



JANUARY 2019

## HYBRID POWER

*Water Woman* | Wangechi Mutu



**VISIT THE BMA** and  
come see *Water Woman*  
on view in the European  
Art Gallery.

Wangechi Mutu (Kenyan-American, born 1972). *Water Woman*. 2017; this cast 2018. Bronze. 36h x 65l x 70w inches (91.4 x 165.1 x 177.8 centimeters). The Baltimore Museum of Art: Purchased with exchange funds from the Pearlstone Family Fund and partial gift of The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc.; and additional funds from Fanny B. Thalheimer Memorial Fund, Katherine M. Hardiman, Frederick R. Weisman Contemporary Acquisitions Endowment, The Rothschild Foundation, and Dr. Max Stern Trust Fund, BMA 2017.148. © Wangechi Mutu, Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels

Legends of beings who are half-woman, half-fish have deep historical roots and can be found in cultures from around the world. While versions of mermaids popularized since the 20th century were often portrayed as benign, beautiful creatures who share the interests and concerns of humans, many stories of sea-women across time warned of sirens who had the power to bewitch and drown sailors.

In this sculpture, Kenyan-American artist Wangechi Mutu evokes the *nguva* of East Africa, a feared sea-woman who lures men to watery graves. Rather than depicting the non-threatening mermaid of popular culture or a blatantly evil siren, the artist aims for something more complex. The water woman is clearly hybrid, with her lower body forming a powerful tail. Her elegantly coiffed hair suggests a fin and she looks at the viewer with a cool, confident expression. The dark, shiny patina of the sculpture evokes a glistening body just emerged from the water. This sea-woman defies simple categories. She is both strong and vulnerable, ethereal and formidably physical.

The artist has long had a fascination with women's bodies, creating sculptures, collages, and video works that reflect her exploration of hybrid female forms by playing with proportions and features. *Water Woman* is an excellent example of the way that Mutu challenges stereotypical ideas about women's beauty and bodies, particularly those of black women. The artist throws off balance assumptions about this *nguva* and poses the question of how the water woman's hybrid nature can act as both a shield and a symbol of defiance and power.

### CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

Look up information on tales of sea-women from around the world. What are some of the common features? What do the stories tell you about the fears and fantasies of the cultures from which they emerged? Look for depictions of the mermaids you've researched. What are the commonalities and differences between those and *Water Woman*? What new things do you notice about *Water Woman* when you look at her in relation to these other depictions?

Discuss how Wangechi Mutu has depicted the different features of *Water Woman*. What kinds of hybrid features can you imagine for yourself? Why would you want those features? What problems would they solve? What possible issues might they cause? Create a collage in which you add new features to your body. Write a brief accompanying paragraph about how you would imagine your life to be with these new features.

**PRINT THE IMAGE ON PAGE 2 FOR YOUR STUDENTS.**

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