2006; ink, collage on Mylar; 91 ¾ x 54 inches

Figure 13: Wangechi Mutu; Riding Death in My Sleep; 2001; ink and collage on paper; 60 x 44 inches

Figure 14: Wangechi Mutu; Uterine Catarrh; 2004; glitter, ink, collage on found medical illustration paper; 23 x 17 inches
Figure 15: Unknown, Untitled (Severed Heads of Namibian prisoners studied by German geneticists), date unknown

Figure 16: Wangechi Mutu; *Intertwined*; 2003; collage and watercolor on paper; 16 x 12 inches

Figure 17: Mickalene Thomas; *Tamika Sur Une Chaise Longue*; 2008; mounted c-print; 24 x 29 ½ inches

Figure 18: Mickalene Thomas; *Tamika Sur Une Chaise Longue*; 2008; linoleum, photograph, color-aid on wood panel; 6 ½ x 8 ½ inches

Figure 19: Mickalene Thomas; *Tamika Sur Une Chaise Longue*; 2008; rhinestones, acrylic, and enamel on wood panel; 84 x 96 inches

Figure 20: Mickalene Thomas; *Interior: Zebra with Two Chairs and Funky Fur*; 2012; rhinestones, acrylic paint, and oil enamel on wood panel; 96 x 132 inches

Figure 21: Mickalene Thomas; *You’re Gonna Give Me the Love I Need*; 2010; mixed media collage; 8 x 8 ½ inches

Figure 22: Mickalene Thomas; *You’re Gonna Give Me the Love I Need*; 2010; rhinestones, acrylic, and enamel on wood panel; 96 x 144 inches
INTRODUCTION

This study will look at the works of three living female artists of the African diaspora, namely Ellen Gallagher (b. 1965), Wangechi Mutu (b. 1972), and Mickalene Thomas (b. 1971). These artists are grouped together for the following reasons: first, they all employ collage methods in their art specifically to address black visibility and Western notions of beauty. Second, they come from the same generation and have developed a prominent presence in the contemporary art world within the past twenty years. Furthermore, although they have worked in several cities around the world, all three artists have a working base in New York City. While they all use a variety of materials to appropriate mass media images of the black body, each artist employs a different strategy to communicate her ideas. This study is the first to conduct an extensive comparative analysis of these three artists’ works and examine their differing techniques of collage. I will focus on works created in the twenty-first century that conceptualize ideas about beauty and the body. Above all, this study will demonstrate how these artists’ use of collage becomes a site for thinking about black visibility and mass cultural imagery.

While different subsets of collage exist, such as papier collé, photomontage, and assemblage, art historian Katherine Hoffman explains that presently the term collage refers to all different types of composite art, whether two-dimensional or three-dimensional. The work

---

1 “African diaspora” is a problematic term that generalizes individuals by their presumed race, ancestry, and cultural background. Although it can present controversial categories due to the difficulty of determining who is of African

2 Papier collé, translated as pasted paper in French, is a collage technique that consists of various paper glued to a ground.

3 Photomontage is a collage technique that juxtaposes fragments of photographs and other types of printed graphic material.

4 As another collage technique, assemblage combines three-dimensional objects in addition to paper and other flat materials.

of Gallagher, Mutu, and Thomas incorporate a variety of materials; thus their collages step into these multiple subsets at different points of their careers. For that reason, I generalize their careers as collage practices that exercise fragmentation, juxtaposition, and appropriation. But before delving into a discussion about each artist and her work, a brief summary of collage as an artistic practice is necessary. As a democratic practice, collage welcomes a large population of creators into the art world but often encourages individuals to view mass culture with a critical eye. Collagists tend to reexamine the world around them from a perceptive standpoint that analyzes the multilayered impact of material and visual culture. Although not considered a fine art practice until the twentieth century, the collage practice has been around for centuries. It was the work of Pablo Picasso (1881-1973) and Georges Braque (1882-1963) in the early-twentieth century that introduced collage as a fine art form. Their integration of everyday objects and materials into two-dimensional work made the distinction between high and low culture increasingly ambiguous. As industrialization and technological media continued to advance, images and objects became more accessible to artists seeking to experiment with multiple materials.

Since then, artists have explored collage as a site that can convey their various views of the contemporary socio-political climate. Likewise, Gallagher, Mutu, and Thomas employ collage as a tool for discussing or commenting on culture, politics, and social values. In addition, these three collagists are among other artists who use the medium to text the semiotic meaning of cultural signs. Through their various techniques, Gallagher, Mutu, and Thomas appropriate cultural signs in order to subvert traditional meaning and formulate new meaning as a way of exposing the sign’s versatility. At the same time, as artists working in an era following poststructural and deconstructive discourse, they understand and embrace the erraticism of
interpretation; for that reason, they decontextualize images so viewers are free to develop multiple interpretations.

While they all practice a form of collage, Gallagher, Mutu, and Thomas come from a larger group of artists who explore themes of identity. In the past few decades, artists and critics have shared a growing sensitivity for marginality and otherness in our increasingly globalized world. Transcultural relations, nomadic lifestyles, and the advances in technology have inspired an interest in identity formation as cultural purity continually dissolves. When discussing the postmodern socio-political climate, Katherine Hoffman asserts, “the individual and individual subjects in the postmodern era, according to some theorists, have lost their identities, and are afloat in space and time, grappling with concepts of, and relationships to, a variety of realities.”

For this reason, many artists explore the concept of identity in terms of both representation and social reception that imposes expectations on individuals and marginalized populations.

Many artists of the African diaspora have gravitated towards the theme of identity as African culture and black culture continuously disseminates throughout the world. They inevitably negotiate their identity between their home countries and the foreign sites that they enter. Wangechi Mutu, for example, is one among many African artists who live and work in Western countries. Although not all classify as collagists, living artists like Yinka Shonibare (b. 1962), Lalla Essaydi (b. 1956), Hassan Musa (b. 1951), Ghada Amer (b. 1963), share this hybridization that integrates their African upbringing with their professional career in the Western world. They address themes such as cultural stereotypes, gender and sexuality, and racial relations, all of which, in some way, contribute to identity formation and visibility in the contemporary world. Many African American artists concerned with identity and marginalization similarly integrate themes of race, gender and sexuality, and representations of

---

6 Ibid.
minorities in contemporary culture. In addition to Ellen Gallagher and Mickalene Thomas, artists like Adrian Piper (b. 1948), Lorna Simpson (b. 1960), Kara Walker (b. 1969), Renee Cox (b. 1960), Glenn Ligon (b. 1960), Iké Udé (b. 1964), Fred Wilson (b. 1961), Chris Ofili (b. 1968), and Hank Willis Thomas (b. 1976), among others, address these themes underscored by interests in racial stereotypes and grappling with marginalization in the Western world.

While the artists mentioned work in various mediums, the collage has specifically provided a site where Gallagher, Mutu, and Thomas have communicated their concerns with Western notions of beauty and black visibility. In her essay, “Collage in the Twentieth Century: An Overview,” Hoffman construes that the postmodern era has introduced an age of multiculturalism and cultural interchangeability. Realizing this shift, she argues, “In confronting the world and grappling with changing concepts of reality/realities, artists and critics have found the medium of collage with its multilayers of significance to be particularly viable and flexible medium, as the century has progressed.”

Collage offers a site that allows artists to examine representation and visual culture as international immigration and transcultural relations increase. In particular, Gallagher, Mutu, and Thomas have employed collage as a weapon that problematizes and recreates representations of the black population. Each of their backgrounds has led them toward unique collaging methods that destabilize cultural signs in various ways.

The eldest of the three, Ellen Gallagher, is an American artist born in Providence, Rhode Island. Gallagher studied writing at Oberlin College in Ohio, then continued her education at Studio 70 in Fort Thomas, Kentucky where she began exploring fine arts. In 1992, she completed a degree in fine arts at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston then immediately attended the Skowhegan School of Art in Maine the following year. The proposed study will focus on three collages from her Preserve (2001) and DeLuxe (2005) series, which

---

7 Ibid.
borrow advertisements, including wig ads, geared toward African American females. Gallagher appropriates ads from the 1930s to the 1970s by erasing or highlighting their content and adding fragmented body parts, such as lips and hair. She either accentuates the body parts associated with black bodily stereotypes or highlights black women’s troubling desires for white physical traits such as blonde hair. By using repeated abstract forms and emphatic fragmentation, Gallagher defaces the models and produces new imagery that bridges the gap between the historicity of the ads and a contemporary perspective. In other words, the artist enters herself into a mid-century dialogue surrounding black visibility and resituates this dialogue in a contemporary discourse. She reevaluates bodily signs, typically separated between blackness and whiteness, and invites viewers to infuse them with new meanings.

Gallagher has found inspiration in Gertrude Stein’s (1874-1946) writing that playfully repeated words in order to obliterate their meaning. Repetition directs a focus on the sounds and phonetic structure of words which eradicated them from previous significations and allowed readers to draw their own associations. Gallagher’s strategy bears similarities to Stein’s writing style as she repeatedly draws or applies plasticine moldings of abstracted racial signs associated with blackface minstrelsy. Gallagher’s abstraction and repetition enter these signs into new contexts and thereby eradicate their racist underpinnings.

Similar to Gallagher’s methods, Wangechi Mutu uses found advertisements and media images to construct collages. However, Mutu creates completely new figures where the collage fragments are less discernible as individual ads, but, when pieced together, engender a new composition. Born in Nairobi, Kenya in 1972, Mutu received her secondary education at the Loreto Convent Msongari in Nairobi. She then immigrated to Wales to study at the United World College of the Atlantic. When she and her family moved to the United States in the
1990s, she continued her education with a focus in fine arts and anthropology at The New School for Social Research and Parsons School of Art and Design in New York City. She eventually completed her BFA at Cooper Union and, finally, her MFA at Yale University in 2000. Her education in the United Kingdom and the United States has granted her an outlook that combines African and Western cultures, both of which she integrates in her work. By borrowing media imagery that perpetuates stereotypes of blackness, she subverts the imagery and reconstructs the black female body into hybrid beings, combining the surreal, the grotesque, and the supernatural. Furthermore, Mutu communicates ideas about desire, fetishism, and the injured body that, in turn, problematize the pervasive imagery in our contemporary society.

While her work bears visual similarities to Hannah Höch’s (1889-1978) collages, Mutu explains that she does not view her disparate images as opposites. She juxtaposes cultural signs to construct hybrid figures as a way of dissolving the dichotomous relations of the fragments that comprise her figures. Many of her figures appear in a liminal state between human and animal, portrait and mask, modern and primitive. Stereotypes of the modern world are paired with stereotypes of the so-called primitive world. She brings these two mythical worlds together in the frame of her collage to create another mythical figure whose identity combines a myriad of influences. By juxtaposing incongruous fragments, Mutu evinces the manipulative power of all image-making and thereby problematizes their role as signifiers for cultures and populations.

Mutu’s collage approach recalls Romare Bearden’s (1911-1988) strategies that he employs when creating his own collages. When describing his artistic method, the Harlem Renaissance artist explains,

In most instances in creating a picture, I use many disparate elements to form either a figure, or part of a background. I build my faces, for example, from parts of African masks, animal eyes, marbles, mossy vegetation [and corn]… I have found when some detail, such as a hand or an eye, is taken out of its original
context and is fractured and integrated into a different space and form configuration it acquires a plastic quality it did not have in the photograph.\(^8\)

Combining disparate elements in her work, Mutu shares Bearden’s interest in testing the “plastic quality” of signs. Mutu exposes this plasticity by positioning fragmented images in the place of a body part that they may not traditionally signify. In other words, when strategically applied by the artist, objects signify something they do not typically represent. Mutu’s strategy challenges viewers to expand their associations with certain images and also to examine the power of the image-maker’s manipulative ability. Her work alludes to the idea that cultural signs and icons are formulated and constructed by those who create images and control their dissemination. In its entirety, her technique tests the supposed truth that photography offers and challenges the divisions between cultures, populations, and disciplines that society perpetuates.

Of all three artists, Mickalene Thomas practices the most deliberate objective of empowering the black female figure and granting a higher level of agency to her figures. Thomas works primarily in New York, not far from her hometown in Camden, New Jersey. Born in 1971, she comes from the same generation as the other two artists, and shares an interest in the portrayal of the black female. Thomas completed her BFA with a concentration in painting at Brooklyn’s Pratt Institute, and continued her education at Yale University where she earned her MFA in 2002. Many of her collages reappropriate canonical works of Western art, by substituting the white figures with black female subjects. Thomas thereby grants her subjects a level of visibility not previously lauded in Western imagery. She rewrites history by representing the black female body in a way that does not exploit her subjects but demands acknowledgement and a new level of respect from the viewer. As a result, Thomas asks her viewers to expand traditional definitions of beauty by presenting her subjects with sass, glamour,

and authority. Her method begins with constructing *tableaux vivants*\(^9\) in her studio, which she decorates with an array of vibrant patterns and colors that recall the 1970s aesthetics and fashion fads. The patterned interiors particularly evoke influences from her childhood, and Blaxploitation imagery. Thomas photographs her figures in these interiors, then cuts and splices the photograph into a collage. As a result, she obscures spatial recession directs attention to the surface of her work. She approaches the image as a ‘made’ object and thereby implicates our reliance on the artifice when formulating identity.

As an artist subverting traditional representations of women, Thomas finds inspiration in Édouard Manet’s (1832-1883) work for his depictions of unrepresented women and his rebellion against tradition notions of beauty. Furthermore, his dismissal of illusionistic representation and his emphasis on the two-dimensionality of painting also resonate with Thomas’s interests. Carrie Mae Weems (b. 1953) is another artist who has greatly influenced Thomas’s career. Weems’s representation of African American domestic life in *The Kitchen Table Series* (1990) deeply touched Thomas and inspired her to pursue art. Furthermore, Weems’s work largely focuses on representations of the black population, a subject which all three artists in this study examine in their collages.

**Literature Review**

Although each artist in this study has been written about individually to some extent, this study is the first to look at their work both individually and collectively as they grapple with issues concerning black visibility. My research primarily focuses both on exhibition catalogues and periodical literature written about the individual artists. Most of the scholarship dedicated

---

\(^9\) *Tableau Vivant* is a French term meaning “living picture.” In the arts, it is a staged scene with silent and motionless actors sometimes representing a scene, painting, sculpture, incident, or another type of preexisting image.
to Ellen Gallagher’s work consists of exhibition catalogues and art criticism reviewing exhibitions and summarizing the concepts presented within her work. *Ellen Gallagher: Preserve* (2001) has been one of the most useful exhibition catalogues for its informative essays discussing her *Preserve* collage series that Gallagher completed in 2001. Therein art critics and scholars focus on a series of works that employ collage elements and concern historical stereotypes associated with the black body. While all the authors write about Gallagher’s art-making methods and the profound concepts that *Preserve* entails, each offers a unique analysis of her work.

Robin D.G. Kelley’s (b. 1962) essay in *Preserve* theorizes Gallagher’s method as an act of “preservation” and presents her work as an archaeological act that engages in dialogue with past generations of consumers who may have come across advertisements targeted toward African American women. I will rely on Kelley’s insight when discussing collage as a site of dialogue that allows the artist to quote and comment on the world around her. Catherine de Zegher discusses the Gallagher’s use of the grid and other artists whose grid-like components have influenced her work. She argues that the grid allows Gallagher to deconstruct the matrix and dismiss social categorizations that essentialize bodies, genders, and race. However, I argue that, through her adherence to the grid, Gallagher destabilizes the signification of racial signs and questions traditional notions of beauty.

Many available exhibition reviews do not analyze specific works at great length, but instead provide general remarks about Gallagher’s methods and themes. They generalize some thought-provoking questions that her overall series may pose. However, many of the theories about her work in the periodical literature remain more open-ended and less assertive about the
ideas perceived. A more theoretical analysis concerning Gallagher’s collage method and the semiotic significance of her work remains to be undertaken in this proposed study.

The literature concerning Mutu’s work consists mainly of exhibition catalogues, criticism, and interviews with the artist. The catalogues and interviews with the artist proved to be the most useful sources for the preparation of this study. The interviews provide insightful statements that Mutu shares about her work and also validate my interpretations and analyses of her collages. The exhibition catalogue *Wangechi Mutu Artist of the Year 2010: My Dirty Little Heaven* (2010) includes essays that theorize Mutu’s techniques and underlying concepts. Authors from the exhibition catalogue, including Okwui Enwezor (b. 1963), Friedhelm Hutte, and Courtney J. Martin, not only discuss specific works at great length, but they also place Mutu’s art into an art-historical context while also theorizing the messages and methods of her work through a postcolonial analysis. Essays by these postcolonial scholars help illustrate the impact of the artist’s transnational cultural background and her ability to address African stereotypes from an immigrant’s perspective. In contrast to the scholarship surrounding Gallagher’s work, the scholarship written about Mutu’s work offers more extensive analyses and discusses individual works at greater length.

Art historian Angela Stief’s essay, “Images of Triumph and Transgression,” written for the exhibition catalogue *Wangechi Mutu: In Whose Image* (2009), is particularly beneficial for its theorization of the portrait as a mask. Stief stresses the inherent madness and artificiality of portraiture and argues that Mutu’s collages exhibit the portrait’s masklike quality. Her argument supports my claim that Mutu’s disparate juxtapositions expose the manipulative hand of the artists and thereby discredit the truth behind stereotypical imagery.
In addition to exhibition catalogues, Lorraine Morales Cox’s essay, “Transformed Bodies, Colonial Wounds, and Ethnographic Tropes: Wangechi Mutu” (2008), published in *n.paradoxa international feminist art journal*, offers a feminist perspective on Mutu’s work. She argues that the method of collage has served as an effective medium for Mutu to communicate her ideas about black body politics. Cox categorizes Mutu into the “post-soul” aesthetic—a term described by Greg Tate as “the African American equivalent of postmodernism.”

She thereby relates Mutu’s art to some of her predecessors and contemporaries, including Lorna Simpson, Kara Walker, and Ellen Gallagher. The collage aesthetic, according to Cox, has allowed the black female artists, mentioned above, to critique and challenge representations of race and gender. By categorizing these artists together, the author traces a trajectory of artists in the African diaspora who have critically examined contemporary representations of black individuals. Cox’s summary helps me situate Mutu among a group of living female artists from the African diaspora dealing with themes of representation, race, and identity. Her arguments support my claim that the collage technique provides an accessible tool that has allowed these artists to engage in a postcolonial dialogue and communicate transnationally.

Finally, filmed lectures given by the artist have proved to be very useful when theorizing Mutu’s work. Like the interviews, they disclose Mutu’s insight into her own work and the concepts that drive her art-making. Lectures given at New York City’s Fashion Institute of Technology and the University of Michigan affirm her interest in the hybrid as a tool for diminishing the oppositions between socially constructed binaries.

Of all three artists, the least has been published about Mickalene Thomas, perhaps because she is the most recent to gain popular recognition. Sources discussing her work consist

---

of exhibition catalogues, periodical literature, and published interviews with the artist, most of
which has been written in the past twelve years. The most useful resources have been published
interviews with Thomas that provide personal insight into her methods, interests, and themes.
Some of these include interviews published by *BOMB*, *Art in America*, and *Bon*. While many of
these interviews offer more anecdotal information about the artist and her personal life, they also
provide the artist’s discussion of her own work. The most useful source regarding Thomas’
work is my personal interview with the artist. Since not much has been published about the
artist, I rely on published interviews and my own interview to understand the specific concepts
and objectives that drive her art-making.

In addition to the sources mentioned above, I borrow concepts from additional texts,
exhibition catalogues, and essays pertaining both to black body politics and the historicity of
collage-making in the fine art world. While these sources may not specifically discuss the work
of Gallagher, Mutu, or Thomas, they familiarize me with the collage practice in the twentieth
century and the ongoing discourse surrounding black representation and visibility. Also, I have
borrowed arguments and concepts from semiology to aid my discussion of the semiotic
implications embedded in each artist’s work.

**Methodology**

I use a variety of methods in this study in order to fully understand the collage techniques
practiced by each artist. The comparative analyses of their works include both a formal and
iconographical analysis in which I examine and analyze specific visual components unique to
each artist’s style. I analyze their individual techniques that separate them but also tie them
together. When analyzing Ellen Gallagher’s employment of racial signs, I apply Ferdinand de
Saussure’s semiological theories reiterated in Yve-Alain Bois’s essay, “The Semiology of Cubism.” Together Saussure’s (1857-1913) and Bois’s (b. 1952) theories help me argue that Gallagher’s repetitive application of abstract racial signs illuminates the arbitrariness and instability of signs as an indicator of race and identity. When discussing Wangechi Mutu’s collages, formal and iconographical analyses dissect her theme of hybridization. These approaches explain her artistic strategy and identify the fragmented signs that comprise her hybrid figures. A semiological approach discerns the significations attached to each sign, but also illuminates Mutu’s ability to challenge traditional meanings associated with cultural signs. Furthermore, the iconographic and semiological approaches allow me to discuss her integration of both Western and non-Western influences incorporated in her hybridized figures. When discussing Mickalene Thomas’s work, I employ a formalist approach when analyzing her collage techniques that focus on pictorial distortion. Semiological theories also were appropriate when discussing Thomas’s attention to the literal and figurative surface of her works. In addition, to theorize Thomas’s theme of self-presentation, I borrowed Judith Butler’s (b. 1952) theories about gender and identity formation, articulated in her essay, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution.” Throughout the entire study, I apply arguments and concepts from scholarship pertaining to the collage method and discuss its history since the early-twentieth century. This material has helped me situate these three artists’ work within the legacy of collage.

Chapter descriptions

Each of the three main chapters will be dedicated to a single artist. The first chapter is dedicated to Ellen Gallagher’s art as she has the longest experience as a professional artist. Focusing on three works, this chapter discusses abstraction and repetition as two of her signature
techniques. The second chapter will concentrate on four works by Wangechi Mutu, and discuss her theme of hybridization both formally and conceptually. Finally, the third chapter analyzes Mickalene Thomas’s work and focuses on her interest in the surface of her work. In addition to each artist’s biographical information, I will explain the personal influences informing their creativity. While I differentiate the artistic process unique to each artist, I also identify those techniques and ideas that tie these artists’ works together.

**Conclusion**

Although scholarship has been published about all three artists, this study is the first to offer a comparative analysis of collage by three black female artists. This study demonstrates how the collage aesthetic allows each of them to express their ideas about beauty standards, while also facilitating the development of a contemporary discourse on black visibility. Equally so, this study discusses how each artist communicates her ideas through a unique inheritance and reconstruction of cultural signs, while also affirming that their works speak across generations by conjoining the past, present, and future of visual culture.
CHAPTER ONE
Ellen Gallagher’s Process of Abstraction and Repetition

People get overwhelmed by the super signs of race. And I’m never trying to avoid those signs. I say this is the given and that’s where I build from—it’s the idea that dark matter is expansive not reductive.

-Ellen Gallagher

In this chapter, I will explore the collages of Ellen Gallagher created in the last thirteen years. Gallagher claims that her work explores the mutability and moodiness of mass cultural signs; however, I propose that, while her work explores the subjective nature of signs, her employment of historically racial signs and abstract forms in her collages leads to a larger discussion that challenges racial identity by subverting the racist significations attached to cultural signs. My objective is to demonstrate how she problematizes the meaning of cultural signs by altering physical appearance of figures and by using the grid as a pictorial organization in her collage work. Specifically using Ferdinand de Saussure’s (1857-1913) principles of semiology rearticulated in Yve-Alain Bois’s (b. 1952) essay “The Semiology of Cubism,” I will explain how her process of repetition and abstraction dismantles the stability of racial signs.

Gallagher’s use of racial signs opens up a deeper discussion about semiology that illuminates the instability of the sign. Before delving into an analysis of specific works, a brief summarization of Ferdinand de Saussure’s semiotic theory is required. As one of the founding fathers of semiotics, Saussure defined four principles of semiology that constituted its makeup. However I will focus on the first principle due to its relevancy to Gallagher’s work. The first principle declares that signs are arbitrarily assigned to their signified, or concept. This is because the signified is conceptual and there exists no definitive idea of the signified. Thus, no ideal or

---

definitive, signifier, or sign, can exist. The signifier is not the signified itself; it is a visual or linguistic stand-in for the signified. Saussure explains that only the repetition of the sign, or the consistent use of a sign, allows it to signify its concept. Otherwise, the actual connection between the sign itself and what it signifies is completely arbitrary. Through her extraction and application of abstract racial signs, Gallagher’s collages recall Saussure’s semiotic theories. But first, a discussion of her methods and creative processes will introduce the semiotic theories that inform her work.

**Materials and Technique**

Gallagher works with a number of materials including pigment, paper, pencil, watercolor, oil, enamel, plasticine,\(^{13}\) and rubber. Many of her works consist of composition paper, penmanship paper, magazine advertisements, and other found images. Onto these various types of paper, she layers repeated abstract forms that historically carry racist implications. She also adds layers by masking out some of the content in the found advertisements as a way of mutating them into her own composition. As practiced in her *Preserve* series (2001) and her *DeLuxe* series (2005), Gallagher’s strategies consist of erasing and fragmenting content, while also reappropriating signs of American history. Although most of her works combine a variety of materials, not all utilize collage practices to the extent seen in the series mentioned above. For Gallagher, it is through the collage technique that she both highlights and deconstructs essentialist signs of race, while also creating a dialogue with twentieth-century mass media. A close reading of individual collages included in her *Preserve* and *DeLuxe* series will allow me to explicate the specificity of my claims.

---

\(^{13}\) Plasticine is a brand of modeling clay that Gallagher often uses in her collages to represent abstracted forms. They also add a minimal sense of color in the black-and-white advertisements, as well as a degree of three-dimensionality in her work.
Born in Providence, Rhode Island from an African American father and Irish American mother, Gallagher’s biracial background has influenced her ambivalence toward race and her interest in diasporic identity. As an artist, Gallagher emerged in the 1990s when she combined minimalist foundations with extracted body parts, such as “googly” eyes and engorged lips, found in minstrel imagery. Examples of these repeated signs can be seen in Host (fig. 1) and Soma (fig. 2)—two large-scale works completed in the 1990s. These cartoonish body parts float across gridded pictorial structures and, through a process of abstraction and repetition, they challenge the validity of cultural signs. However, it was not until her Preserve series that she borrowed advertising prints and reappropriated them with her own materials and imagery.

The Preserve series first debuted in 2001 as a solo exhibition curated by Jeff Fleming at the Des Moines Art Center. A large section of this show featured a series of collages by Gallagher in which she alters wig advertisements taken from popular magazines such as Ebony, Our World, and Black Stars. The layout of her collages builds on the modernist compositional device of the pictorial grid that divides the advertisement into squared compartments. These gridded compartments keep the magazine pages organized and structured all the while visually separating the advertisements within the page. Targeting a readership of African American women, the borrowed advertisements were published between the 1950s and 1970s; they reveal some of the fashionable black hairstyles sported through the use of wigs. The wigs were often given names in the ads that characterized their look or evoked a certain attitude that the customer might undertake when wearing the wig. Some of these include “freedom wig,” “capless joy,” “gypsy darling,” “brown skin beauty,” “mushroom,” “lioness shaggy,” and “Afro American,” as seen in her collage (Karate) (fig.3). The magazine pages become Gallagher’s canvas and the visual ground on which her collages are built. By “built,” I refer to the artist’s physical process
of layering her own materials and imagery onto the magazine advertisement, and thereby building her collage into a three dimensional work. As a result, the entire magazine page serves as the framework for each collage making the dimensions of each work around the size of the magazine page. Gallagher inserts her own commentary into these removed pages by adding and repeating abstract body parts, masking out the eyes and/or faces of the models, and changing their hair with molded plasticine. In addition to her plasticine layers, she uses pencil, oil, paper and, in some cases, toy eyes and pomade to adorn the models and alter the magazine ads in their entirety. Many of these components, particularly her plasticine shapes, add a three-dimensionality to her work, and thereby, grants the original media archive both a tactile quality and an imposing presence. Her innovations not only add a layer of color to the black and white advertisements, but also alter both the propagandistic text and the physicality of the models’ heads. As a result, the viewer experiences a manipulation of signs, texts, faces, and content with the vintage media sources as the foundation of the artist’s composition.

Abstraction and Repetition

One work from her Preserve series, *(Karate)* (fig. 3) borrows a magazine page that is vertically bisected, separating the different advertisements that inhabit the page. The left side of the composition appears to be a karate advertisement that the artist has obsessively covered with blue, yellow, and white plasticine shapes; these shapes are manically repeated and obscure the majority of the left side. The upper left section of the work is patterned with jumbled rows of circular shapes. Many of these shapes are made of two plasticine layers: the bottom layer in blue and the top in yellow. Some blue circles are plastered without a layer of yellow, but instead are marked with small black dots. As seen in many other collages from the *Preserve* and *DeLuxe*
series, Gallagher’s layering of materials and abstract forms build the composition into a sculptural unit, using the gridded advertisement as its organization. The grid, as a compositional device in the advertisements, is a flat pictorial space often seen in modern art. However, Gallagher begins building it into a three-dimensional form by layering plasticine shapes onto her composition. As a result, she mutates the flat pictorial design of the advertisement into sculptural form.

For Gallagher, the applied plasticine circles resemble abstracted floating eyeballs—a motif that she has carried over from her earlier work. The bottom of the left section of the collage is predominantly covered with repeated sets of engorged blue lips and some repeated circular shapes seen in the upper left section. Gallagher began incorporating these shapes in the mid-1990s and has continuously reused them in her work since. She borrows these abstracted eyes and lips from black minstrel imagery (fig. 4) that degraded blacks with exaggerated physical features and foolish behavior. These shapes invade her compositions like a viral infestation. In some cases, they only cover half of the ground, but bleed partly into other sections of the magazine page. In this respect, they do not completely adhere to the gridded organization of the preexisting media archive, but penetrate the divisions mapped throughout the advertisement. As a result, the viewer is overwhelmed with these signs, each one slightly different from one another, and experiences their manifestation into an overpowering entity. By repeatedly entering these abstracted body parts into a new terrain, Gallagher decontextualizes the forms and allows them to adopt new meaning.

The right side, less obscured by the artist’s plasticine shapes, shows twelve different wigs, each one modeled on a different woman. Gallagher masks out much of the text on this page, such as the entire heading of the wig advertisement. She has applied circular yellow and
blue plasticine shapes onto each model’s eyes. As a result, she has physically transformed the women into inhuman faces similar to the effect created by nineteenth-century American minstrel imagery. The figures lose a sense of individuality, and instead, collectively appear as an unusual species each adorned with a different hairstyle. Furthermore, by defacing some of the text printed in the magazine page, Gallagher obscures the original function of the page as an advertisement. In the absence of the textual context, these models appear as anonymous floating heads that assume the name of the wig that they each individually wear. In some collages, Gallagher not only plasters over the eyes, but also colors over the hairstyles with pomade, a hair product especially popular in the 1950s.¹⁴

In *Medalo* (fig. 5), another collage from her *Preserve* series, she has added a layer of pomade on the lower section of the ad and draws into it with multiple circular shapes evocative of her signature floating eyes. The artist treats the pomade as a paint pigment that turns the hairstyles into a blondish color. Using a hair product popular at the time the advertisement was published, Gallagher not only depersonalizes the models but also nearly conceals their race. In other words, she creates an implicit mockery of these cosmetic techniques by demonstrating their ability to transform and even depersonalize an individual. In this way, she highlights the mutability of physical appearance and thereby problematizes racial stereotypes attached to physicality.

*Yellow*, another work from the *Preserve* series (fig. 6) is built from another wig advertisement in which Gallagher changes the hair color to a bright yellow, by gluing cut pieces of yellow paper over each person’s hair. The magazine organizes the figures’ portraits into columns and rows, similar to the layout of a yearbook page. The result is a gridded magazine

---

¹⁴ Pomade is a greasy and waxy substance used to style hair. Although still used today, it is often associated with hairstyles of the 1950s. It gives hair a slick and shiny appearance.
advertisement in which every person, man and women, has been adorned with a different yellow hairstyle, some of which do not match the style masked in the advertisement below. The yellow paper jumps out at the viewer and obliterates each individual’s portrait with its vibrant color. Upon a quick glance, the viewer’s eye scans over rows and columns of abstracted yellow shapes. The yellow shapes stand as the focal points of the work and thereby take on a character of their own. Again, the artist transforms the models into cartoonish depictions that ultimately dehumanize the figures. Although defacement often signals mockery, Gallagher’s work also exhibits the mutability of physical appearance and the ways that physicality transforms the identity of the figures. In other words, her collages recall the problematic notion that identity is often dictated by one’s individual appearance. However, she questions the validity of racial signs, particularly signs representative of physical features, by demonstrating their fragility and ephemeral quality. Furthermore, by practicing methods of defacement, alteration, erasure, and repetition, her collages indicate the ability to transform identity through the use of image mutation.

A few of her collages go as far as completely masking out the model’s face, which can be seen in another work from her DeLuxe series (fig. 7). This defacement not only dehumanizes the figures, but may visually metaphorize Ralph Ellison’s (1914-1994) concept of black invisibility. In his book, Invisible Man, Ellison’s narrator admits:

I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When [people] approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me.\(^\text{15}\)

Ellison’s quote offers readers an insight of what it means to be an African American. He illustrates the frustrations and identity struggles that African American must endure in order to

survive as an oppressed minority. Unavoidable invisibility, for Ellison’s narrator, requires blacks to compensate their lifestyle by obeying society’s expectations, while also searching for their place in a racist American society. Likewise, the borrowed cosmetic advertisements, for Gallagher seem to allude to black women compensating for their invisibility by conforming to social standards of beauty. Made out of synthetic material, the wigs create the appearance of fine, silky hair typical of the desired European features. Wearing a wig requires the concealing of one’s natural hair in exchange for a different look. Hairstyles, wigs, makeup and other physically mutating devices allow for reinvention, fantasy, and transformation. But in Gallagher’s collages, her defacements may suggest the inevitable invisibility that women continue battling even after altering their physical appearances. In her essay for the exhibition catalogue Preserve, art historian and curator Catherine de Zegher recognizes that Gallagher’s alterations depersonalize the models within the ads. She argues that Gallagher “adds masks to women’s faces to figure the boundary between human and inhuman, but also to recast the difficulty of identity in a diasporic setting or segregated society.”

De Zegher’s explanation implies that, while Gallagher’s collage methods further objectify the models, Gallagher’s alterations stress the inescapable ostracization from mainstream culture. In some cases, their physical alterations may contribute to their invisibility as they become what society expects of them. In this way, Gallagher’s collages once again question the obsession with physicality as indicators of identity.

Although Gallagher’s works may inevitably problematize racial imagery, one must note she does not attempt to criticize or rectify the advertisements, but rather, she enters herself into the ongoing discourse surrounding mass media imagery and the stereotypes that they circulate.

16 Catherine de Zegher, “The Grid as Playground or the Creativity of Limits,” Preserve (Des Moines Art Center, 2001), 62.
Her collages offer a response and even a contribution to mass media imagery, and the magazine ads thereby adopt different meanings determined by Gallagher’s appropriation. By combining imagery from the nineteenth century with imagery from the mid-twentieth century, Gallagher instigates a discussion about anachronistic racial imagery between these historical eras. Her twenty-first century perspective brings a third era into the equation and bridges the time gap between these periods. Her material additions to these advertisements transport the images into a contemporary setting that grants them current relevancy. Through her method of collage, with an emphasis on the strataums of both materials and meanings, Gallagher creates a visual thread that connects various centuries of American culture and black identity. Just as her collaged materials are layered, so too are the embedded significations and the generations that her materials and imagery span across. In other words, her use of vintage magazine ads and historic icons highlights collage’s ability to speak across generations and adopt new meanings that resonate with different readers. Gallagher’s method of layering and reappropriating helps viewers visually and conceptually understand the historic weight of her work and the overlapping periods of time embedded within her work.

**Versatility of the Sign**

Taking Saussure’s semiological theories into consideration, one can begin to understand the absurdity of signs signifying race. In his essay for the exhibition catalogue, *Picasso and Braque: A Symposium*, art historian Yve-Alain Bois discusses Picasso’s semiological exploration through his Cubist work. He summarizes Saussure’s definition of the value of a sign, explaining that “the flexibility of the sign and its semantic weight (the fact that it can bear multiple
significations) depends entirely upon the value system in which it is embedded."\(^{17}\) The value of the sign changes as it acquires more meaning, and it acquires meaning from the society that exploits it. Two different cultures may use the same sign; however the sign may bear more significations in one culture as opposed to other cultures. This explains why societies create signs only as they are needed. Bois argues that in Picasso’s pictorial representations, particularly in his *papiers collés*, we can witness this “testing of flexibility within the open system of signs.”\(^{18}\) Similarly, through her use of “metaphoric displacement,” a term borrowed from Bois, Gallagher toys with the meaning of signs by extracting and abstracting them as floating signifiers. The disembodied lips and eyes are extracted from their original context—blackface minstrel imagery—and applied to her collages as independent forms. As disembodied forms, the eyes and lip are not attached to a minstrel show poster or a blackface minstrel; Gallagher applies the abstract forms to magazine ads created decades after blackface minstrel stereotypes first emerged. In other words, by applying nineteenth-century signs to twentieth-century media sources, Gallagher demonstrates the contextual versatility of these signs.

Her *Preserve* and *DeLuxe* series further emphasizes the versatility of signs through repetition and decontextualization. By haphazardly repeating the same racial signs over and over, with slight variation in each form, Gallagher highlights the arbitrariness and the infidelity of the signifier. In other words, through her method of abstraction and repetition Gallagher challenges the historic significance of the sign, but also devalidates its attachment to bodies and stereotyped populations. As a result, she not only destabilizes the racial signs as falsities, but also strips them of their previous visual power, one form at a time. Without the additional facial structure surrounding the eyes and lips, these forms transform into abstract shapes unrelated to


\(^{18}\) Ibid.
their racist underpinnings, and take on a character of their own. At times the lips may resemble abstracted illustrations of beans, while the eyes may appear as random polka-dot patterns. Gallagher’s process liberates the viewer to formulate new meaning instigated by each individual’s subjective interpretation.

The Grid as a Weapon

Understanding the unfixed quality of the sign and “its exchangeability based on its value,” as described by Bois, Gallagher parodies its vulnerability with the rigidity of the compositional grid. She tampers with the modernist grid structure, not just in her collages, but also in other mediums that she employs. Grid formations are found in the foundations of many of her works—some that she has created, as seen in her gridded display of the DeLuxe collages (fig. 8), and others inherent in her chosen medium, seen in the magazine advertisements themselves. Art historian Rosalind Krauss (b. 1941) has discussed the grid as an abstract concept whose limitations Western artists either accept or challenge. Realizing the limitations presented by gridded structures, Gallagher nevertheless addresses its prevalence in the Western world. At times, for example, she defaces the gridded organization of magazine advertisements but in other instances, she builds from the preexisting arrangement of a grid. In the case of (Karate), the advertisements are divided into three grid-like sections that structure the composition and foster a visual sense of confinement. Gallagher generally adheres to the structure by applying plasticine shapes inside the lines that separate the advertisements. In this case, she integrates a preexisting grid as an outline that compositionally organizes her collaged additions.

19 Ibid, 175.
As Krauss wrote in her essay “Grids,” published in 1979, “grids are not only spatial to start with, they are visual structures that explicitly reject a narrative or sequential reading of any kind.”

Due to the idea that the grid exists strictly as a spatial and visual structure, Krauss addresses the prohibitions that grids impose on subjective interpretations and perpetuating or opposing narratives. The idea that the grid signals purity and levels any sense of alterity suggests that it does not easily accommodate difference or change. However, Gallagher challenges this very notion by using the pictorial lattice to challenge the mythical significations of cultural imagery. The grid allows her to exploit the syntax, or the structural relationship, of the components that comprises her collages. In other words, viewers can focus on the composition’s formality and view each form for its physical and structural properties. The cut and dry organization enlivens the purity of each compositional form and constituent that Gallagher applies to the magazine page. As a result, the abstracted eyes and lips associated with black minstrelsy are recast in a neutralizing space and stripped of their associative meaning; instead formal qualities emerge as the focus of the composition, particularly when Gallagher subtracts a model’s individuality by masking out her eyes and other physical features. In other words, Gallagher employs the relative purity of the grid to declassify signs that may have previously marked or masked racial identity. She extracts the cultural significance from the sign and inserts the “plastic expression” that allows colors and forms to assert their presence. In this way, she decouples the found imagery from the purpose it had in advertisements and this process demonstrates that such images can be both decoded and disempowered. In other words, by incorporating the grid to recontextualize cultural imagery, Gallagher employs the compositional lattice both as a weapon and a formal device.

---

Instability Caused by Subjectivity

Although she exploits the relative purity that the grid offers to viewers, Gallagher also welcomes the subjective readings unique to each viewer. By reverting power to the viewer, she directs attention to the biases and inconsistencies that inform the significations of signs. As a result, she reveals the erratic nature of signifiers and the instability of meanings. Gallagher abstracts, erases, fragmentizes, and exploits human anatomy to encourage the viewer to rethink the significance of invasive imagery circulated by mass media. Furthermore, she applies racist imagery into her collages as a way of commenting on society’s tendency to measure an individual’s worth by their physical attributes. At the same time, she realizes the subjectivity inherent in such imagery and appreciates that new meanings emerge as more people view her work. Gallagher relies on the fact that no symbol or sign maintains a stagnant concept or definition; each carries a social life of its own determined by the viewer. She alludes to the arbitrariness of the sign, through aggregation, abstraction, and repetition. By mutating mass media documents, she encourages viewers to attach new associations to the historical imagery she reuses. In his exhibition catalogue essay, Fleming recognizes that Gallagher “mak[es] viewers aware of their historical power [and thereby] pushes us into a new world.”21 Like many artists working in the late-twentieth and twenty-first centuries, she appropriates imagery and welcomes multiple interpretations while debunking fixed content.

Form Becoming the Content

The fact that she embraces multiple readings also explains her fascination with printed materials due to their wide dissemination. Like many collage artists, Gallagher shares an interest in the ubiquitous power of mass media. In an interview with ART21, she explains:

I really get excited by this idea that a printed material can be so widely distributed. The black press was widely distributed and there is a great American history of manifestos. I was always jealous of writers because their story could be in so many different hands—it didn’t have to occur only in a gallery or a museum. There is a possibility for distribution and freedom.22

When Gallagher adds her own material onto the magazine pages or yearbook pages, she enters into the immortal lives of those models she alters. She includes herself into the network of social media by actively responding and contributing to it. Gallagher describes the characters and stories that she appropriates as conscripts because she brings them into her life without their permission.23 This suggests that after a person’s image has entered into the social media at any level, there exists a dimension of that person’s life that he/she cannot control. Gallagher takes advantage of this by using these images to participate in the ongoing dialogue of the black body. These models from the advertisements, as faces widely circulated by the media, become part of Gallagher’s narrative. As old imagery permeates throughout contemporary society, new meanings emerge, and Gallagher exploits this potential by adding her own layer of meaning.

She also appreciates the aging visible in vintage magazine pages. Historian Robin D.G. Kelley (b. 1962) writes in his catalogue essay that “for Gallagher, the condition of the page and its historical status are essential.”24 It calls attention to their age and alludes to their immortal lives that spans across multiple decades. To add to Kelley’s analysis, the small portable sizes of the magazine pages allude to the intimate tangibility of the work’s material. Gallagher incorporates entire pages that may have been touched and handled by countless readers in the mid-twentieth century. Her work thereby implicates a vast history of ownership and reception that the magazine pages survive. By including media, subjects, and viewers that string across

generations, Gallagher’s work becomes about the lapse of time and what that time does to a work or sign as it is seen by multiple viewers. In a similar sense, she uses plasticine because of its inherent vulnerability. Gallagher explains, “plasticine is meant to allude to that idea of mutability and shifting, because plasticine is used in animations and Claymation.” 25 The media itself, as a mutable material that changes over time, alludes to the overall concept of evolution communicated in her work. Furthermore, by exploiting vulnerable materials and speaking across generations, all the while using the grid as her compositional organization, Gallagher contests that grids “explicitly reject a narrative or sequential reading of any kind.” 26

Collages from Gallagher’s Preserve and DeLuxe series use the visual residue from American media to highlight and challenge social iconography. However, what sets Gallagher apart from other collagists is that her form does not just illustrate a hybrid depiction through fragmentation and juxtaposition; her form becomes the content. The advertisements themselves, with their yellowed pages, torn edges and other signs of aging, call attention to the historicity of the images they contain. Also, her use of plasticine, an inherently moldable material that absorbs change throughout time, adds another dimension of mutability, but in a sculptural sense. The vulnerability of Gallagher’s materials is as much the subject matters as are the abstract concepts they symbolize. By using aged magazine ads, she physically and socially connects herself with the models photographed in the ads and the consumers who bought the magazines. Gallagher borrows mass media documents and imagery to enter herself into the continuous narrative about black stereotypes and racist imagery, beginning with nineteenth-century minstrelsy images. However, the dialogue does not stop with her. Fleming explains, “through these works, Gallagher blends histories and searches for a resolution of the conflict between the past and

present while pointing to a future that has absorbed the lesions taught by that conflict."27 While destabilizing the signs found in historical imagery and texts, she opens the playing field for new meanings to emerge and for other viewers to enter themselves into the dialogue as well.

Furthermore, by defacing the models, changing their hair color, or adding abstracted body parts, Gallagher reiterates the fact that identity and race consist of erratic definitions; as social constructions composed of materiality and sensual markers they illogically categorize individuals. As Kelley explains, wigs are transforming devices “functioning like masks in that they can generate and erase identities in a flip.”28 Art historian and critic Thyrza Nichols Goodeve adds to this realization, explaining that “Wigs challenge essentialism. They are not tied to any one body.”29 In this sense, they are similar to language and symbols in that they do not show any fidelity to one person or group. They lack stagnant significations due to their mutability and dissemination. Gallagher dedicates her work to these devices that are inherently anti-essentialist. She challenges historic signs, not only through repetition, but by demonstrating the mutability of physical appearance and the possibilities that arise when she inserts her own innovations into magazine ads. In addition to the wigs, Gallagher continues the transformative process of the models by masking over their wigs and face with plasticine or cut paper to further emphasize their perpetually capricious state. Her physical alterations present the body as a permeable surface and vulnerable form. By exposing the inconsistencies of appearance, Gallagher devalidates racial stereotypes or marks of differences based on appearance. In this sense, because Gallagher’s images do not serve as propaganda promoting a specific look or

---

standard, she ultimately grants her viewers a new opportunity to project their own interpretations and readings of her collaged imagery.
Wangechi Mutu creates collages using popular media imagery as a commentary on cultural stereotypes and the elasticity of identity. Mutu is known for creating hybrid women figures assembled with fragmented preexisting images. She cuts images from a variety of media sources including fashion magazines, coffee-table photography books depicting African women, science journals such as *National Geographic*, and pornographic magazines, among other sources. Mutu creates completely novel figures that do not bear a resemblance to any particular person. Much of her work does not build from a preexisting magazine page or add supplementary adornment to images of models. With the exception of a few collage series, e.g. *Histology of the Different Classes of Uterine Tumors* (2004-2005), she often constructs her female figures from the ground up and conceives her characters on a completely blank surface.

While Ellen Gallagher’s *Preserve* and *DeLuxe* collages maintain portability due to their small dimensions, the vast size of many collages constructed by Mutu exude a sense of monumentality that imposes itself upon the viewer. Combining the beautiful with the grotesque, Mutu’s figures break down the dichotomies between human/inhuman, primitive/modern, and violence/empowerment as a way of embracing hybridized identities.

In its entirety, Mutu’s work exhibits the power of violation—violation of imagery and violation of stable meaning executed by the image-maker. Likewise, many titles of her works exude a sense of violation and coercion, while some titles are mordant, ironic, or witty allusions to cultural stereotypes or existentialism in our technologically advanced world. Her hybrid figures pose the question of what it means to be living in the contemporary world, as someone simultaneously fighting and incorporating media imagery into his or her daily life. Nevertheless,
Mutu’s work reveals the fragility of cultural imagery when reappropriated in different arenas. By decontextualizing forms from popular media sources, Mutu forces the viewer to reexamine the control of mass media imagery. Her collages carry semiotic implications through the use of fragmentation and appropriation. She constructs entire figures out of incongruous forms and substitutes unrelated images for specific body parts. Signs often represent two things at once: fingers may represent lips, reptile claws may take the place of human feet, motorcycle parts may stand in for an arm, or simply, each eye may be extracted from a different image then applied on the same face. Once carefully cut and positioned, these forms adopt new meanings often not related to their traditional significations. Through a process of aggregation, displacement, and juxtaposition, Mutu creates hybrid figures that test the semiotics of fragmented signs while also problematizing perceptions of women. The artist explains in a conversation with art historian Gerald Matt (b. 1958),

I am not sure what the viewer sees when they look at my work but I hope that there is something that happens in the eye and mind so that what one is looking at can be easily confused or interpreted as something else; so prosthetics and limbs or accessories and growths or even animal parts and adornment are confused with one another.  

Here we can construe that the artist purposely situates fragmented images in the position of something it does not signify as a way of forcing the viewer to carefully examine and reconsider the versatility of signs. She severs images projected by the media as a way of commenting on cultural stereotypes. Many of her figures exist in a liminal state between the human and inhuman. For Mutu, hybridization functions as a way of destabilizing categories that perpetuate cultural stereotypes, particularly categories that dichotomize Western and Non-Western countries. The artist also employs the hybrid to stress the heterogeneity and the cultural

---

intersections that formulate individual identity. A reading of four collages—Riding Death in My Sleep (2001), Uterine Catarrh (2004), Le Noble Savage (2006), and Blue Eyes (2008)—will illuminate the semiotic practices inherent in her work, and also analyze her hybridization as a process that critically explores ethnographic binaries and convolutes meaning.

**Education and Career**

While all three artists addressed in this study share a diasporic perspective, Mutu is the only one who has lived in three continents. Born and raised in Kenya, Mutu moved to the U.K. and began her college education in Wales. She then immigrated to the United States with her parents in 1992. She completed her BFA at Cooper Union in 1996 and her MFA at Yale University in 2000. Although Mutu gained international recognition for her collage work, she began her academic career in the United States as a sculptor and anthropologist.

Mutu combines her interest in cultural studies with fine art by creating work that responded to her peers’ essentialist perceptions of African art. Her nomadic lifestyle has afforded her experience of Kenya both as a native and an expatriate living in the Western world. The collage provides a site where Mutu articulates her hybridized perspective of African culture and images of women. During her studies in New York, she produced ironic and satirical work that cleverly poked fun at Western generalizations of blackness and African cultures. She eventually developed an affinity for collage and began creating work using a variety of mass media imagery, watercolors, and ink. However, as she combined more external material, her work developed a heaviness that paper could no longer support. In an interview with curator Isolde Brielmaier, Mutu explains, “Eventually watercolour became second nature, but the very

---

organic, emotional temperament of the paper prevented me from loading on more liquid and heavier materials.”32 To accommodate her changing techniques, she turned to more synthetic surfaces that could withstand her deeply layered work. She continues, “Thus began my transition to larger collage, and with this shift in the fluidity and morphing of the figures came a move to super-synthetic Mylar.”33 As a transparent polyester film, Mylar’s34 chemical stability and high tensile strength provides durability for Mutu’s materials that paper could not support.

**Hybridization**

In addition to ink, watercolor, and media images, Mutu enriches her collages with a variety of other materials, including acrylic, contact paper, packing tape, glitter, pearls, and sometimes rabbit fur. However, her works in their entirety retain a smooth flatness unlike the collages created by Ellen Gallagher and Mickalene Thomas. Upon first glance they appear as large photomontages in which the fragmented images are securely pieced together to form a single, integrated figure. Often times, she builds her figures with fragmented animal prints and organic earth patterns, but accessorizes them with high heels, jewelry, painted acrylic nails, and glittered apparel (fig.9, 10). These juxtapositions parody “primitive” stereotypes of African women, often found in anthropological and science magazines, with modern-day fetishes that superficially symbolize beauty and Western luxury. However, Mutu applies these materials in a way that mitigates their incongruity and creates a disturbingly relatable character, despite the figures’ paradoxical attributes. She combines signs signifying two separate stereotypes into one being, creating a crossbreed that disturbs the polarity between the modern and the primitive.

---

33 Ibid.
34 Mylar is a brand of extraordinarily strong polyester film that was developed in the early 1950s. It is also heat resistant with excellent insulating properties. It is often used in photography and recording tapes.
Mutu’s disparate signs may also signify body parts from a distance. When melded together in a conglomeration of various fragments, objects bleed together the same way as repeated dots in a pointillistic painting. But once the viewer approaches the work at a closer distance, he or she can differentiate the individual objects comprising the larger figure. An example of this technique is visible in *Blue Eyes* (fig. 11), a collage from her 2008 portrait series included in the exhibition *Wangechi Mutu: In Whose Image*. Held at the Kunsthalle Wien in Austria, this 2008 exhibition displayed a collection of Mutu’s collaged portraits. *Blue Eyes* is among several that depict both a frontal and profile portrait bust of a woman, using mixed media and ink collaged on Mylar. The figure’s race remains generally ambiguous as the portrait displays only her head and neck. The surface of her speckled skin morphs into a variety of yellow and tan earth-tones probably as a result of the chemical reactions that the artist emanates in her compositional process. In the frontal bust, a squatting black man, turned ninety degrees on its side represents the figure’s nose; printed in a sepia tone, the image shows him wearing only a blanket over the lower half of his body and a cloth over his head. A traditional African mask decorated with a bell hanging from its chin stands in as the figure’s left earring, while the other ear wears a combination of an indiscernible bluish grey object with a motorcycle fragment hanging below. The woman’s lips are constructed from two different sources: her full, upturned upper lip and her teeth seem to come from the same source, whereas her bottom lip appears to be taken from an exotic flower petal. Fragments of naked arms and breasts make up the contours of her eyes and temples. Similar to her lips, her two eyes do not match and come from separate images; however, both do not resemble human eyes, but rather, eyes from different animals. Mutu unobtrusively adds other fragmented images throughout the surface of the figure. A young nude African boy crouches and mourns with his head in his hands on the figure’s left shoulder.
In contrast, a motorcycle is added on the edge of her right shoulder. These unrelated images create an opposition in the figure that evokes the dichotomous stereotypes of the “primitive” African world and the “modernized” Western world. The polarizing binaries found in many of Mutu’s portraits insinuate the separate societies that immigrants, such as Mutu, must negotiate and reconcile while cultivating their hybridized identities.

The profile collage offers a very different perspective of the figure, almost to the point that the two collages seem to depict different women. However, the general color tonality and the structure of the faces share similarities that suggest their interrelationship. From the side view, Mutu places a green and yellow iguana in the position of the woman’s brow bone. A green insect stands in for her nose, with its body extending under her eye. Upon closer inspection, one can discern the countless fragmented objects hidden in Mutu’s collages. Although some applied fragments are more recognizable than others, they collectively morph together in a balanced composition that, upon an initial glance, translates into a foreign, but comprehensive, human figure.

Through collage, she highlights the versatility of the sign by placing them in different contexts and thereby dismantles the viewer’s ability to assign stable meanings to the sign. As seen in Blue Eyes, objects stand in for various body parts and facial features that they may not traditionally signify as a way of expanding and mutating their significations. With proper appropriation and manipulation, Mutu exhibits that an iguana can translate as a woman’s brow bone, or an African mask can signify an earring. Furthermore, appropriation and decontextualization allows Mutu to create hybrid beings that challenge the separation of binaries such as primitive/modern and myth/reality.
Many of her collages also exaggerate Western fantasies of primitivism by disguising or metamorphosizing her figures into inhuman hybrids. In the case of *Le Noble Savage*35 (fig. 12), Mutu isolates her female subject in the wilderness and camouflages her as an exotic tree. Mutu depicts her in mid-transformation, as part human and part tree. The figure stands on her knees in high, unkempt grass; she looks up to her arm vertically outstretched above her head that tightly grips palm foliage. Her jubilant posture proudly erects the palm foliage, displaying it like a torch or trophy, or some other emblem of pride. With her arm substituting the trunk, Mutu’s character simultaneously resembles a human figure and a tree. The foliage houses a flock of macaws, some of which rest in the branches and many others that swarm around its perimeter. With the exception of a tangled grass skirt, the woman appears mostly unclothed or scantily covered by raw materials taken directly from nature, such as flowers and animal skin. Snakes wrap around her body, rest on her head, and spiral up to her raised hand. She wears a mosaic of triangular fragments on her bodice that creates the appearance of a shattered mirror or reflective armor. Whether this fragmented surface represents her skin or clothes remains unclear as it terminates at her shoulders, but dissipates down her right leg. Mutu mutilates the skin on the woman’s arms, legs, and head using mud, plaster, sumi ink and acrylic; as a result, the woman’s skin consists of earth tones and shapes that have chemically transmuted into a colorful pattern that obscures any sign of race. Mutu adds an element of surprise by adorning the figure with small photos of exotic species including vibrant flowers, particularly noticeable in the place of her breasts, and wild cats such as lions and leopards. Many of these fragmented images appear as accessories or inseparable staples on the figure’s body.

35 *Le Noble Savage* was exhibited in Mutu’s solo exhibition, *An Alien Eye and Other Killah Anthems* (2006), held at Sikkema Jenkins & Co. in New York City.
Upon first glance, and as implied by the title of the collage, Mutu’s figure appears “uncivilized” and removed from the “modern” world; she shares a close kinship with the untouched, natural world that Westerners often associate with African land. Multiple animals congregate around her, indicating her own animalistic nature. By constructing her body from images of plants and animals, Mutu visually equates her being with untamed wildlife. The figure’s marbleized skin tones further differentiate her from the civilized voyeur. Mutu creates a grotesque but dignified savage locked in a fantasy world of exotic flora and fauna, far away from the world of her modern-day viewers. By creating a hybrid figure part woman and part tree, she galvanizes the myth of exotic African women fabricated by Western storytellers and audiences.

At the same time, however, Mutu’s hybrid characters also problematize stereotypes by parodying the mythological tropes of African people and cultures. Interestingly, upon closer inspection, the viewer may notice the woman wears acrylic, French-manicured nails. This unbefitting twist demonstrates the power of the artist or more generally, the image creator, to construct and manipulate imagery and thereby dictate the viewer’s impression. Through careful fragmentation and assemblage, Mutu combines tropes of the uncivilized and the modern to create a hybridized imaginary being that simultaneously represents two disparate worlds. In other words, she desegregates socially-polarized concepts by juxtaposing their respective signs in a single figure. As a result, her work implicates that both worlds—the modern and the primitive—are realms heavily constructed and impressionable by the imagination and media imagery. Mutu’s hybrid characters counter the supposed truth of media imagery and demonstrate that images function as interpreted constructions of reality based on the image creator’s mutations. In this case, the title *Le Noble Savage*, may carry a sardonic tone that pokes fun at cultural stereotypes that bind individuals into problematic generalizations. By conglomerating disparate
imagery under the umbrella term “savage,” she highlights the arbitrariness of binaries and unveils the fictional information that separates individuals into categories.

_Riding Death in My Sleep_ (fig. 13) represents another hybrid figure, but here Mutu synthesizes a woman and animal. While the shape of her body generally resembles a human, the surface of her body and her posture exhibit inhuman qualities. The figure squats on a dark, mounded surface in a frog-like position. Supporting herself on all four limbs, she exposes her animalistic lineage. Mutu credits a performance she viewed by Grace Jones as inspiration for much of her work, particularly her collages that create an ambiguity between humans and animals. She explains, “I first encountered Grace Jones from this strange program called ‘Pop in Germany’ […] I remember seeing Grace Jones on there and that particular moment she was wearing a leopard suit cat suit with a tail […] and everything that it took to make her look like this animal creature.”

Both perturbed and captivated by her performance, Mutu found significance in the fact that one of the few black women projected as emblem of beauty was transformed into a feline seductress. As a Jamaican singer, actress, and model who gained popularity in New York City, Grace Jones has employed her body as a site for transformation. Countless photographs and performances have oversexualized her body, androgynized her gender, and metamorphosized her body into half human and half animal figures. In the particular performance that Mutu watched, the artist continues, “she was writhing and shaking her tail all over the place literally.” Similarly, Mutu’s figure is almost entirely covered with a spotted pattern that resembles reptilian skin. She is brightly colored with reds, oranges, yellows, and greens. Mutu’s portrayal does not clarify whether this surface represents a body suit or the figure’s skin. Only her head, visible in a fair human skin tone, escapes this vivid pattern.

---

37 Ibid.
The figure’s ambiguity prevents the viewer from visually identifying the species of the subject. Mutu does not distinguish whether the figure represents an animal masked with a humanistic face, a human posing as an animal, or a complete hybrid of the two. Like a human in the so-called modern world, she wears fashionable boots and accessorizes her wrists with bands patterned in leopard print. These wristbands match the patterned fragments covering her breasts and the rims of her boots. But like an animal spotted in the wilderness, she poses in a defensive position that prepares for quick movement and confronts the viewer with a predatory gaze. Both human and animal are visually present. The predation exuded by the figure is also implicated in the title of the collage, *Riding Death in My Sleep*. As seen in this particular collage and suggested by its title, many of Mutu’s prominent figures reveal a sense of power and appear as if they are undergoing an existential conquest to survive in this world. They transform into chameleon-like beings that adopt and adapt to their surroundings as a survival technique. As a result of their adaptability, Mutu’s inexplicable creatures challenge the viewer’s desire to identify the subject. The artist’s hybridization disturbs the tendency to categorize individuals and decipher concrete meaning in pictorial expression.

Hybridization and ambiguity are deployed beyond the central figure and throughout the collage’s entirety. As the earliest of all the collages discussed, the overall composition of *Riding Death in My Sleep* appears relatively more simplified and less overwhelmed with countless fragmented images. The minimalism in the background and foreground isolate the figure as the central focal point. The figure’s location remains unclear as she stands on a mounded black ground spotted with mushrooms. The pure blackness of the surface obscures a sense of spatial recession as does the solid grey background that represents the surrounding atmosphere. Small hybrid creatures crawl and fly around the figure. With their forms composed of spliced body
parts disjointed from various animals, the creatures do not wholly signify a single animal. A bald eagle head lacks a body and sits on the feet of a larger bird. A cat forms the head of an insect with butterfly wings attached. A creature with feathers as wings, an elephant’s face as the head, and a long reptilian tail flies in the air. Among other bizarrely constructed creatures, these hybridizations inhabit the fantasy world that Mutu constructs from both media imagery and her imagination. She combines signs identified with supposedly disparate worlds and, thereby, pictorially desegregates the associations connected to different cultures.

At the same time, works like *Riding Death in My Sleep* also evince the artist’s interpretation of signs specifically attached to African cultures and women of the African diaspora. During a lecture held at the University of Michigan in 2010, Mutu voiced her concern with media projections that reductively represent Africa nations as countries full of wild animals. She posits that we often see “animals standing for culture,” particularly when visualizing her native country Kenya. She argues, “One thing you rarely see when you see ads and stories about Kenya is people. You often see animals. It’s a safari place; it’s like a big zoo… That’s what our media is feeding and not only what the media’s feeding, it’s what also trickles down to even the most intellectual spaces in our lives.” Mutu responds to these stereotypes by creating disturbing collaged versions of these icons. She employs abjection as a coping mechanism but also as a strategy to reveal the absurdity of constructed stereotypes.

Traditional African masks are another cultural icon that Mutu appropriates in her work partly because she finds the European Western perceptions of these masks particularly fascinating. “It is an all-encompassing way of describing Africa,” Mutu construes, “Often you see a mask or this kind of face that is slightly abstract and dark and frightening in a particular way, and that means African.” She explores the meaning of the mask from a Western

---

38 Ibid.
perspective and employs the icon in various ways. Her collage *Uterine Catarrh* (fig. 14) problematizes the mask motif as a symbol of African cultures. Belonging to a series entitled *Histology* of the Different Classes of Uterine Tumors, *Uterine Catarrh* differs aesthetically from the previous two images discussed. Here, Mutu collages the head of a black woman on found medical illustration paper depicting female reproductive organs. The woman’s head is depicted from a three-quarter profile perspective and cunningly resembles traditional African masks that heavily abstract the facial features. Her head floats without a body, recalling an isolated face characteristic of a masks and mug shots. Drawn genitalia, previously illustrated, fill a void in the woman’s forehead. A medical tool clamps a localized section of the drawing; the circular portion of the clamp becomes a third eye on the face.

While objects resemble two things at once, Mutu also employs hybridization through a combination of incongruous facial features and the materials used to construct the portrait. The woman’s black skin is featured with stereotypical white European traits, such as luscious pink lips and a small ear, all of which possess the smooth surface of magazine pages. In addition, Mutu adorns her short black hair with glitter. Together the glitter and the glossy surface of the magazine page evoke the materialistic glitz and glamour of the modern era. Paired with aged medical illustration paper, these surfaces parody one another as they compete for the viewer’s attention. Here, the art realm—exhibited in her collaged fragments—is merged with science—present in the medical illustrations—to depict a black woman’s face. Instead of reintegrating their polarities through juxtaposition, Mutu unites art and science by highlighting the slippage between the two realms. They coalesce into a hybridized realm of representation as they collectively compose the woman’s face.

---

39 *Histology* refers to the microscopic anatomical study of tissue in animals and plants.
Her inclusion of scientific material disturbingly recalls historical phrenological images and forensic studies used to categorize black people as an inferior race. Unsurprisingly, Mutu confirms that these systems of racial differentiation have inspired her work that focuses on the face. At her lecture given at the University of Michigan, Mutu specifically cites images of severed Namibian heads (fig. 15) and ethnographic images as objects that instigated her adaptations of portrait busts. Reflecting on the legacy of these studies, Mutu contends, “there’s this very kind of distinct belief that if you look at a face if you look at the way the head is shaped […] the structure of the cranium, that somehow you’ll understand who they are morally, ethnically, intellectually […] it’s still somehow in the fabric of the way we see things and people.”

Mutu realizes that these studies, despite their racism and denigration, have inspired an ongoing desire to categorize individuals based on their physical features and outer appearance. She explores this legacy by creating portraits resembling masks, thereby indicating their inhuman quality. Devoid of a body and any additional surroundings that could contextualize her location, the woman is stripped down to her face. This minimal information distances the viewer from the subject and degrades the woman as an object of the gaze. If her abstracted face does not create enough of a disguise, the drawn genitalia serves as an additional mask barely exposing her eyes. By covering her upper face with the medical illustration paper, Mutu emulates the tendency to reduce black people to their physicality. Now the subject is not only a masked face, but she is a reproductive vessel defined by her genetics.

In *Uterine Catarrh*, Mutu’s collaged hybridization combines the human with the inhuman—two opposing concepts already inherent in the mask. While masks exist as inanimate

---

objects, they abstractly signify human faces. At the same time, masks used as disguises are animated by the wearer, thus dissolving the barrier between the human and inhuman. Through this hybridization, Mutu explores the act of looking at the Other. Masks conceal what is underneath and prevents the viewer from developing an intimate relationship with the Other. Likewise, mug shots, forensic photographs and phrenological studies that reduce black people to their external features perpetuate a preoccupation with appearance and differences based on external factors. These images serve as mythological facades that societies exploit to stereotype the Other. By emphasizing the mask as an impenetrable barrier, Mutu problematizes this tendency to categorize individuals by their race and external appearance. As a result, portraits from *Histology of the Different Classes of Uterine Tumors* destabilize cultural categories and binaries as reductive falsities.

In its entirety, Mutu’s overall compositional process involves a hybridized method. Fusing fragmented images with ink, sometimes watercolor, and other liquid substances, her collages withhold disparate materials unified into a final product. She combines precise, controlled cuts with the fluidity of ink and watercolor; solidified objects are paired with liquidized materials. In her description of this process, she explains,

> I’ve often worked on a work for a few months and at some point I feel like I’m at this grand point with it, and I throw some ink on it to make it look a particular way. And I wake up in the morning and the ink has flown and flowed and gone all over the place and I have to decide whether there’s something about that mistake that’s inherently important to what I’m trying to say.\(^{41}\)

Cutting and piecing together fragmented magazine images exercises more control and security over the outcome. However, Mutu balances these blunt edges by applying ink and/or watercolor. The chemical reactions that gradually occur after she applies the fluids require the artist to relinquish control over the final product. She combines precision with improvisation. As a

\(^{41}\) Ibid.
result, Mutu concludes, “It’s always more interesting when the work disobeys me […] I end up with these incredible mistakes.”

As her materials come from different sources, the combination of disparate materials provides a perfect site for depicting themes of hybridization. When placed together, these materials integrate in a way that desegregates their properties. The watercolor blends and bleeds the images from magazines while the ink dyes and is assimilated into the paper. As seen in *Intertwined* (2003) (fig. 16), the chemical reaction produces marbleized skin that is not distinctly animal or human nor racially classifiable. Like hybridization, her technique involves a process of integration that prevents the viewer from separating the blended sources.

During her lecture held at the University of Michigan, Mutu included a quote by the post-colonial theorist Trinh T. Minh-ha. It reads: “Despite all our desperate, eternal attempts to separate, contain and mend, categories always leak.” This “leaking” is what interests Mutu and that which she incorporates in her work. She exhibits the “leaks” by amalgamating so-called oppositions into hybridized forms and concepts. While her materials are taken from a variety of sources, so too are the signs and inspiration that comprise her collages. She looks at fashion, advertising, and photojournalism, among other media sources because, as she explains, “there’s so much power in some of these pictures but there’s a lot of damage that’s done in these iconic photographs.” Mutu explores both the weight and elasticity of these icons through mimicry and hybridization. Mimicry occurs when she adopts African stereotypes, such as primitivism, as underlying themes or components of her work. Hybridization occurs when she constructs her figures with incongruous signs or oppositional sources, and creates figures that are both human and inhuman. In addition, the large scale of works such as *Le Noble Savage* and *Riding Death in

---

42 Ibid.
43 University of Michigan, “Penny W. Stamps Distinguished Speaker Series: Wangechi Mutu.”
*My Sleep* transform her hybrid figures into eminent icons that celebrate a conglomeration of differences. Mutu’s combination of the beautiful and the grotesque challenges viewers to reexamine their definitions of the two terms while also considering the intersections between the two concepts. Her theme of hybridization celebrates cultural integration by conjoining separate signs in a single figure. With the amalgamation of signs that constitute their physicality, the hybrid characters project new meaning for the juxtaposed signs. Mutu’s figures demonstrate that cultural signs do not remain stagnant, but exist in a state of flux, just as cultures exist in a state of flux. Her work comes at a crucial time while globalization destroys cultural purity and forces social assimilation. As Mutu suggests, during this ongoing process of global integration, we must open our eyes to the similarities instead of alienating ourselves and others by fixating on difference.
Mickalene Thomas finds inspiration not only in pop culture but also appropriates material from the canon of Western art history. Known primarily as a painter and photographer, Thomas stages and photographs *tableaux vivants* in her studio. The positioning of her African American female figures evokes the compositional set-up of European “masterpieces,” such as the Pietà, Jean-Auguste Ingres’s *Grande Odalisque* (1814), Édouard Manet’s *Le déjeuner sur l’herbe* (1863), and Gustave Courbet’s *Origin of the World* (1866), to name a few. By replacing white figures with black female figures, Thomas disturbs historical representations that often tended to neglect black individuals or place them in marginal roles. Rather than purely objectifying and eroticizing her figures, as often seen in Western depictions of the Other, Thomas grants them a heightened sense of agency and visible stature that empowers them as strong, beautiful women who command the viewer’s attention.

While her *tableaux* imitate the compositional content of Western canons, she decorates the interior of her studio with a lavish array of vivid patterns and furniture. The photographs taken from her *tableaux* are cut and transformed into collaged versions of the scene. Thomas’s compositional method focuses on the surface and the façade as critical components of portraiture. She accentuates the surface by flattening images, obscuring a sense of spatial recession, rendering the blunt edges of her fragments, and adorning her finished product with Swarovski rhinestones. For Thomas, the surface serves as the medium through which identity is revealed.
Thomas’s collage process stands apart from Gallagher’s and Mutu’s in that her compositional process involves three distinct steps, each yielding a product that could stand as a finished work. First, she photographs the subjects in her self-designed tableau interiors. In her second step, Thomas creates a small collaged image by splicing fragments from her photograph taken in the previous step. These collages further distort the depth and space in the composition and thereby create a heightened sense of flatness often characteristic of collage work. Finally, Thomas replicates the collage into a colossal painting on a wood surface; these paintings are often more than one hundred times the size of the collaged version. Her separate works, based on the same initial tableaux, explore the mutability of the image and pictorial space when rendered in different mediums. Through this process, the artist creates a collage aesthetic that emphasizes the surface quality of portraiture. Furthermore, her tableaux and collage aesthetic exhibit identity as an accumulation presentable through adornment and eclectic patterns. This chapter will focus on two works completed by Thomas—Tamika Sur Une Chaise Lounge (2008) and You’re Gonna Give Me The Love I Need (2010), each of which exists as a photograph, a collage, and a painting. An analysis of these works will discuss the flatness, retained edges, and applied rhinestones as reoccurring components of Thomas’s art that direct attention to the surface of her works. This chapter will also demonstrate that Thomas’s use of vibrant patterns, costumes, and portraiture at large serve as both transformative tools and cultural signs that signify the countless influences formulating an individual’s identity. Finally, a discussion of these works will illuminate Thomas’s ability to empower her figures through acts of appropriation and performance.
Performance

In contrast to Gallagher’s and Mutu’s approaches to collage, Thomas’s process involves real-life models whom she photographs in interior spaces. These models often include influential women in Thomas’s life, for example her mother, past spouses, and friends, whom she feels possess independence and attitude. They often exude beauty through their confidence, vibrant sensibilities, and their ability to establish control over an audience. However, these qualities require the ability to perform in front of the camera. Thomas asserts, “from the beginning, my work has been grounded in performance.”44 This performative component of her work is carefully constructed through multiple props. She adorns her models with make-up, wigs, and vivacious clothing to help transform her subjects into assertive women. She adds to their costuming by placing them in elaborate interiors decorated with multiple, energetic patterns and wood paneling that recall American 1970s trends and fashions. To enhance the physical transformation of the figures, Thomas encourages her models to adopt a seductive mentality that will translate in photographs. In an interview with curator Matthew McLendon,45 Thomas explains her objective: “when I photograph the women for my work, we are creating an atmosphere, often of seduction, that allows them to play out an aspect of themselves usually reserved for private moments.”46 As implied in her explanation, she explores identity as a performative gesture mutable by the figure’s dress, pose, and surroundings. But for Thomas, performance only reveals selected parts, or glimpses, of the performer’s identity while much remains invisible.47 Likewise, images offer limited information about the figure; these

45 This interview was completed for the catalogue of the exhibition Beyond Bling: Voices of Hip-Hop in Art held in 2011 at the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art.
46 Matthew McLendon, “Interview with Mickalene Thomas,” 115.
47 Mickalene Thomas, e-mail message to author, February 8, 2013.
limitations are further reinforced in Thomas’s collage process. To remind the viewer of the image’s skewed lens so to speak, she reveals its properties by cutting up her photographs and obscuring the distinction between the foreground and background. In the end, her method underscores the materiality of her work as a representative object rather than a window into reality.

**Flattening Spatial Recession**

An example of her technique is visible in *Tamika Sur Une Chaise Longue* (fig. 17). A seductive woman, with her chest partially exposed, reclines on a couch covered with multiple fabrics. Juxtaposed vibrant patterns overlap and compete for the viewer’s attention. The woman also wears colorful clothing with a variety of patterns, adding to the cacophonous display of designs. Thomas explains, “These fabrics come from a lot of different sources, both literally and conceptually.” She clarifies that many are chosen “with the intention of reconstructing elements of my childhood and the aesthetic of the 1970s.”

In other words, the patterns function as personal signs for Thomas that signify her upbringing. After the initial photo shoot, Thomas moves onto the next step of her compositional process. In this step, Thomas cuts the photograph from the previous step, collages the pieces and additional fragmented patterns throughout the background of the scene. The collaged version (fig. 18) diminishes a sense of depth perception and flattens the surface of the work. While the photograph captures the corner where the two walls meet behind the couch, Thomas does not recreate it in her collage. Instead, she splices the background with additional fragmented patterns. Likewise, the records and pictures hanging on the two walls and the tree positioned in the same corner are absent in the collage. These objects are among the visual cues that evince spatial recession in the photograph. By replacing these

---

48 Ibid.
them with fragmented patterns, Thomas flattens the space and the patterns thereby emerge to the foreground. As a crucial component of her work, she retains the flatness in her final painting as well (fig. 19).

The lack of foreground-background contrast causes the patterns to become part of the subject as much as the figure herself, who appears to recede into space more than any other form within the scene. Thomas defends the flatness of her work as a compositional strategy that emphasizes the significance of external appearance. She explains, “In portraiture, you are always dealing with the surface—the presentation of the sitter. As the artist, I use surface-level clues as indicators of what lies beneath the surface of the individual.”

Splicing her photographs into collages obscures the spatial recession visible in the photograph and thereby evens all the fragments to the same level. In this sense, everything is brought to the forefront, allowing the viewer to receive each fragment as equally significant parts.

For Thomas, each fragment and the patterns they frame, deserve just as much attention as the figure because they serve as indicators of the subject’s identity. When discussing the collage work of Ellsworth Kelly (b. 1923), art historian and curator Diane Waldman (b. 1936) describes his process as “the gradual disintegration of the image into minute units, which were then reassembled into another totality.” While Thomas does not emulate Kelly’s method of tearing up old drawings and gluing them on the paper just where they spontaneously fell, she does share his process of fragmenting and reorganizing preexisting images—in this case her photographs. To borrow Waldman’s description of Kelly’s work, Tamika Sur Une Chaise Longue exemplifies Thomas’s “combination of fragmentation with an allover intensity to avoid a fixed center of

interest.” This is especially evident in her painted version of the collage because in the absence of photographed fragments, Thomas’s paint application does not capture as much shading and volume visible in the photographed fragments. Thomas also outlines the figure with a thick black line covered with rhinestones; this barrier delineates her as a two-dimensional shape as opposed to a three-dimensional form. As a result, the figure “Tamika” is flattened more and thus appears as another object among the juxtaposing patterns surrounding her.

**Material Objects as Indicators of Identity**

The figure “Tamika” is nearly camouflaged by the patterns that direct the eye throughout the composition and frame the figure’s reclining body. Thomas explains this compositional decision by articulating her interest in interior space. She emphasizes that people present themselves not just through dress, but through material surroundings; thus, she explains that she is “concerned with people’s connection to artifice and how we construct even our most intimate interiors in order to feel a certain way about ourselves.” As people decorate their living spaces, their possessions become an extension of themselves. In addition to her *tableaux vivants*, several of her works subtract the figure all together. As seen in *Interior: Zebra with Two Chairs and Funky Fur* (fig. 20), Thomas creates a domestic interior space in which the furniture, décor, and vibrant patterns serve as the sole signifiers of the absent figure’s identity. In this respect, Thomas fully stresses her idea that “the interior is a portrait” in and of itself. But while the collaged fragments tell a story about the figure, whether visible or invisible in the picture frame, the layers allude to the complicated stratum of identity. Thomas deduces that “the sense of flat

---

51 Ibid.
53 Ibid.
layers produced by collage has functioned as an embodiment of the layers of self and perception intrinsic to the notion of artifice.” In other words, the collage process not only provides a portrait of the figure portrayed, but serves as a metaphor for the process of identity formation. Thomas’s layering and juxtaposition of eclectic fragments symbolize the complexity of identity and self-presentation.

Thomas further embellishes her work by adorning the surface of the painted version with Swarovski rhinestones. In the case of Tamike Sur Une Chaise Longue, the artist applies rhinestones to cover the woman’s hair, the contours of her figure, the shadowed folds of her blue shirt, patches of the wall patterns, and the dark grooves of the wood paneling, among other areas of the work. The rhinestones not only add flamboyance to the already vibrant scene, but they create a three-dimensionality that contrasts the flattened surface beneath. Like the spliced images, the rhinestones place more emphasis on the surface-quality of her work. Thomas explains to McLendon that she initially added a layer of rhinestones for aesthetic intrigue. However, as she continually applied them in countless works, her reason, “expanded to encompass formal concerns of texture and color.”54 The rhinestones produce a captivating sparkle that draws the viewer physically closer to the work in order to decipher the material that creates such an effect. As a result, the rhinestones attract viewers to the surface of the painting, thus forcing them to observe the minute qualities that comprise the work. When explaining her fixation on the surface, Thomas realizes, “I think part of my insistence on the surface, part of the ‘fetishization’ stems from my awareness that I am creating art objects, not just images and representations of women.”55 Her rhinestones allude to the fact that her works function as objects in and of themselves. Likewise, her process of fragmentation and flattening do more

55 Ibid.
than distort the pictorial space inherent in photography and representational painting. Thomas claims these techniques “remind the viewer that we are in fact looking at an object as well as an image.” They reveal the properties of the photographs, paper, paint, rhinestones, and other materials she includes. By exposing the substantiality of her materials, she negates illusionistic representation and thereby she directs attention back to the surface of the work. Although they may serve as portraits, in the end her works offer a product of Thomas’s expression and interpretation.

Thomas’s perception of her work as a constructed object reveals that she embraces the inherent subjectivity of all portraiture regardless of whether the image represents a real individual. She appreciates and stresses the idea that portraiture—through the use of external visual clues—tells a story about the subject rather than simply providing an objective, visual representation of an individual. However the collage medium itself does more than opening up a venue in which Thomas can appropriate cultural influences. In his essay, “Collage: Philosophy of Put-Togethers,” art historian and critic Harold Rosenberg (1906-1978) refers to the image in collage as a “conscious artifice” because it functions as a surrogate for the “real” object in the modern age of mass production and mass media. He argues, “it is the visual vocabulary of what Walter Benjamin called ‘the age of mechanical reproduction’” and it “corresponds to the illusion-producing processes of contemporary civilization.” While the artifice is a by-product of society’s dependence on external appearance for self-presentation, the conscious artifice, or the collaged image, particularly in Thomas’s work, exposes this dependence while also exploiting it further. Thomas confirms, “Conceptually, this sense of overlapping, flat images and

56 Mickalene Thomas, e-mail message to author, February 8, 2013.
space reflects my interest in the artifice. These techniques practiced by Thomas reveal the forgery of the image and demonstrate that it functions as a sign, or a proxy, for complex concepts such as identity. She thereby embraces the referential quality of images rather than aspiring towards direct representation.

**Delineated Edges**

Thomas further accentuates the artifice and the surface by retaining the blunt edges of her assembled fragments, as seen in *You’re Gonna Give Me the Love I Need* (fig. 21). She photographs a woman reclining on a couch, with her arm erected and her elbow propped on the couch arm. Her head gently rests on her hand that touches the side of her face. In this image, Thomas presents a woman with attitude and confidence, seen in her aggressive posture and her brazen appearance. Colorful patterns cover every object in the *tableaux*, including the couch upholstery, the pillows, the footstool, the floor, and the woman’s dress. Again, Thomas applies rhinestones to embellish the flamboyance and highlight the surface of the work. However, in the collaged version, Thomas exposes the edges in between the fragmented images, similar to puzzle pieces tentatively placed in position, but not yet securely pieced together. Instead of concealing these edges, she renders them in her painted version of the collage (fig. 22).

When asked about her collage process, Thomas explains her reason for retaining these edges:

> When I first started using collage, it was compositional tool. But in the paintings, I would always remove some of the energy that was in the collage by flattening everything and not keeping the edges exposed. Around 2007 and 2008, I found that edge very interesting. It shifted the painting when I kept it in—a sort of visceral play with the painting that allowed me to explore ideas more openly and

---

58 Mickalene Thomas, e-mail message to author, February 8, 2013.
not be so constricted. It created a distance with the foreground and background and created this perspective that wasn’t in my earlier work.\textsuperscript{59}

The blunt edges unveil the layering of the collage process that builds two dimensional photographic images and, like the rhinestones, attract attention to the surface of the portraits. In addition, the edges rendered in Thomas’s painted version of the collage isolate portions of the composition by visually framing the fragments of the image. Thomas paints the edges with a light tan color which frames and draws attention to the specific objects visible in the fragments, such as the footstool, the throw pillows, the woman’s legs, and the woman’s upper body. The edges exist as outlines separating each section and thereby serve as a frame encompassing each fragment within the larger frame of the entire composition. In the painted version, the painted edges also lead the eye on a mazelike tour, as viewers attempt to follow the start and end of each edge. This visual excursion recounts the hand of the artist as the placement and shape of each fragment is chronicled along the way.

The edges also amplify the syntactical character of each fragment that revolves around the placement of the figure. Thomas thereby highlights the collaged segments as individual objects in their own right. Art historian and critic Donald B. Kuspit (b. 1935) offers a general description of collage that is particularly pertinent to Thomas’s \textit{You’re Gonna Give Me the Love I Need}. In his essay, “Collage: The Organizing Principle of Art,” he writes, “In collage we find abstract elements as material fragments—elements of a code of abstraction that no longer perform the abstractive function but exist as entities in their own right. These fragments of art have equal status with fragments of life in the collage.”\textsuperscript{60} In other words, each unit gains a new level of independence, a new identity separate from the rest of the work; this level of

\textsuperscript{59} Lisa Melandri, “Points of Origin: An Interview with Mickalene Thomas,” 36.
independence is especially acquired in Thomas’s work when she retains the edges of each spliced fragment. Instead of props comprising the overall picture, they become significant pieces of the puzzle separately objectified in their own right. Here, Thomas’s work exemplifies Kuspit’s claim that “the collage replaces privilege with equivalence.” Her retained edges present the fragments as equally significant pieces of the composition that collectively reveal a window into the figure’s identity. Thomas’s creative process stresses the importance of each individual unit assembled in her collaged work. Each fragment stands as an isolated sign, but when juxtaposed with other images, they tell a story about the figure depicted with their fractured totality.

Black Visibility

Together, these fragments construct a composition that grants visibility to black women in particular. While Thomas’s work serves as autobiographical images, recalling 1970s patterns and décor, they also function as portraits of the modeling figures posed in the artist’s elaborate interiors. Many of these portraits, as seen in Tamika Sur Une Chaise Longue, rework the compositional layout of Western canons in order to reclaim black visibility and subvert traditional notions of beauty. In her book, Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness, historian and art consultant Nicole R. Fleetwood argues, “black women are produced through visual signs as in excess of idealized white femininity.” To challenge this troubling phenomenon, Fleetwood explains that artists like Renee Cox create counternarratives that reclaim the presence of black subjects in the hands of black creators. Black individuals may also create images of “hypervisibility,” a term defined by Fleetwood as “a performative strategy that

61 Ibid.
points to the problems of the black female body in the visual field.” While Fleetwood’s discussion analyzes the work of Renee Cox (b. 1960) and Tracey Rose (b. 1974) as examples of counternarratives and hypervisibility, Thomas’s appropriation of canonical works and collaged portraits of confident black women function similarly.

With Tamika Sur Une Chaise Longue, Thomas’s recreates the Western trope of reclining female figures by replacing the ubiquitous Anglo woman with a black woman. By appropriating art “masterpieces,” Thomas addresses the idea that Western canons—that have endured the test of time and have solidified as symbolic prototypes in western culture—also serve as cultural signs themselves. When Euro-Americans mentally pictures a female nude, an image of Sandro Boticelli’s Birth of Venus (1486) or Jean-Auguste Ingres’s Grande Odalisque (1814) may flash through their mind. These archetypal images of quiet, reserved women objectified by the viewer’s gaze are combated with Thomas’s images of confident black women. Thomas’s women may confront the viewer with a direct stare; they may recline nude or partially naked; they wear dramatic make up and flashy patterns. Furthermore, Thomas’s painted versions of the collages project the figures on a monumental scale; like Wangechi Mutu’s hybridized figures, the mere scale of Thomas’s female figures also contributes to their unavoidable presence and enhances their transformation into grand icons. By demanding visibility, they compensate for past Western visual culture that did not represent them as beautiful, desirable, or respectable. As a result, the canon is appropriated as an alterable sign and approached as a socially constructed image. In other words, Thomas’s appropriation destabilizes cultural signs as negotiable signifiers influenced by the image-making process and mass culture.

When asked about her interest in reworking canonical art work, Thomas replies, “History is important whether it’s art history, political history, or cultural history—it allows you to gain

---

63 Ibid, 110.
and understanding of the language that has developed and where you might contribute to the
discussion or dispute what has come before.”
Similar to Ellen Gallagher’s method of defacing
and building from popular mid-century advertisements, Thomas’s collage work provides a site
where she can assess and interpret mass cultural imagery, but also create a dialogue with the
artists whose work she appropriates. Although Édouard Manet did not depict black subjects with
such authority, Thomas acknowledges that he challenged contemporary depictions of white
women by granting them more individuality and agency than artwork previously exhibited at the
French salons. As an artist also disturbing the status quo, Thomas admits, “I feel a kinship and
imperative to interact with these pivotal figurative painters.”
She shares a desire in a continual legacy that employs art as a medium through which social conventions and contemporary values
are problematized. She inserts her personal lexicon into visual culture and contributes to the
ongoing discourse surrounding both black and female visibility.

Although Thomas grants visibility to her black female subjects, her portraiture runs the
risk of perpetuating Western objectification of the black body. However, she avoids this
tendency by empowering her female figures rather than exploiting or fetishizing them. Her
empowering process begins the performative aspect she employs as an underlying technique and
theme. You’re Gonna Give Me the Love I Need is one example among many that she titles in the
first person. The title not only addresses both the viewer and the subject depicted, but directs the
viewer with a command for attention. She disturbs the traditional subject-object relationship by
not dismissing the viewer as a detached voyeur, but an individual involved in a two-way
relationship. Her title grants her subject a level of consciousness that thereby creates a fight for
control between the viewer and subject. As a result, both the viewer and subject are mobilized:

64 Matthew McLendon, “Interview with Mickalene Thomas,” 115.
65 Ibid.
while the subject confronts the viewer and exercises the power of voice, the viewer is forced to consider his or her relationship with the subject and the larger message of the work.

**Femininity and Beauty**

In addition, Thomas’s first-person statements enhance the performative quality of her work. The link between the title and subject is performative because the title verbalizes the role of the subject. To perform is to make a statement, and Thomas’s subjects make statements via text and physical performances. Thomas helps construct these performances by building mini domestic interiors that situate her subjects. Her tableaux provide a stage, a microcosm, in which femininity is performed. The fact that Thomas presents femininity as a performance suggests that she perceives femininity and identity as a mutable concept that individuals must undertake and exhibit in some way. In her essay, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution,” post-structuralist philosopher Judith Butler (b. 1956) presents gender as “an act which has been rehearsed.”66 She argues that gender “is real only to the extent that it is performed.”67 Thomas plays on the performative nature of gender and thereby undermines its so-called factuality. By dressing up her subjects and decorating interior settings, she surrenders to the idea that gender, and identity to a certain extent, is exhibited through the external surface. Her attention to external appearance suggests she shares Butler’s conviction that “the ascription of interiority is itself a publicly regulated and sanctioned form of essence fabrication.”68 In other words, to borrow from Butler’s argument, Thomas performs the exterior to expose the interior.

---

67 Ibid, 363.
68 Ibid, 364.
By emphasizing the interpretative nature of identity and femininity, Thomas also introduces beauty as a negotiable concept. Her subjects perform their personalized perceptions of beauty and femininity. Thomas explains that by exposing their individualized conception through performance, her subjects demonstrate the variability in beauty:

It can be about masking, but more than that it’s about people’s perceptions of beauty. We all have notions in our mind of how something is supposed to look. I’m interested in the gray area… When I spoke with the models they said that when they think of being women, they think of emulating their mothers. All of these women come with a multitude of layers of artifice, pretense, and perception that is entangled with beauty. It is a constructed beauty.  

For Thomas, the concept of beauty acts as a sign that has the potential of expanding and mutating just as other signs. She hopes to expand viewers’ notions of beauty by exhibiting its performative quality. Art historian Amelia Jones posits art’s meaning production as a performative gesture that activates the viewer. Jones believes in “opening ourselves to visual art works as fully embodied sensuous experiences rather than… fixing them in a matrix of predetermined values.” If viewers engage with the performance of the work, they can partake in “meaning as process, an ongoing change.” In keeping with Jones’s philosophy, Thomas invites her audiences to view her subjects as performed identities in which beauty is presented as a fragile construction.

**Rebuilding Iconicity**

Thomas shares Ellen Gallagher and Wangechi Mutu’s interest in cultural signs as indicators of identity. To borrow art historian Yve-Alain Bois’s description of Picasso’s

---

70 Amelia Jones, “Art History/Art Criticism: Performing Meaning,” in *Performing the Body, Performing the Text*, ed. Amelia Jones and Andrew Stephenson (Routledge, 1999), 46.
71 Ibid, 50.
collages, she explores “the *elasticity of iconicity,*”\(^{72}\) as a way of granting black women visibility and expanding Western notions of beauty. Her work builds on historical representations of femininity portrayed in Western paintings. When appropriating Manet’s work, Thomas perceives her strategy as “picking up the gauntlet thrown down by Manet [and] laying [her] own challenge at the feet of the same paintings.” She builds from his legacy by “bringing the black woman front and center, inhabiting the space of seduction, aggression and beauty that Manet’s subject originally shocked the Parisian crowds with.”\(^{73}\) With Manet’s work as a starting point, she contributes the discourse concerning portrayals of women and black women specifically. By entering her subjects into the social matrix that defines femininity, she disturbs the limitations inflicted by the matrix and expands traditional notions of beauty.

As revealed in several interviews, Thomas agrees that individuals can project a desired ideal or fantasy of themselves through self-presentation. She empowers her subjects through a transformative process that illustrates both her own vision and the subject’s character. While her work reveals information about the women photographed, it also embodies Thomas’s exploration of herself through the design and portrayals of external material. She confirms, “I am making my work as a personal journey and a ways of placing and navigating the world that I grew up in. I think it is imperative to note that this exploration is of my very particular experience and in an effort to represent and shape my own, very particular identity.”\(^{74}\) Although she is not physically visible in any of the works discussed, Thomas implies that the presence of the individual is not required for portraiture because the portrait portrays limited facets of the subject depicted. Recognizing these limitations, Thomas admits, “This is what I love about portraiture—the way it


\(^{73}\) Mickalene Thomas, e-mail message to author, February 8, 2013.

\(^{74}\) Matthew McLendon, “Interview with Mickalene Thomas,” 117.
will only ever capture one moment, one vantage of a person.”

She shares art historian Angela Stief’s argument that portraiture offers an inevitable masklike quality which artists should embrace rather than conceal. Thomas continues, “To me, this seems like the most honest way of representing anyone—we only really ever know parts of another person.” She embraces these ‘shortcomings’ by focusing on the surface quality of her work, as emphasized in the flatness and applied rhinestones. Thomas does not hide the fact that her collaged fragments are part of the simulacra—signs that signify complicated concepts. She confesses, “I’m not interested in presenting the image as a photograph because it would be too close to reality. I’m more interested in transforming the idea.”

The collage process—the act of splicing, layering, and flattening spatial perception—allows her to accentuate the deception of portraiture. She highlights their materiality as a way of exposing their roles as signs, and thus reveals our deep reliance on signs as indicators of identity.

For Thomas, collage presents an opportunity to cite the countless sources that construct an individual’s identity. In addition, her artistic method exposes the versatility of visual cues through a process of decontextualization and appropriation. When expressing her interest in collage she explains,

Our culture is becoming so amalgamated… Everyone’s taking something on, appropriating… whose language is whose? That’s how I see collage, it’s really wanting to play with these kinds of images and patterns and ask where did they come from and how were they incorporated and constructed?

She capitalizes on the flexibility of the sign and expands its social life in her collages. As Bois argues, “signs take on a life of their own, almost entirely disconnected from the identity of the object as

---

75 Mickalene Thomas, e-mail message to author, February 8, 2013.
77 Mickalene Thomas, e-mail message to author, February 8, 2013.
a referent… As a result of this disconnection, the signs “migrate” in all kinds of directions.”

These migrations depend on individuals, such as Thomas, Gallagher, and Mutu, who adopt the signs into their personal lexicons. As a result, these artists’ collages reinvigorate the past while reworking signs of the past; they enter the past into the discourse of their own time and thereby expand the semiotic weight of the signs that they recontextualize.

---

CONCLUSION

Ellen Gallagher, Wangechi Mutu, and Mickalene Thomas are among a large group of artists from the African diaspora who explore identity in the twenty-first century; many of these artists work to subvert conventional notions of blackness and Africanness. At the same time, they recognize and welcome the plurality of viewpoints inevitable in the age of our shifting global landscape. In our world of advanced technology, continuous immigration, and transnational relations, artists continuously explore identity as a negotiable concept and exploit its elasticity. Contemporary artists grappling with these concepts realize that the composition of identity depends on both self-presentation and erratic social reception. In other words, concrete meaning no longer takes precedence in the more recent decades, and artists, such as Gallagher, Mutu, and Thomas, use this to their advantage. As countless societies comprise global material culture, artists today are inspired by a myriad of influences. However for these three artists in particular, the media, in addition to material culture, provides a prominent source from which they draw their material.

Through collage, Gallagher, Mutu, and Thomas are able to construct images that problematize preexisting meaning but also develop new meaning throughout their process of appropriation and decontextualization. They avoid projecting static messages through their art and instead activate the viewer to consider the subjective perceptions that arise from their disparate juxtapositions and unconventional adaptations of preexisting imagery. Each artist activates cultural signs as alterable signifiers when appropriated in different ways. As a recurring component distinctly applied by each artist, the sign serves as a unifying theme tying their work together. This study has explored the semiotic implications inherent in each artist’s work as a way of assessing each unique collage process. Although scholars have analyzed their
work separately, no study has offered a comparative analysis of these three artists, and only these artists, that focuses on their ability to explore the semiotic weight of the sign. A formal analysis of their separate collage techniques illuminated their underlying semiotic principles.

Using pages of popular magazines as her canvas, Gallagher employs abstraction and repetition to deconstruct racial signs and expose their arbitrariness when decontextualized. A large portion of the first chapter reads Gallagher’s work through a lens of Ferdinand de Saussure’s semiological principles that are rearticulated in Yve-Alain Bois’s essay, “The Semiology of Cubism.” While not all of his principles prove applicable to Gallagher’s work, his theory about the arbitrariness of the sign resonates in her collages that destabilize blackface minstrel stereotypes. Gallagher creates new characters from the models of preexisting magazine advertisements as her base. The grid-like organization of these advertisements provide a foundation that she, at times, adheres to but also overtakes with her obsessive application of eyes and lips. As a formal device and an abstract social concept, the grid may limit artists or individuals attempting to survive in the social matrix; however, Gallagher exploits the grid to her advantage and uses it to subvert traditional black visibility and racial stereotypes. In addition, Gallagher enjoys exposing the vulnerability of her materials. She views her work as adding to the ongoing discourse concerning African visibility and stereotypes; thus, she embraces the aged look of the magazine pages and the malleability of plasticine because these impressions attest the past life of her incorporated materials.

Mutu’s materials also come from magazines and aged media sources; however, instead of isolating and repeating body parts to the point of obliterating their traditional meaning, she constructs female figures from disparate fragments in order to deconstruct binary oppositions that separate cultures. Chapter two focuses on the hybridized approach and forms that Mutu
employs as a way of destabilizing cultural stereotypes and filling the space between separated binaries. It also analyzes her collage technique that appropriates signs and reconstructs new significations. While Gallagher neutralizes cultural signs by abstracting them and entering them into sterile spaces like the grid, Mutu exploits the differences and disparate associations attached to her conglomerated signs. Difference and incongruity in Mutu’s figures allude to the complexity of identity and the layered history of cultural signs. Her hybridized figures consist of stereotypes associated with the polarized modern and so-called primitive worlds. She expands the signification of the sign by applying fragmented images in the place of body parts that the images do not typically represent. Small images of animals may become lips or a nose, motorcycle parts or other mechanical machinery may take the place of an arm or leg. These incongruous forms taken from a variety of media sources create abrupt shifts in scale, shape, and color that surprise the eye. As a result, Mutu’s figures exist between the dichotomies of human/inhuman, human/animal, and portrait/mask, among other divided concepts. Her work exudes a glossy smoothness yielded by the magazine scraps that Gallagher’s and Thomas’s work do not possess.

Thomas directs attention to the surface of her work as a way of envisioning the portrait as an artifice. She shares the idea that portraiture functions as a mask that selectively reveals information about the figure. In addition, Thomas recognizes contemporary society’s attachment to the artifice when constructing images or perceptions of themselves that they project to the world. She lures the viewer to the surface of her work by exploiting flatness, distorting the foreground-background relation, exposing blunt edges, and adorning the surface of her paintings with rhinestones. Chapter three focuses on these qualities of her style in order to exhibit her interest in the ‘madeness’ of images. Furthermore, this chapter also discusses Thomas’s
application of vibrant patterns, costumes, and props as indicators of identity. By appropriating Western canons and providing a venue for black female visibility, she illustrates a contemporary perception of empowered femininity.

While other female artists of the African diaspora examine black visibility in mass culture, Gallagher, Mutu, and Thomas specifically employ the collage medium as their site for exploration. If this study was expanded to include other artists, Lorna Simpson, Renee Cox, and Tracey Rose would be appropriate for their similar subject matters that investigate black visibility, racial stereotypes, and identity formation; however, while they predominantly work with photographic images, their stylistic techniques do not typically step into the realm of collage. Kara Walker’s work also shares many similarities with collages by Gallagher, Mutu, and Thomas, not only because she explores race, gender, sexuality, and violence, but also because she constructs much of her most renowned work with cut paper. However, unlike the three collage artists, Walker’s materials are not extracted from preexisting media sources. Like Gallagher and Mutu, she works through abjection in order to disturb and encourage the viewer to deeply investigate embedded racial tension. Both Gallagher’s and Walker’s images maintain a sense of anonymity among their figures as a way of portraying invisibility and essentialism. Walker also shares Thomas’s interest in role-playing, but she conveys this theme much differently, through the simplified mask of the black silhouette. While Walker shares many similarities with these three artists in separate ways, Gallagher, Mutu, and Thomas stand out as a collective group that destabilizes racial signs. Their strategy differs from Walker’s, who deliberately disturbs the viewer by reinvigorating stereotypes and presenting relationships of power. Also, aside from black paper and occasional light projections, Walker’s silhouette installations do not combine an array of material objects characteristic of collage.
Using the debris from visual culture, these three artists create images that confront and destruct cultural stereotypes and the signs that communicate these stereotypes. They sample sources from the media to cite the eclectic cultural influences that inform their work. Thomas, in particular, draws a similarity in her method with that of hip-hop artists. She claims:

I believe that my work and hip-hop have developed from similar artistic impulses and employ some of the same conceptual strategies. If you think back to the earliest days of hip-hop with is heavy use of sampling to quote and reshape what had musically come before in order to assert a new musical and cultural identity, that is almost exactly what I am doing with my work.\(^81\)

Although she only discusses her own work, Gallagher and Mutu share this affinity for appropriating historic representations. By appropriating preexisting signs and imagery, they continue the discussion of black body politics and black visibility. Furthermore, these artists share an interest in extracting elements from old narratives, and through appropriation, assemblage, and juxtaposition, they construct new narratives that alters the historic meaning of their found imagery. Gallagher, Mutu, and Thomas adopt a critical perception of the sign: like any object, its signification changes depending on the individual interpreting it and adopting it into his or her personal lexicon.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


Thomas, Mickalene. E-mail message to author. February 8, 2013.


Fig. 1

Ellen Gallagher; *Host* (detail); 1996; oil, pencil, paper on canvas; 69 1/8 x 49 7/8 inches
Fig. 2
Ellen Gallagher; *Soma* (detail); 1998; oil, pencil, paper, on canvas; 96 x 84 inches
Fig. 3
Ellen Gallagher; *Preserve (Karate)*; 2001; oil, pencil, plasticine, magazine page; 13 3/8 x 10 inches
Fig. 4
Example of black minstrel poster; not dated; poster
Fig. 5
Ellen Gallagher; *Preserve (Medalo)*; 2001; oil, pencil, and pomade on magazine page; 13 x 9 ¼ inches
Fig. 6
Ellen Gallagher; *Preserve (Yellow)*; 2001; oil, pencil, and paper on magazine page; 13 ¼ x 10 inches
Fig. 7
Ellen Gallagher; *DeLuxe* (detail); 2005; portfolio of 60 etchings with photogravure, spit-bite, collage, cutting, scratching, silkscreen, offset lithography and hand-building; 13 x 10 ½ inches
Fig. 8
Ellen Gallagher; *DeLuxe* series; 2005; portfolio of 60 etchings with photogravure, spit-bite, collage, cutting, scratching, silkscreen, offset lithography and hand-building; 84 ½ x 179 inches
Fig. 9
Wangechi Mutu; *The Patrician’s New Curse*; 2004; Ink, acrylic, collage and contact paper on Mylar; 72 ¾ x 46 ½ inches
Fig. 10
Wangechi Mutu; *Lockness*; 2006; mixed media, ink, collage on Mylar; 92 ¼ x 54 inches
Fig. 11
Wangechi Mutu; *Blue Eyes*; 2008; mixed media, ink, collage on Mylar; 45 ¼ x 73 ¼ inches
Fig. 12
Wangechi Mutu; *Le Noble Savage*; 2006; ink, collage on Mylar; 91 ¼ x 54 inches
Fig. 13
Wangechi Mutu; *Riding Death in My Sleep*; 2001; ink and collage on paper; 60 x 44 inches
Fig. 14
Wangechi Mutu; *Uterine Catarrh*; 2004; glitter, ink, collage on found medical illustration paper; 23 x 17 inches
Fig. 15
Untitled (Severed Heads of Namibian prisoners studied by German geneticists), date unknown
Fig. 16
Wangechi Mutu; *Intertwined*; 2003; collage and watercolor on paper; 16 x 12 inches
Fig. 17
Mickalene Thomas; *Tamika Sur Une Chaise Longue*; 2008; mounted c-print; 24 x 29 ½ inches
Fig. 18
Mickalene Thomas; *Tamika Sur Une Chaise Longue*; 2008; linoleum, photograph, color-aid on wood panel; 6 ½ x 8 ½ inches
Fig. 19
Mickalene Thomas; Tamika Sur Une Chaise Longue; 2008; rhinestones, acrylic, and enamel on wood panel; 84 x 96 inches
Fig. 20
Mickalene Thomas; *Interior: Zebra with Two Chairs and Funky Fur*; 2012; rhinestones, acrylic paint, and oil enamel on wood panel; 96 x 132 inches
Fig. 21
Mickalene Thomas; *You’re Gonna Give Me the Love I Need*; 2010; mixed media collage; 8 x 8 ½ inches
Fig. 22
Mickalene Thomas; *You’re Gonna Give Me the Love I Need*; 2010; rhinestones, acrylic, and enamel on wood panel; 96 x 144 inches