

Zanele Muholi

Somnyama Ngonyama

Opening: 28 April 2017, 6–9 pm

Exhibition: 29 April – 17 June 2017

Zanele Muholi sees her artistic practice as “visual activism”, thereby ascribing to her images explicit and causal power to effect change. She has become known worldwide with *Faces and Phases*, her portrait photography of South Africa’s LGBTI scene. *Faces and Phases* has been prominently featured in venues such as the last documenta (2012). WNTRP now shows Muholi’s current series *Somnyama Ngonyama* (Zulu for: hail the black lioness), in which she stages herself in multiple identities for the camera. After stops in the Stevenson Gallery in Cape Town and the Luma Foundation in Arles, these works can be seen for the first time in Germany.

A wealth of critical questions about social injustice and the representation of the “black body in the photographic archive as a whole” converge in every portrait from *Somnyama Ngonyama*, as critic Tymon Smith states. Among other things, Muholi devotes her attention to “blackfacing”, in which white actors in grotesque makeup performed African-American roles in 19th and 20th century minstrel theater productions in North America; its visual aftershocks are also found, for instance, in staged depictions of black physicality in colonial travel literature. Muholi portrays herself with coarsely darkened or extremely lightened skin, with whitened lips and eyeliner, beneath oversized wigs or with steel wool and clothespins in her hair. When Muholi appears in folkloric garb with a white headdress, she alludes on one hand to models from the Flemish portrait painting of Rogier van der Weyden, and on the other hand, relates with her complex motifs to the latest (visual) history of South Africa. In *Thulani II, Parktown* (2015) she portrays herself as one of the mineworkers from the Marikana Massacre of 2012 and thus gives a face to those who have been overlooked or ignored for the most part in international news reports. In a work such as *Bakhambile, Parktown* (2016), we see furs in the background of a shot in which Muholi postures with artificial long blond hair and the white minstrel show makeup. Here the centerpiece of the shoot, the black body, is both the trophy of a hunt via camera as well as a fetishistic object of exoticism on the part of the “other”.

Each photograph from *Somnyama Ngonyama* shows a self that is composed of



countless historical attempts to depict the black body as the “other”. Muholi expertly achieves a visual transcription of the problematic “self-portraiture” of the postcolonial subject. If historical images from the past consisted of intentionally exaggerated, stereotyping or degrading attempts to construct a form of being-different, then a new construction of the self must initially manifest itself as visual re-appropriation. Muholi’s great photographic skill is also her conceptual strength: each work in the series *Somnyama Ngonyama* is a mosaic of constructed identities and thus a clear formulation of the task Muholi has set herself: “Reclaiming my blackness, which I feel is continuously performed by the privileged other”.

Zanele Muholi (born 1972 in Umlazi, Durban) lives and works in Johannesburg, South Africa.

Muholi was responsible for the South African pavilion in the 55th Venice Biennale (2013) and took part in documenta 13, Kassel (2013) and the Sao Paolo Biennial (2010). Recently Muholi has been invited to present solo exhibitions at the North Carolina Museum of Art and the Brooklyn Museum in New York. She previously had numerous solo and group shows in institutions such as the Akershus Kunstsenter, Lillestrom; Schwules Museum, Berlin; Kunsthalle Wien project space, Vienna; Wits Art Museum and Goethe Institut, Johannesburg; Seoul Museum of Art, Seoul; Kunsthal Rotterdam, Rotterdam; Tate Liverpool, UK; Guggenheim, New York; Tate Modern, London; Deutsches Historisches Museum, Berlin; BOZAR, Brussels, and many others.

Muholi has been the recipient of honors including the Prince Claus Award and the Carnegie Fine Prize. Her works are represented in numerous museums and collections: Boston Museum of Fine Arts; Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris; Guggenheim, New York; Margulies Collection, Miami; Museum of Contemporary Photography, Chicago; Museum of Modern Art, New York; South African National Gallery, Cape Town; Tate Modern, London, and others.

