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Zanele Muholi, *Bangizwenkosi, The Sails, Durban*, 2019, gelatin silver print, 23 5/8 × 15 3/4". From the series "Somnyama Ngonyama" (Hail the Dark Lioness), 2012–.

Zanele Muholi

NORVAL FOUNDATION

The celebrity status that photographer Zanele Muholi has come to enjoy is paradoxical, considering the relatively incendiary tenor of their earlier work vis-à-vis the general atrophy of activist art in South Africa. The assertiveness of Muholi’s photographs appear untrammelled by bourgeois conventions, offering instead the photographic outspokenness and sensuality of Black queer lives. It beckons many of us to reckon with the scandalized existence of Black lesbian, queer, and trans people, especially in the South African townships.

Muholi’s iconoclasm isn’t a consequence of the new generation’s insolent attitude toward the old vanguard but comes straight out of the political culture that was prematurely adjourned in the wake of South Africa’s national freedom. This culture pensively asked: What does it mean to see, perhaps to oversee, or desire to refuse to see that which is constantly flagged as a hypervisible and embarrassing exception to the norm? Central to Muholi’s work is the ability to interrogate and decry the pervasive genocidal scrutiny of heteronormativity, to point an accusatory finger at the implicit visual matrix of colonial-apartheid puritanism operating in disguise.

The artist’s new work, perhaps differently from previous efforts, addresses these visual apparatuses and their histrionics of anti-Black violence not by negating them through an affirmation of Black lives but rather by resignifying and queering them. Instead of succumbing to heteronormative coercion that has threatened sexual and social freedoms, Muholi’s earlier work weaponized photographs as public manifestations of the human presence and subjectivity of the Black LGBTQ+ community. The current show, “And then you see yourself: Zanele Muholi,” brings together older and very recent works in a tense conversation, unfortunately without facing the methodological and stylistic conundrums this juxtaposition entails. Curated by Owen Martin and Khanya Mashabela, the exhibition explores Muholi’s trajectory somewhat haphazardly, despite the title’s hint that it brings the artist’s oeuvre full circle.

Muholi’s latest black-and-white self-portraits, part of the ongoing series “*Somnyama Ngonyama*” (Hail the Dark Lioness), 2012–, situate the artist’s own body within the histories of racial othering. Here Muholi not only attempts to give racial stereotypes a positive valence, but also tries to repurpose the visual typology of othering to undermine it from within. The darkening of skin complexion coupled with the exaggeration of particular facial features—nose, lips, eyes, and so on—seems less about beautifying the racial other than about indulging in stereotypes. The hypervisibility of the Black as an image—nothing but an image—is where the conundrum lies. Not only are the Black and the image of the Black synchronized, these pictures offer no classificatory or liberatory break between the subject and its racialized distortion. If anything, Muholi seems to luxuriate in typecasting. That is, the racial image takes precedence over any self-actualizing potential. In self-portraits such as *Babaza II, Philadelphia*, 2018; *Bangizwenkosi, The Sails, Durban*, 2019; and *Balindile I, The Square, Cape Town*, 2017, for instance, the body either disappears in the nocturnal blackness of the background or materializes, shadowy, against the crisp white behind it. The figure is made legible through the continuous and troubling emphasis on eyes and lips leaping forward like markers of ethnological distinction.

Unlike the artist’s previous works, in which Black queerness refuses to be conscripted into the perceptive logics of othering, Muholi’s self-portraits submerge themselves in these logics. Though their enchanting power cannot be understated, one enjoys the images’ formal beauty circumspectly. Thus I am not persuaded that Muholi’s work comes full circle here, let alone that some anticipatory self was envisioned despite and through the stereotype. Seen from the perspective of the artist’s previous works, the apparent evolutionary flow and sense of a time-bound revelation invoked in the title “And then you see yourself” brings more questions than answers. In the end, it is not clear what or who we ought to see.

— Athi Mongezeleli Joja

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