SESSION 31 · UNIT 4 — MY WORK · Final session before the show · May 18, 2027

Zanele Muholi

1972–present · South African · they/them

Visual activism — the year ends here



Mihla IV · 2020

"My practice as a visual activist looks at black resistance — existence as well as insistence."

— Zanele Muholi, Aperture, 2018

KEY WORKS

- Faces and Phases, 2006–ongoing — nearly 300 portraits of Black lesbian and transgender South Africans
- Somnyama Ngonyama (Hail, the Dark Lioness), 2014–ongoing — 365 self-portraits built from everyday objects
- Of Love & Loss, 2014 — weddings and funerals in the LGBTQIA community, side by side
- Difficult Love, 2010 — co-directed documentary blending Muholi's own life with the community's

CONTEXT

Muholi, who is non-binary and uses they/them pronouns, calls themself a 'visual activist' rather than an artist. Since 2006, Faces and Phases has built an archive of nearly 300 portraits of Black lesbian and transgender South Africans — dignified studio portraits, each captioned with the sitter's full name, date, and location, a deliberate answer to the anonymous way colonial photography once documented African people. In Somnyama Ngonyama, begun in 2014, Muholi turns the camera on themself: 365 self-portraits built from everyday objects — clothespins, rubber tubing, scouring pads — with the darkness of their own skin deliberately exaggerated to reclaim Blackness on their own terms.

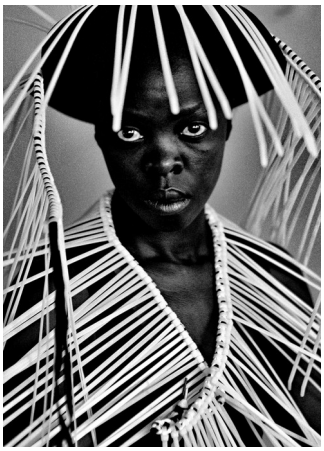
WHY THIS PHOTOGRAPHER

The year ends with Muholi because they are everything the curriculum has been building toward: technically exacting, politically urgent, personally implicated in nearly every image, and entirely their own visual language. Muholi connects Cameron's directed sittings to Keïta's collaborative portraits — Muholi calls their sitters 'participants,' not subjects — to Weems's self-implication, since most of Somnyama Ngonyama is self-portraiture. They are alive and working, with their largest solo show yet at Tate Modern — students can follow them now.

SOMNYAMA NGONYAMA: KEY WORKS



ZaKi, Kyoto · 2017



Bhekezakhe, Parktown, Johannesburg · 2016

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Muholi prints each participant's full name, date, and location, refusing old colonial photography's anonymity. How does naming change what a portrait means?
2. Muholi calls the people they photograph 'participants,' not subjects, and lets them help decide the pose. What changes when the person in front of the camera has a say in the picture?
3. Muholi darkens their own skin in Somnyama Ngonyama, using clothespins and scouring pads as costume. What have you made visible this year that was invisible before?

MORE IMAGES



Faniswa, Seapoint, Cape Town · 2016



Ngwane I, Oslo



Bangizwenkosi, The Sails, Durban · 2019



Somnyama Ngonyama, self-portrait