SESSION 15 · UNIT 2 — LIGHT & PERSON · Jan 05, 2027

Cindy Sherman & Zanele Muholi

Sherman b. 1954 · American — Muholi b. 1972 · South African

The self-portrait as invention, disguise, and political act



Untitled Film Still #21 · Cindy Sherman, 1978

"I feel I'm anonymous in my work. When I look at the pictures, I never see myself; they aren't self-portraits."

— Cindy Sherman

KEY WORKS

- Untitled Film Stills, 1977–80 — 69 photographs of Sherman performing invented female film characters from movies that were never made (Sherman)
- History Portraits, 1988–90 — costumed, prosthetic-aided recreations of Old Master paintings (Sherman)
- Somnyama Ngonyama ("Hail, the Dark Lioness"), begun 2012 — an ongoing series of self-portraits built from found objects and everyday materials, confronting the politics of race and representation (Muholi)
- Faces and Phases, begun 2006 — a growing archive of portraits of Black LGBTQIA+ South Africans (Muholi)

CONTEXT

Sherman and Muholi both make the self-portrait the entire subject of their work, but for opposite reasons. Sherman disappears into invented characters — a housewife, a starlet, a corpse from a painting — to argue that identity in photographs is always constructed, never simply captured; she has said she does not see herself in the pictures at all. Muholi does the opposite: appears unmistakably, defiantly as themself in every frame, using everyday objects — clothespins, rubber gloves, cable ties — built into elaborate headdresses and garments to darken and heighten their own skin in-camera, insisting on visibility as a Black, queer South African in a culture that has tried to erase that visibility. One photographer's self-portrait is a mask; the other's is a refusal to be masked. Both make the same argument from opposite directions: nothing about a self-portrait is neutral.

WHY THIS PHOTOGRAPHER

Irving Penn taught precision and attention; this week turns that attention on the self. Sherman and Muholi are the two clearest arguments for why a self-portrait is never simply a record — Sherman invents a character to hide behind, Muholi builds a persona to be seen more fully. Both make the choice of what to construct, and what to reveal, the entire content of the image.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Sherman said her film stills "aren't self-portraits" even though she is in every one. Can a photograph of yourself not be a self-portrait? What would make it one?
2. Muholi builds their headdresses out of ordinary objects — clothespins, gloves — rather than costumes or makeup alone. What constraint or everyday material could you build your own self-portrait around, and what would it force you to reveal?

MORE IMAGES



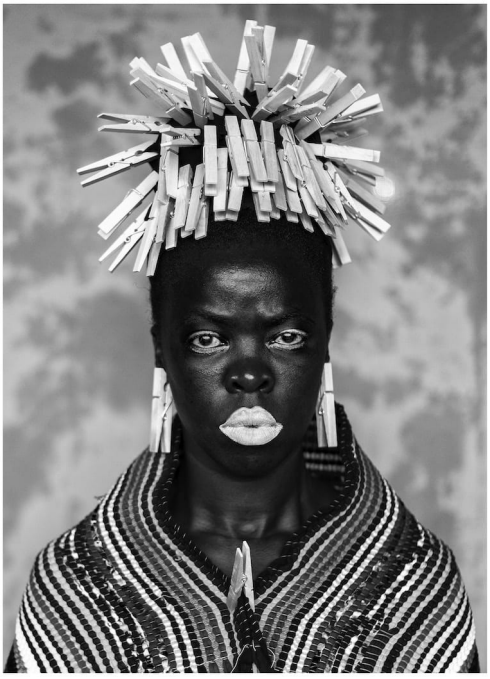
Untitled Film Still #48 · Sherman, 1979



History Portraits (detail) · Sherman, 1989–90



Contact sheet, Untitled Film Stills · Sherman, 1977–80



Self-portrait, Somnyama Ngonyama series · Muholi



Self-portrait, Somnyama Ngonyama series · Muholi