

YANCEY RICHARDSON

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“Somnyama IV” (Oslo, 2015) Credit Zanele Muholi/Yancey Richardson Gallery/Stevenson Gallery

Zanele Muholi’s Transformations

A photographer known for taking striking portraits of members of the black queer community in South Africa turns the camera on herself.

By JENNA WORTHAM OCT. 8, 2015

One morning in August, as the sun brightened the sky over Syracuse, Zanele Muholi woke up thinking about her breasts. She had a cancer scare recently, and the dissection of female bodies lingered in her mind, kindling a concept for a photograph. She wanted to make a neckpiece similar to the beaded drapery worn by Zulu women during marriage ceremonies, only hers would be made of masking

tape and tissues. It would form a bodice that looked like a cage — confining her body as much as adorning it.

Muholi, a photographer from South Africa, was in Syracuse on a residency with the photography collective Light Work, and she had decided to take daily self-portraits for the duration of her stay. She had invited me over in the early afternoon to watch her process, but she wasn't ready to begin until late at night. It was as if she kept finding reasons not to take her photo. Calls had to be made, emails sent, lunch prepared. The weather created delays, too: Every few hours, the clouds unleashed downpours that made it impossible to shoot outside in natural light, which Muholi prefers. She finally asked her assistant, Lerato Dumse, a quiet woman with a shaved head, to help her start setting up around 10 p.m.

Self-portraiture is a departure for Muholi, who has devoted much of her career to a voluminous body of work called "[Faces and Phases](#)." She spent the last decade training her camera on those around her, primarily black, gay communities in South Africa, both her own and those that overlap in ever-widening concentric circles. These portraits, which she still shoots, depict lesbians and transgender men dressed to the nines, gazing at the viewer with a sort of placid resolve. The photos leave you with the sense that these are people who simply want to be *seen*, to have their life entered into the record.

"Faces and Phases" began as a reaction to an escalation of homophobic hate crimes and murders in South Africa. Muholi believed that photography could normalize and quell fears of queerness, and in doing so, make life safer for women like her. To date, Muholi has shot more than 250 portraits, often following the same subjects over a period of years. She considers herself as much of an activist as a photographer: Her work is politically potent, capable of communicating on multiple frequencies simultaneously, confronting the audience's preconceived notions of gender binaries, class, sexuality and race.

But Muholi has also transcended her activist roots, developing a following in the art world. She has a solo exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum this year, called "[Isibonelo/Evidence](#)," her largest to date.

Until now, Muholi's focus has been directed outward — at her subjects, at South Africa — but rarely at herself.

It was late evening when Muholi disappeared into the bathroom of the spartan apartment that Light Work had provided for her and Dumse. The sound of water and the sweet smell of soap drifted into the living room. Minutes later, she emerged, cargo shorts slung low around her hips, the band of her boxers visible. A pretty blue-and-white cotton fabric called *akhanga* was loosely tied around her chest like a cape. Her only tattoo, an outline of the entire female reproductive system, was visible on the still-damp skin of her left shoulder. Muholi and Dumse spent the next hour fiddling with the lighting and taking test shots, conversing in Zulu as they peered and frowned at the readouts on the digital camera

The late-summer humidity kept causing a dewy shine to sprout above Muholi's brow, and she rummaged around in the kitchen for something to soften the glare it produced. She found some flour and rubbed it in circles on her forehead. Then she propped a pink plastic mirror onto a counter and stared into it with intense concentration, first creating a tight collar around her neck with the tape and then making four long spokes down her body, carving it into sections. Dumse turned to me and asked, with mock seriousness, if I knew CPR.

The process dragged on. Muholi reapplied tape, adjusted lighting, played African gospel songs on her laptop. This elaborate choreography seemed to be a kind of prolonged foreplay, a delaying of the inevitable moment when she would step in front of the camera and stare into its lens. We had spoken the day before, and Muholi had described self-portraiture as confrontational, an inward examination that could border on violence. It requires dredging up dormant emotions and painful memories and then putting them on display. The lengthy preparation bordered on playful, but Muholi insists that it is not pleasurable, but necessary.

“The whole thing of turning the camera to yourself — it's really not easy,” she says. “Because you want to tell the truth, but at the same time you have reservations for confronting the self, dealing with you.”

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In person, Muholi is antic and witty, and when she makes a joke, she follows it up with affectionate taps on the shoulder to make sure everyone feels included. She's handsome, blessed with an abundance of melanin that keeps her looking much younger than her 43 years. She carries herself with the casual swagger of an off-season

soccer player and dresses the part, favoring cuffed jeans, popped collars and a black trilby hat. In her self-portraits, however, she likes to alter the contrast so that it darkens her complexion into an oil-slick black, sharpening her soft edges and transforming her charisma into ferocity.

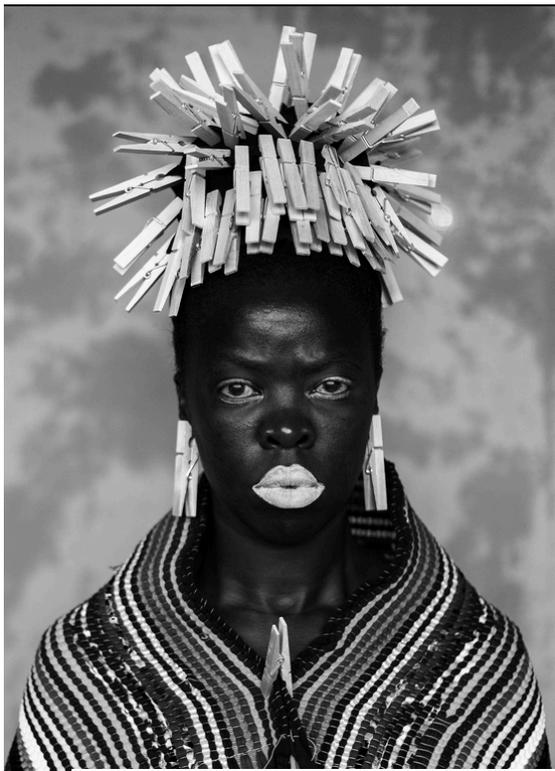
Muholi's favorite photograph of herself is one that hung in her mother's house in Umlazi, the township on the eastern coast of South Africa where she grew up. As she remembers it, the picture captures an inner defiance that she was rarely able to express. She also likes it because it is the only photograph taken of her as a child. Like most black South Africans living under apartheid, her family was very poor, and photographs were a rare extravagance.

Growing up black in South Africa during the '70s and '80s meant learning to exercise restraint and refraining from questions about your place in the world. Family histories were often fraught with disturbing memories, and obedience was mandatory, as was carrying identification passbooks that controlled how long blacks could stay in white areas before returning to the townships. Identity was used as a weapon, a tool for subjugation and oppression. Apartheid left a searing impression on Muholi, awakening in her the desire to become a keeper of memories, a warden of truth, given how easily it could be hidden, forgotten, rewritten.

This desire was made stronger as Muholi discovered gaps in her own family history. Even her father's death, a few months after her birth in 1972, is still a mystery to her, something she never worked up the courage to investigate — what would she uncover, and would it be the truth anyway? Her mother died of liver cancer when Muholi was 37, and Muholi never asked her for details about her early life, like the

story of her birth. She does know this: Her first name means “enough” or “last one” in Zulu, and she was, indeed, the last of her father’s children.

Muholi came to terms with her sexuality in 1991, when she was 19, as apartheid was coming apart. South Africa was in upheaval with protests, and the turmoil of the country, combined with the unfamiliar territory of queerness, made adolescence even more difficult. “This whole notion of coming out over a dinner table — we were limited,” she says. “It wasn’t like: ‘Zanele’s coming out. Let’s



Look Again
“Bester I” (Mayotte archipelago, 2015)
Zanele Muholi/Yancey Richardson
Gallery/Stevenson Gallery

have a barbecue.’ No.” Her family had other things to worry about.

While her mother accepted her sexuality, Muholi felt she couldn’t be herself in Umlazi. She moved to Johannesburg and, eager to find a creative outlet, applied to film school twice — and was twice rejected. She found work as a hairstylist in the meantime. A client encouraged Muholi to apply for a human-resources job at her insurance company. She did, and bounced around the corporate world for a few years.

In 1996, South Africa introduced a new constitution with the goal of ushering in an era defined by equality. It included a section prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation — the first of its kind. In 2006, it became the

fifth country in the world to legalize same-sex marriage — the first in Africa and the second outside Europe. But even now, nearly 10 years later, anti-gay violence is rampant, and black lesbians and transgender men are particularly at risk. A report [that aired on Al Jazeera](#) estimated that each year, 500 lesbians in South Africa are victims of a form of sexual assault known as “corrective rape,” intended to “fix” them of their nonconforming sexual orientation.

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Early last decade, Muholi began taking down the stories of the lesbians she encountered: horrifying accounts of rapes, assaults, harassment and abduction. Around this time, she started working at Behind the Mask, a blog that covered queer South Africa. Using a hefty S.L.R. camera that she shared with a girlfriend, Muholi photographed these women.

Through an acquaintance, Muholi heard about the Market Photo Workshop, a well-known gallery and art space in Johannesburg. She applied to its photography program and was accepted in 2003. A studiomate gave her a book by Nan Goldin, the American photographer, who turned her camera on her circle of friends in the '80s, capturing lives that were at turns seedy and vibrant, brushing up against drag, punk and drug subcultures. "It was good," Muholi says, "but I longed for something that was black."

Muholi took notes from Goldin, and it shows. Her work from this time is startling in its intimacy: close-ups of women kissing, in nude embrace, bathing in colorful tubs in their homes. Her photos often provoked controversy in South Africa when they were displayed. In 2009, a government official, Lulu Xingwana, [walked out of a Muholi gallery show](#), calling it "immoral." One of Muholi's most remarkable images from this period is of a woman flattening her breasts with white bandages in order to appear more masculine — perhaps even passing as a man. Another is of a woman's legs, made extraordinary by the presence of a large scar running down the length of one thigh.

Yancey Richardson, Muholi's American gallerist, first heard about Muholi's work through her friend Sandra Phillips, the senior photography curator for the Museum of Modern Art in San Francisco. Phillips had come across Muholi's work on a trip to Johannesburg and mentioned it to Richardson. "She said: 'You should look at this artist. She is amazing,'" Richardson says. "And she wrote the name down for me." Muholi doesn't have a website, so Richardson had to find her work in person. By chance, in 2012, an exhibition at her own gallery curated by the artist Mickalene Thomas included a few portraits from Muholi's "Faces and Phases." The rows of piercing eyes overwhelmed and impressed her. "The first time I saw her work, I was knocked out," Richardson says. She likened Muholi's work to "People of the 20th Century," a monumental photography project by

a German artist named August Sander, who dedicated his life to capturing rural life in his home country. “The kind of work that she’s making is a life work,” she says. “It’s taking years and years.”

But Muholi never stopped being an activist, even as her work gained renown for its beauty and craft. She still documents gay life in South Africa, in all its complexity, photographing hate-crime scenes and funeral processions as well as weddings and parties. The work she does is draining; it erodes her spirit and interferes with her personal life. “I’ve listened to so many people’s pain, and it meant I had to sleep with that pain when people moved on with their lives,” she says. “When do photographers get time to deal with their own pain and be given their space to do it? Others will say, ‘Oh, just go to therapy.’ But it is not that simple.”

Muholi feels that turning the camera on herself will force this introspection. “This is why the self-portraits are so major to me,” she says. “We get caught up in other people’s worlds, and you never ask yourself how you became.”

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It was almost midnight by the time Muholi was ready to take her photograph for the day. She eyed a wire fruit basket on the counter nearby and placed it on her head. It could have read as silly, but on her, the effect was Afrofuturistic, even debonair. As she lifted her face to the camera, her visage melted into something pleading and vulnerable. I was perched behind Dumse, who was shooting the photo, and could see Muholi’s eyes, full of a searching, woeful expression. It was hard to look into them directly.

Photography, Muholi says, is her therapy: a daily prayer, written out in the positioning of her limbs and the look haunting her face. She thinks of these self-portraits as autobiographical. They explore the elements of her personality — female, African, gay — and where they blur together and pull apart. She wants to undo the damage of growing up in a society that drew its strength from demonizing blackness, which is part of the reason she drastically darkens her skin

tone in the photographs. It is her most deliberate declaration that she is black and that she is beautiful.

“When I was young, I was told that I was ugly, and I had to grow up with a sense of ugliness and shame,” she says. “And I had to overcome it, because nobody can love you more than you.” She titled the series “Somnyama Ngonyama,” which means “Hail the Dark Lioness.”

Muholi told me she was trying to find her own language to articulate the long-lasting effects of the politics that have defined her life. She grew up in a culture steeped in rich, idiomatic expressions, and visually, her work echoes that tradition. Muholi is reaching deep into herself, sucking out the troubled history in her marrow. Her self-portraits explode stereotypes of African women while evoking them, implicating the viewers for summoning those clichés as they gaze upon her skin. What does it mean to see Muholi’s face surrounded by clothespins and see a headdress? Where have you seen these images before? And who took them?

After a few shots, Muholi removed the fruit basket from her head and sat down at the kitchen table to load the images into Photoshop. She rapped her knuckles on the table while she waited, fretting out loud that the concept wouldn’t work. The images appeared, and she sighed and rubbed her face wearily. “Something’s not right,” she said softly. I couldn’t see what she meant — the low-lit room had created a soft palette of silvers and grays, and Muholi’s eyes were ablaze. She was almost glaring, as if challenging the viewer to interpret her tableau. The taped lines of the makeshift body armor cut eye-catching white divots into her smooth skin. The image was stunning. But night was slipping into morning, and Muholi was still not satisfied

Jenna Wortham is a staff writer for the magazine.

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