



Fotografiska

In collaboration with



Press release 1/3

Zanele Muholi

Somnyama Ngonyama, Hail the Dark Lioness

9 February–1 April

In the exhibition presented in partnership with Fotografiska and Autograph ABP and curated by Renée Mussai, South African visual activist Zanele Muholi (b. 1972) confronts the politics of race and representation in the visual archive in her ongoing self-portrait series Somnyama Ngonyama.

Taken primarily in Europe, North America and Africa between 2014 and 2016, each portrait in *Somnyama Ngonyama – isiZulu for Hail, the Dark Lioness* – poses critical questions about social justice, human rights and contested representations of the black body. Muholi's self-reflective and psychologically charged portraits are unapologetic in their artistry as she explores different archetypes / personae and offers visual reflections inspired by personal experiences and socio-political events.

In *Somnyama Ngonyama*, ready-made objects and found materials are transformed into culturally loaded props, merging the political with the aesthetic – often commenting on specific events in South Africa's recent history. Scouring pads and latex gloves address themes of domestic servitude, while simultaneously alluding to sexual politics, violence and the suffocating prisms of gendered identity. Rubber tires, electrical cords or cable ties reference forms of social brutality and capitalist exploitation, and powerfully evoke the plight of workers – maids, miners and members of the disenfranchised communities. Using different artefacts – from chopsticks, can lids and safety pins to plastic bags or polythene wrapping – Muholi draws attention to urgent environmental issues and toxic waste. Accessories such as cowrie shells or beads highlight Western fascinations with clichéd, exoticised representations of African cultures and people as well as the global economies of migration, commerce and labour.

The portraits in *Somnyama Ngonyama* skillfully employ the conventions of classical portraiture, fashion photography and the familiar tropes of ethnographic imagery to rearticulate contemporary identity politics. By increasing the contrast in post-production, the dark complexion of Muholi's skin becomes the focal point of a multilayered interrogation into complex notions of beauty, desire and the dangerous terrains, racisms, and interlinked 'phobias' navigated daily.

For images, please contact
Fotografiska's Head of Communications
Margita Ingwall +46 (0)70 456 14 61
margita.ingwall@fotografiska.se

Muholi responds to these constraining narratives of history, ideologies and contemporary realities with a sinister, often tragi-comical humour, embarking, in her own words, on “a discomfoting self-defining journey, rethinking the culture of self-representation and self-expression”.

Thus, *Somnyama Ngonyama* represents Muholi’s personal visual memoir – an Archive of The Self – a growing compendium of photographic portraits emerging in constant dialogue with her surroundings, at once affirmation and reclamation, and testament to a myriad of tribulations brought forth by displacement and subjugation. Gazing defiantly at the camera, Muholi continually challenges the viewers’ perceptions while firmly asserting [her] cultural identity on her own terms.

“I’m reclaiming my blackness, which I feel is continuously performed by the privileged ‘other’. My reality is that I do not mimic being black; it is my skin, and the experience of being black is deeply entrenched in me. Just like our ancestors, we live as black people 365 days a year, and we should speak without fear.”

ZANELE MUHOLI

“*Somnyama Ngonyama* presents a compelling and visionary mosaic of identities, an exquisite empire of selves. Inviting us into a multi-layered conversation, each photograph in the series, each visual inscription, each confrontational narrative depicts a self in profound dialogue with countless others: implicitly gendered, culturally complex and historically grounded black bodies.”

RENÉE MUSSAI · Curator

“This exhibition demonstrates once again the incredible power photography as an art form possesses to problematize and to drive change. Zanele Muholi’s work is not only urgent and pressing; it leaves no one untouched. She is working for a future that is already delayed, with an unyielding strength and power. With her very important activist art, she asks straightforward questions that create and require new answers.”

JOHAN VIKNER · Exhibition Manager Fotografiska

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ABOUT ZANELE MUHOLI

Zanele Muholi was born in 1972 in Umlazi, Durban, and lives in Johannesburg, South Africa.

Muholi sees her practice as visual activism to effect social change. Over the past decade, she has become known globally with *Faces and Phases*, her pioneering portrait photography of South Africa's LBTQI communities. She co-founded the Forum of Empowerment of Women (FEW) in 2002, and founded Inkanyiso (www.inkanyiso.org), in 2009 a forum for queer visual activist media.

Muholi studied Advanced Photography at the Market Photo Workshop in Newtown, Johannesburg, and holds an MFA in Documentary Media from Ryerson University, Toronto. She is an Honorary Professor at the University of the Arts Bremen, and has been the recipient of the prestigious Prince Claus Award and the Carnegie Fine Prize.

She was included in the South African pavilion at the 55th Venice Biennale (2013) and took part in the São Paulo Biennial (2010) and documenta 13, Kassel (2013). Recent solo exhibitions include the Brooklyn Museum, New York (2015); Rencontres D'Arles (2016); and Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (2017). Her photographs are represented in the collections of Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris; Guggenheim, New York; Museum of Contemporary Photography, Chicago; South African National Gallery, Cape Town; Walther Collection New York/Neu-Ulm; Tate Modern, London; and others. Muholi is represented by Stevenson Cape Town/Johannesburg and Yancey Richardson, New York. •

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All press pictures are just allowed to be used
 for press during the period of the exhibition.

FOOTNOTE

Autograph ABP is a charity that works internationally in photography and film, cultural identity, race, representation and human rights. www.autograph-abp.co.uk.



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