Wangechi Mutu is best known for spectacular and provocative collages depicting hybrid female figures—part human, animal, plant, and machine—in fantastical landscapes that are both unnerving and alluring, defying easy categorization and identification. Through these hybrid beings from alternative universes, she began exploring traditional ideals of beauty and the ways in Black women are perceived and represented in Western art. The artist samples from sources diverse as African traditions, global politics, science fiction, pornography, the fashion industry, art history, to examine the exoticization of Black female bodies within representation and the ecological, economic, and political world.

Mutu has worked significantly with Mylar polyester film, manipulating ink and acrylic paint into swirls of color and carefully applying images sampled from different magazines to the surface. Her lavish collages challenge conventional aesthetics and ways of representing women, and her futuristic female forms upend the eroticism and patriarchal ideologies underpinning representation. Combining cut-out collaged forms and painterly techniques, she also uses materials imbued with cultural significance, such as tea, synthetic hair, soil, and feathers.

Though large works on mylar have been at the forefront of Mutu’s practice, she often returns to smaller works on paper, such as, the diptych You Can’t Fly. This small watercolor and mixed media collage is from a body of work that was part of the artist’s 2008 solo exhibition “Little Touched” at Susan Vielmetter gallery in Los Angeles which featured new drawings, collages, and sculptures. In the show, Mutu explored themes of play and whimsy, and states of contemplation and reverie.

Play abounds in You Can’t Fly. While Mutu employs words and language, she relishes undoing their meanings visually. Although the words mean one thing, her magical image evokes precisely the opposite; flight, movement, and fantasy.

Wangechi Mutu’s primary aesthetic strategy has been described as engaging in her own distinctive form of mythmaking, created by the interconnection of traditional mythological themes and archetypes into fiction. Her fantastical figures act as guides, messengers, keepers, or sentinels, proposing an existence that is joyously free of biological determinism, psychological conditioning, and hetero normativity. Using mythical and art historical references, Mutu’s fantastical fictions collapse divisions between human, animal, plant, and machine, and rationality, sensing, and perception to reveal suppressed narratives and uncover hidden possibilities.

-Natasha Becker, Curator of African Art  
de Young Museum