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Zanele Muholi: Somnyama Ngonyama, *Hail the Dark Lioness*

Center for Visual Art, Metropolitan State University of Denver
January 8 – March 20, 2021

Curated by Renée Mussai

CVA is proud to present *Zanele Muholi: Somnyama Ngonyama, Hail the Dark Lioness*, an internationally touring exhibition organized by Autograph, London and curated by Renée Mussai.

DENVER, COLORADO – In more than 80 self-portraits, celebrated visual activist Zanele Muholi (South Africa, b. 1972) uses their body as a canvas to confront the deeply personal politics of race and representation in the visual archive. Their ongoing series *Somnyama Ngonyama*, which translates as 'Hail The Dark Lioness' in isiZulu, one of the official languages of South Africa, playfully employs the conventions of classical painting, fashion photography, and the familiar tropes of ethnographic imagery to rearticulate contemporary identity politics. Each black and white self-portrait asks critical questions about social (in)justice, human rights, and contested representations of the Black body.

Muholi states, *"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."*

Throughout the series, the dark complexion of Muholi's skin (intensified through enhanced contrast applied in post-production), becomes the focal point of a profound, multilayered interrogation of beauty, pride, desire, self-care, well-being, and the many interlinked phobias and isms navigated daily such as homophobia, transphobia, xenophobia, racism, and sexism, to name but a few.

The exhibition features photographs taken between 2012 - 2019 in cities across Europe, North America, Asia, and Africa. Muholi's socially-engaged, radical brand of self-portraiture transforms found objects and quotidian materials into dramatic and historically loaded

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props, merging the political with the personal, aesthetics with history - often commenting on specific events in South Africa's past, as well as urgent global concerns pertinent to our present times: scouring pads and latex gloves address themes of domestic servitude while alluding to sexual politics, cultural violence, and the often-suffocating prisms of gendered identities. Rubber tires, cable ties, or electrical cords invoke forms of social brutality and exploitation; sheets of plastic and polythene draw attention to environmental issues and global waste, while accessories like cowrie shells and beaded fly whisks highlight Western fascinations with clichéd, exoticized representations of African cultures and people.

Gazing defiantly at the camera, Muholi challenges viewers' perceptions while firmly asserting their cultural and sexual identity on their own terms.

Renée Mussai, exhibition curator and Autograph's Senior Curator and head of Curatorial & Collections, explains that *Somnyama Ngonyama* presents *"a compelling and visionary mosaic of identities, an exquisite empire of selves. Inviting us into a multilayered, visceral conversation, each photograph in the series, each visual inscription, each confrontational narrative depicts a self in profound dialogue with countless others: implicitly gendered, non-conforming, culturally complex and historically grounded Black bodies. It's a great privilege and honour to be working with the Cooper Gallery again, after numerous curatorial collaborations over the years, to present the work of one of Africa's most celebrated and courageous contemporary artists – especially poignant considering the current socio-cultural climate globally."*

ABOUT ZANELE MUHOLI

Zanele Muholi is a visual activist and photographer based in Johannesburg. Muholi's 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."

They (Muholi's preferred pronoun) co-founded the Forum for Empowerment of Women (FEW) in 2002 (www.inkanyiso.org), and in 2009 founded Inkanyiso (www.inkanyiso.org), a forum for queer and visual (activist) media. They continue to train and co-facilitate photography workshops for young women in South African townships and engage in a variety of community support programs.

Muholi studied Advanced Photography at the Market Photo Workshop in Newtown, Johannesburg, and in 2009 completed an MFA: Documentary Media at Ryerson University, Toronto. In 2013 they became an Honorary Professor at the University of the Arts/Hochschule für Künste Bremen.

Awards and accolades received include the Humanitarian Award from for the Lucie Foundation (2019); 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); the Mbokodo Award in the category of Visual Arts (2017); ICP Infinity Award for Documentary and Photojournalism (2016); Africa'Sout! Courage and Creativity Award (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 Casa Africa award for best female photographer and Fondation Blachère award at Les Rencontres de Bamako biennial of African photography (2009).

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).

Somnyama Ngonyama was exhibited in *May You Live in Interesting Times,* the 58th Venice Biennale (2019); and in 2017, they produced a city-wide project titled *Masihambisane – on Visual Activism* for *Performa 17*, New York, and their work featured in the inaugural exhibitions at the Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa, Cape Town. Recent solo exhibitions including Seattle Art Museum (2019); Spelman College Museum of Fine Art, Georgia (2018); Museo de Arte Moderno de Buenos Aires (2018); LUMA Westbau (2018), and Market Photo Workshop, Johannesburg (2017) Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (2017); Autograph, London (2017); and the Brooklyn Museum, New York (2015). Their work was also showcased at the South African Pavilion at the 55th Venice Biennale (2013); dOCUMENTA 13 (2012), and the 29th São Paulo Biennial (2010).

Their photographs are represented in major collections globally, including Centre Georges Pompidou (Paris), the Guggenheim (New York), Museum of Contemporary Photography (Chicago), Tate Modern (London), South African National Gallery (Cape Town), and others.

They are represented by Yancey Richardson, New York, and Stevenson, Cape Town/Johannesburg.

ABOUT CVA

Center for Visual Art is the off-campus contemporary art center for Metropolitan State University of Denver. CVA provides a year-round schedule of bold, contemporary exhibitions of both local significance and international reach, educational programming open to the community and immersive workforce development for students in creative fields. CVA's mission is to provide access to diverse, high-quality art experiences that advance the global urban dialogue. CVA is free and open to all.

ABOUT AUTOGRAPH

Autograph is an arts charity based in London, UK, that advocates internationally for the work of artists who use photography and film to highlight issues of identity, representation, human rights and social justice. https://autograph.org.uk

Images available upon request.

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