

# ZANELE MUHOLI

ZANELE MUHOLI  
SOMNYAMA NGONYAMA

curated by

Francesca de' Medici

Opening:

27.09.2023

28.09 - 20.12.2023

Via G. Ventura 6 -  
Via Massimiano  
20134, Milano

The exhibition *Zanele Muholi  
Somnyama Ngonyama* will be  
accessible from Monday to Friday from  
11 AM to 1 PM and from 2 PM to 7 PM  
at Via G. Ventura 6 - Via Massimiano,  
Milan.

For further information, please contact  
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*Prometeo Gallery Ida Pisani* is pleased to present **Zanele Muholi  
Somnyama Ngonyama**, a thematic solo presentation of self-  
portraits of South African activist **Zanele Muholi** (Umlazi, Durban,  
1972), with an introductory text by **Francesca de' Medici**.

Once again in their beloved Milan, and showing for the first time at  
Ida Pisani's Prometeo Gallery, Zanele Muholi offers us a selection of  
eloquent images from their ongoing and critically-acclaimed series  
*Somnyama Ngonyama (Hail, the Dark Lioness)*.

In these self-portraits, made before and after the COVID-19  
pandemic, Sir Muholi avail themselves of heterogeneous objects and  
innumerable cultural references to explore personal and intimate  
narratives and address issues concerning Black queer visibility,  
identity and sexual desire.

Inventive, evocative and hypnotic, Sir Muholi's work defies  
traditional forms of meaning-making and creates its own  
explorative language. These vibrant black-and-white self-portraits  
embody a history of recurring thematic and formal concerns;  
from an exploration of identity, power and social justice to the  
interconnectedness between ourselves, others and the world. A  
never-before-seen video completes and enriches this extraordinary  
event.

Zanele Muholi's quietly subversive approach to the themes of  
sexual identity and gender politics are vital to the evolution  
of mentality and weigh considerably in the crucial role that  
women play within it. By offering us their innumerable facets  
and portraits, Muholi leads us to the unseen, the marginalised  
and the misrepresented. Powerfully embodying the spirit of  
Ubuntu, and opening a space for Black and LGBTQIA+ people,  
Muholi encourages us to explore the most profound meaning  
of compassion, embrace our shared humanity and take real and  
effective action. With their impactful and unique visual language,  
they offer urgent reflection on high-profile themes such as the  
contemporary depiction of queer bodies and the established  
notions of 'male' and 'female' as socially constructed terms within  
the struggle for gender equality and rights.

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Zanele Muholi (Umlazi, Durban, 1972) is a visual activist,  
humanitarian and artist whose practice focuses on the

documentation and celebration of the lives of South Africa's Black lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex communities.

Born in Umlazi, Durban, Muholi currently lives and works between Durban and Cape Town. They studied Advanced Photography at the Market Photo Workshop in Newtown, Johannesburg, and in 2009 completed an MFA in Documentary Media at Ryerson University, Toronto. They received an Honorary Doctorate from the University of Liège on 19 September 2023, after having become an Honorary Professor at the University of the Arts/Hochschule für Künste Bremen in 2013.

Beginning in 2006, Muholi responded to the continuing discrimination and violence faced by the LGBTQIA+ community by photographing Black lesbian and transgender individuals, resulting in the ongoing portrait project, *Faces and Phases*. Their self-proclaimed mission is "to re-write a Black queer and trans visual history of South Africa for the world to know of our resistance and existence at the height of hate crimes in South Africa and beyond". These arresting portraits are part of Muholi's contribution towards a more democratic and representative South African cultural history. Through this powerful celebratory imagery, Muholi hopes to offset the stigma and negativity attached to queer identity in African society.

The series *Somnyama Ngonyama (Hail, the Dark Lioness)* shifts the lens with Muholi becoming both participant and image-maker. Experimenting with different characters and archetypes, this ongoing series of self-portraits references specific events in South Africa's political history.

By exaggerating the darkness of their skin tone, Muholi reclaims their Blackness, and offsets the culturally dominant images of Black women in the media today. Muholi is invested in educational activism, community outreach and youth development. In 2009 they founded Inkanyiso ([www.inkanyiso.org](http://www.inkanyiso.org)), a forum for queer and visual (activist) media and in 2002 co-founded the Forum for Empowerment of Women (FEW). They facilitate access to art spaces for youth practitioners through projects such as Ikhono LaseNatali and continue to provide photography workshops for young women and in the townships through PhotoXP.

Awards and accolades received include the Hall of Fame at Toronto Metropolitan University; International Center of Photography's Spotlights (2022); Spectrum International Prize for Photography (2020); Lucie Award for Humanitarian Photography (2019); the Rees Visionary Award by Amref Health Africa (2019); a fellowship from the Royal Photographic Society, UK (2018); France's Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres (2017); Mbokodo Award in the category of Visual Arts (2017); ICP Infinity Award for Documentary and Photojournalism (2016); Africa'Sout! Courage and Creativity Award (2016); Outstanding International Alumni Award from Ryerson University (2016); Fine Prize for an emerging artist at the 2013 Carnegie International; Prince Claus Award (2013); Index on Censorship - Freedom of Expression art award (2013); and the Casa Africa Award for Best Female Photographer, and Fondation Blachère Award at Les Rencontres de Bamako Biennial of African Photography (2009).

A survey exhibition of Muholi's work took place at the Tate Modern, London, UK (2020-21) and other solo presentations have taken place at institutions including Maison Européenne de la Photographie, Paris (2023); Museo delle Culture (MUDEC) Photo, Milan (2023); National Gallery of Iceland (2022); Kunstforeningen GI Strand, Denmark (2022); Institut Valencià d'Art Modern, Spain (2022); Fotografihuset, Norway (2022); the Finnish Museum of Photography (2022); the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston, USA (2022); Bildmuseet, Umeå, Sweden (2021); Gropius Bau, Berlin, Germany (2021); Sprengel Museum, Hannover, Germany (2021); Cummer Museum, Florida, USA (2021); Norval Foundation, Cape Town, South Africa (2020); Ethelbert Cooper Gallery of African and African American Art at Harvard University, USA (2020); Seattle Art Museum, USA (2019); Colby Museum, Maine, USA (2019);

Spelman College Museum of Fine Art, Georgia, USA (2018); New Art Exchange, Nottingham, UK (2018); Museo de Arte Moderno de Buenos Aires, Argentina (2018); LUMA Westbau, Zurich, Switzerland (2018); Fotografiska, Stockholm, Sweden (2018); Durban Art Gallery: a survey exhibition conceptualised as a homecoming, Kwazulu Natal, South Africa (2017); Market Photo Workshop, Johannesburg, South Africa (2017); Glasgow School of Art, Scotland (2017); Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, the Netherlands (2017); Autograph ABP, London, UK (2017); Maitland Institute, Cape Town, South Africa (2017); North Carolina Museum of Art, USA (2016); Standard Bank Gallery, Makhanda, South Africa (2016); Gallatin Galleries, New York, USA (2016); Open Eye Gallery, Liverpool, UK (2015); Brooklyn Museum, New York, USA (2015); Akershus Kunstsenter, Norway (2015); Einsteinhaus, Ulm, Germany (2014); Schwules Museum, Berlin, Germany (2014); Williams College Museum of Art, Williamstown, USA (2014); and Casa Africa, Las Palmas, Spain (2011). *The Faces and Phases* series has been shown at the South African Pavilion at the 55th Venice Biennale (2013); dOCUMENTA 13 (2012), and the 29th São Paulo Biennial (2010).

Muholi has exhibited extensively in group shows across the globe, including at the 22nd Sydney Biennale; Fotografiska, New York, US; Guggenheim, New York, US; Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, Canada; Museum of Contemporary Photography, Chicago, US; National Gallery of Victoria Triennial, Melbourne, Australia; Guggenheim Bilbao, Spain; LUMA, Arles, France; S.M.A.K Ghent, Belgium; Fondation Louis Vuitton, Paris, France; Kulturhistorisk Museum, Oslo, Norway; The Walther Collection, Ulm, Germany; and Museo Amparo, Mexico, among others.

Muholi won the 2019 Best Photography Book Award by the Kraszna-Krausz Foundation for *Somnyama Ngonyama (Hail, the Dark Lioness)* (Aperture), and was shortlisted for the 2015 Deutsche Börse Photography Prize for the publication *Faces and Phases 2006-14* (Steidl/The Walther Collection). Other publications include *Zanele Muholi: African Women Photographers #1* (Casa Africa and La Fábrica, 2011); *Faces and Phases* (Prestel, 2010); and *Only half the picture* (Stevenson, 2006).