

Zanele Muholi

Selected FACES&PHASES and BEULAHS

Opening: 18 January 2014, 5-9 pm

Exhibition: 21 January – 28 February 2014

“We live in fear,” Muholi said. “And what are we doing about it? You have to document. You are forced to document.”

Art as a means to effect political and social change constantly raises the question as to what role the artist can play. Zanele Muholi is a South African photographer who sees herself as a “visual activist” and, since her participation in documenta 13, she has also been known as an advocate for the LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex) communities. A show of her works opens January 18th, 2014, at Wentrup.

Muholi’s solo exhibition in Berlin features selections from three groups of works: black-and-white portraits from her ongoing project Faces and Phases, a sequence of color photographs from the Beulah series, and a documentary video work.

A core motivation for Muholi’s works is to make visible and document the lives of black homosexual women in South Africa. In a society that spawns so-called “curative rapes” – planned rapes of homosexual women by heterosexual men, it is a highly explosive endeavor to be engaged on behalf of this community. Muholi is actively involved, especially through Inkanyiso, the collective she founded in 2006. She generates attention, but it does not come without a backlash: her apartment was broken into while she participated in documenta; a hard disk with images was stolen. This direct attack on Muholi’s Faces and Phases project aimed to thwart her attempt to continue to expand an archive that already includes more than 60 portraits.

The women portrayed in Faces and Phases, typically in torso or half-length portraits, look directly and self-confidently into the camera. The title Phases relates to a personal, liminal, transitional stage of life. But we can also comprehend Phases in terms of society – since it is particularly the transition and emergence phases of the South African Rainbow Nation (a term coined by Archbishop Desmond Tutu) that have been shaping the coexistence of the different social groups. The groupings have to do not only with skin color, but also with gender. And so Muholi’s photographs function as referential pieces of evidence, because Faces and Phases proclaims, empowers and witnesses: “we are here”. A selection of these important pictures, which were awarded the Prince Claus Prize for Photography in 2013, can be seen on the gallery’s central wall.

The second group of works, Beulahs is comprised of color photographs whose objectives are more than documentary. Building on the basis of Muholi’s engagement as a “visual activist”, these staged photographs show her to be a versatile artist as well, one who skillfully juggles visual narratives and iconographies of clothing. Young men stand in front of rough concrete walls and look shyly, smilingly,

but also mistrustfully at the camera. One kneels on the grayish-black ground of ash and charcoal. Colorful clothing and jewelry accessories gleam in contrast to the earthier hues in the foreground and background. At second glance, the subjects appear perhaps too naïve for the scorched ground on which they stand. The South African art historian Tamar Garb describes this series as an intentional cross-fade, visually superimposing the bodies of young men with eroticizing accessories derived from pop culture, beaded skirts and colorful plastic combs in their hair. Last but not least, the Beulahs series is also a clever new take on colonial portraiture – Muholi employs photography's well-known strategies of draping, staging and sexualizing bodies. While the individuals portrayed in Faces and Phases look at us in order to affirm their existence, the Beulahs respond to being looked at in portraiture by – so it seems – hurling that gaze back at us.

Zanele Muholi contributes to social change as a “visual activist” and is equally versatile as an artist in the medium of photography. The conjunction creates an extremely exciting nexus of staged portraits and portrait-like settings, as the Wentrup exhibition demonstrates.

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Recently

Zanele Muholi has won the Fine Prize for an emerging artist at the 2013 Carnegie International, Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Muholi was also honored with a prestigious Prince Claus Award in Amsterdam last year. Muholi was recently made Honorary Professor of the University of the Arts/Hochschule für Künste Bremen. She won the Index on Censorship - Freedom of Expression art award in London and the Mbokodo Award for Creative Photography in 2013. Her Faces and Phases series was included on the South African Pavilion at the 55th Venice Biennale, titled Imaginary Fact: South African art and the archive (1 June - 24 November). Group exhibitions include Distance and Desire: Encounters with the African Archive at the Walther Collection in Ulm, Germany (8 June through to 2015); SubRosa: The Language of Resistance at the University of South Florida Contemporary Art Museum in Tampa, Florida (26 August - 7 December); Glyphs: Photography, Video and the Politics of Inscription at Pitzer College Art Galleries, California (19 September - 5 December); and the 2013 Carnegie International survey of contemporary art (5 October - 16 March).

Biography

Zanele Muholi was born in Umlazi, Durban, in 1972, and lives in Johannesburg. She studied photography at the Market Photo Workshop in Newtown, Johannesburg. She was a founder of the Forum for the Empowerment of Women (FEW), a black lesbian organisation based in Gauteng. She was the recipient of the 2005 Tollman Award for the Visual Arts, the first BHP Billiton/Wits University Visual Arts Fellowship in 2006, and was the 2009 Ida Ely Rubin Artist-in-Residence at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). In 2009 she received a Fanny Ann Eddy accolade from IRN-Africa for her outstanding contributions to the study of sexuality in Africa. She also won the Casa Africa award for best female photographer and a Fondation Blachère award at Les Rencontres de Bamako biennial of African photography in 2009. In 2010 her Faces and Phases series was included on the 29th São Paulo Biennale; the series was published by Prestel and nominated as best photobook of 2010 at the International Photobook Festival in Kassel. In 2012 the series was shown on Documenta 13. Muholi also exhibited at the Rencontres d'Arles festival in France in 2012, as a nominee for the Discovery Award, and was granted a fellowship at Civitella Ranieri in Italy.