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**Zanele Muholi at Tate Modern (5 November 2020 – 31 May 2021)**

Collaboration and collectivity are the resounding themes of South African photographer Zanele Muholi’s first major UK survey exhibition at Tate Modern. Muholi’s photography documents and makes visible their own Black LGBTQIA+ community in South Africa and beyond, challenging their lack of representation within mainstream visual culture. Muholi’s photographs are created through a collaborative process that seeks to empower both participants and audiences. Since their solo exhibition *Visual Sexuality: Only Half the Picture*, displayed at the Johannesburg Art Gallery in 2004, Muholi has used the term “visual activism” to describe their practice. In an interview with the *Guardian* on occasion of her first solo exhibition in London, *Somnyama Ngonyama* (2017) at Autograph, Muholi commented, ‘If you don’t see your community, you have to create it. I can’t be dependent on other people to do it for us’.

Born in 1972, Muholi’s early life was spent under South Africa’s apartheid regime, which upheld injustice and discrimination based on gender and sexuality. These prejudices and violence continue today despite the post-apartheid government’s outlawing of discrimination based on sexual orientation in 1996. The final room of the exhibition chronicles these histories and the emergence of queer activism in South Africa, situating Muholi’s practice within this timeline. However, opening the exhibition is Muholi’s first black and white photographic series, *Only Half the Picture* (2002–06), which documents survivors of hate crimes living across South Africa and its townships. In *Aftermath* (2004), Muholi conceals the identity of the participant, shooting them from the waist down. They capture the long scar running down the subject’s thigh, the result of an injury prior to the hate crime. Alternatively, the photograph, *ID Crisis* (2003), depicts a participant binding their breasts. Both photographs convey an intimate space and moment which Muholi has been allowed to enter and capture, suggesting the long and sustained relationship and collaboration between themself and the participants. The second half of the first room shows Muholi’s series *Being* (2006–ongoing), which conveys moments of intimacy between couples, as well as their daily life and routines. Shot in Paris, in *ZaVa I* and *ZaVa* III (2013), Muholi turns the camera on themself and a lover in their vulnerable states of undress and caress. For the photographs, Muholi smeared Vaseline on the camera lens, creating a cinematic feel, but one without an exact source, emphasizing the way their work writes and re-writes the stories of the Black LGBTQIA+ community.

The photographs from *Only Half the Picture* and *Being* are shown alongside a video, *Enraged by a Picture* (2005), and a glass vitrine which captures the negative response of viewers to an exhibition of Muholi’s work. One of the comment sheets states: ‘It is truly unacceptable for you to undermine our races especially black portraying nudity and sexual explicit content images [sic]’. The video includes an interview with John Fleetwood, then Director of Market Photo Workshop, who describes the shock of Muholi’s classmates upon seeing their work. Muholi completed an Advanced Photography Course at Johannesburg-based Market Photo Workshop in 2003. The organisation was established in 1989 by South African photographer David Goldblatt (1930–2018). Goldblatt’s own work chronicled the daily injustices of apartheid, and Muholi’s practice can be conceived within this legacy of visual activism in South Africa.

The individuating imperatives of Muholi’s portraits stand in contrast to the generalizing claims of taxonomies and types, to which much photography of black South Africans was harnessed in the colonial and apartheid-era. Photographing Black LGBTQIA+ participants in public spaces is an important part of Muholi’s visual activism, and one of the works that comprises this group of images plays with the ethnographic archive. In *Miss D’vine I, Yeoville, Johannesburg, 2007* – the title of which endows the image with a documentary power, a practice seen in the work of Goldblatt – Muholi captures the drag queen, Miss D’vine, wearing a skirt made from colourful Zulu beadwork and stacked neck rings, which were often used as props in ethnographic photography to represent Africa and Africans, repeating “native” stereotypes, and a pair of blood-red stilettos. In comparison to the natural landscapes of ethnographic photography, Miss D’vine poses gracefully against the dry, crumbling outskirts of a city with litter strewn around her feet. By combining the pictorial legacy of ethnography with contemporary figurations of femininity, the photograph examines the way gender-queer identities and bodies are shaped by, but also challenge through their very existence, dominant notions of what it means to be black and feminine. The following room of the exhibition includes another series of portraits of transwomen, gender non-conforming and non-binary people, many of whom are beauty pageant contestants. The participants photographed in this black and white series are pictured in the style of fashion magazine covers, again evoking pre-existing conceptions of femininity and the performance of gender.

The next two rooms emphasise the collectivity that lies at the heart of Muholi’s visual activism. One of the rooms includes images taken by Muholi’s large network of collaborators who are members of their collective, Inkanyiso, which means ‘light’ in isiZulu, Muholi’s first language in which they often title their work. These images document public events such as Pride marches and protests, or private events such as marriages and funerals, creating an ever-expanding visual archive of the Black LGBTQIA+ community. The following room continues the same theme of living archives through Muholi’s ongoing series of portraits, *Faces and Phases*, which they started in 2006. The series includes over 500+ portraits, and Muholi often returns to photograph the same person at different times in their lives. In the exhibition, these images are presented in a grid spanning several walls, and the gaze of the participants confronts viewers and compels them to witness the people pictured. There are a handful of gaps in the grid used to indicate individuals that are no longer present in the project or a portrait yet to be taken. One wall is dedicated to the participants who have passed away.

The penultimate room of the exhibition presents *Somnyama Ngonyama* (2006–ongoing), which translates from isiZulu to ‘Hail the Dark Lioness’. In the series, Muholi turns the camera on themself to explore the politics of race and representation. They often enhance the contrast of the photographs, playing with the darkness of their own skin tone. The series tracks Muholi’s travels around the world. In *Kwanele, Parktown* (2016), Muholi is depicted emerging from the plastic wrap used to secure their luggage, exploring the racial profiling and continuous security endured by Black people crossing borders. In another photograph, *Bester VII, Newington, London* (2017), Muholi is wrapped in a piece of pleated fabric by the fashion designer Issey Miyake. This garment belongs to Autograph curator Renée Mussai, who organised the artist’s first solo exhibition in London and commissioned four new self-portraits for the series. In the catalogue for the Tate exhibition, Mussai writes: ‘See you in 2020, perhaps in our library-cum-lounge-cum-studio, inhabiting my pleated garments once more to create new insurgent (self)imagining worlds’.

The collaboration and collectivity inherent to Muholi’s practice bring into focus the shortcomings of Tate as an institution. Muholi’s exhibition coincides with that of British painter Lynette Yiadom-Boakye at Tate Britain, marking the first female black British artist to have a major show at the museum. In addition to Autograph, Muholi previously exhibited in London at the Victoria & Albert Museum’s *Figures & Fictions: Contemporary South African Photography* in 2011. Alternatively, Yiadom-Boakye has been active in the London art scene since the early 2000s, but she has largely received institutional support from abroad. While these two exhibitions at Tate should be celebrated, they also bring up questions around performative decolonisation. There is disjuncture between the curators, galleries and institutions who support these artists, and the ones that crown them, and Tate is most often the latter.