

Zanele Muholi
Sawubona
April 17 – May 23, 2025



Yancey Richardson is proud to present *Sawubona*, an exhibition bringing together work from five different series made between 2002–2013 by South African artist and visual activist Zanele Muholi. Their fifth exhibition with the gallery, *Sawubona* reveals both the historical depth and visual complexity of Muholi's overarching project of empowering the Black LGBTQIA+ community in South Africa through a collaborative process of representation. *Sawubona* will also be the first gallery exhibition outside of Africa to feature their early work. The exhibition will be on view from April 17 through May 23, 2025. An opening reception will be held on Thursday, April 17 from 6–8PM.

For more than twenty years Muholi has studied the multifarious and ever-evolving nature of Black, queer life in South Africa, specifically through a group of projects centered around forms of portraiture both intimate and disarming, personally descriptive and socially incisive. Though widely-known and celebrated for their ongoing series of self-portraiture titled *Somnyama Ngonyama* (“*Hail, the Dark Lioness*”), which they began in 2012, Muholi had by that point either completed

or begun several other bodies of work that addressed the discrete circumstances and challenges—including for basic civil rights and for visibility and recognition free from stereotypes—being faced by different members of the queer community in South Africa. These early projects, including *Only Half the Picture* (2002–2006), *Being* (2006), *Beulahs* (2006), *Faces and Phases* (2006–ongoing) and *Miss Lesbian* (2009), each seek to empower Muholi's participants and by extension the queer community at large, with images defined by affirmation, dignity and joy rather than struggle, tragedy or trauma.

Muholi's first project, *Only Half the Picture*, grew out of their work with the Forum for the Empowerment of Women, which works with survivors of hate crimes living across South Africa and its townships and which Muholi co-founded in 2002. Rather than emphasize the visceral details that would attest to the suffering endured by each participant (a term Muholi uses in place of “subject”), these photographs instead show fragments of bodies at rest or in repose and faces that are contemplative rather than vindictive. Muholi often isolates body parts and garments as well, creating pictures that complicate whatever normative assumptions about gender and identity we may hold.

The challenge to stereotypical and queerphobic representations was further developed by Muholi with their series' *Being* and *Beulahs*. For the former, Muholi made portraits of queer couples in settings and circumstances at times intimate and domestic, in others casual and public. Each photograph demonstrates the bond of love between two people regardless of personal difference or public challenge. If the *Being* photographs were largely situated in private spaces, those Muholi made for the series *Beulahs* were just as often situated outdoors and in public spaces. In South Africa the term

“beulah” refers to a gay man that the queer community deems beautiful. The “beulahs” that Muholi photographed demonstrate how malleable masculinity can be—their self-presentation is their own as opposed to being socially prescribed.

In their *Miss Lesbian* series Muholi used the conventions of pageantry as the aesthetic and conceptual framework to critique social definitions of beauty and success. These self-portraits take the staging and presentation used by beauty pageants as a pretext for exploring how they have historically expressed gender as a social construct and how that has defined what “success” or “acceptance” so often looks like.

Muholi’s project *Faces and Phases* is a vast collective portrait that both commemorates and archives the lives of Black LGBTQIA+ people in South Africa. Many of these portraits are the result of long and sustained relationships and collaboration, as Muholi often returns to photograph the same person over time. In the title, “*Faces*” refers to the person being photographed, while “*Phases*” can signify the transition from one stage of sexuality or gender expression to another, while also marking the changes to the participants’ daily lives. As with so much of their work, *Faces and Phases* acts as a living archive that visualizes Muholi’s belief that “we express our gendered, racialized and classed selves in rich and diverse ways.”

Zanele Muholi was born in Umlazi, South Africa and currently lives and works in Cape Town, South Africa. They studied Advanced Photography at the Market Photo Workshop in Newtown, Johannesburg and in 2009 completed an MFA: Documentary Media at Ryerson University, Toronto. Their work has been exhibited at the 2020 Biennale of Sydney; the 58th International Venice Biennale; Documenta 13; the South African Pavilion at the 55th Venice Biennale and the 29th São Paulo Biennale. They are currently the subject of a mid-career survey at the Instituto Moreira Salles, Sao Paolo. In 2024 they were the subject of a retrospective exhibition at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and in 2020, the Tate Modern mounted a major mid-career survey which traveled to Martin Gropius Bau, Berlin; Maison Européenne de la Photographie, Paris and Bildmuseet, Sweden.

Other notable solo exhibitions have taken place at the Tate Modern, London; Sprengel Museum, Hannover; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; Kulturhistorisk Museum, Oslo; Schwules Museum, Berlin and Brooklyn Museum, New York. They received an Infinity Award from the International Center of Photography in 2016, a Chevalier de l’Ordre des Arts et des Lettres in 2016, an Honorary Fellowship of the Royal Photographic Society in 2018, and the Spectrum International Prize for Photography in 2021. Their work is included in the collections of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts; the Brooklyn Museum; the High Museum of Art; the Carnegie Museum of Art; the Guggenheim Museum; the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; the Tate Modern, London; the Victoria and Albert Museum, London; Centre Pompidou, Paris; the Art Institute of Chicago and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, among many others.

For sales inquiries, contact: Cortney Norman, cnorman@yanceyrichardson.com

For press inquiries, please reach out to the team at ALMA: hannah@almacommunications.co

Image: Zanele Muholi, *Pearl Hlongwane and Katso Makhafola II Masisulu Ladies Hostel, Vosloorus, Johannesburg, 2007*, from the series *Being*.
Gelatin silver print, 30 1/8 x 19 3/4 inches.