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The only museum in the nation emphasizing art by women of the African Diaspora

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Spelman College Museum of Fine Art and Autograph, London Present the Captivating Series of Self-portraits by Renowned Visual Activist Zanele Muholi

Zanele Muholi: Somnyama Ngonyama, Hail The Dark Lioness
September 14 – December 8, 2018



Somnyama Ngonyama II, Oslo, 2015
© Zanele Muholi
Courtesy of Stevenson, Cape Town/
Johannesburg and Yancey Richardson,
New York

ATLANTA (August 20, 2018) – Spelman College Museum of Fine Art is proud to present the United States premiere of *Zanele Muholi: Somnyama Ngonyama, Hail The Dark Lioness*, an internationally touring exhibition organized by Autograph, London and curated by Renée Mussai. In more than 70 photographs, visual activist Zanele Muholi (South African, b. 1972), whose pronouns are they, them, and their, uses their body as a canvas to confront the politics of race and representation in the visual archive. In *Somnyama Ngonyama*, which translates to *Hail The Dark Lioness* in isiZulu, one of the official languages of South Africa, Muholi playfully employs the conventions of classical painting, fashion photography, and the familiar tropes of ethnographic imagery to rearticulate contemporary identity politics. Spelman’s presentation of this ongoing series of self-portraits (September 14 – December 8, 2018) coincides with the release of Muholi’s long awaited monograph *Somnyama Ngonyama*, which is published by Aperture, the nation’s leading publication for the advancement of photography.

Each black and white self-portrait asks critical questions about social (in)justice, human rights, and contested representations of the Black body. Muholi states, “I’m reclaiming my blackness, which I feel is continuously performed by the privileged other. My reality is that I do not mimic being Black; it is my skin, and the experience of being Black is deeply entrenched in me. Just like our ancestors, we live as Black people 365 days a year, and we should speak without fear.”

By increasing the contrast in post-production, the dark complexion of Muholi's skin becomes the focal point of a multilayered interrogation of beauty, pride, desire, and interlinked phobias and isms that must be navigated daily such as homophobia, transphobia, xenophobia, racism, and sexism, to name but a few.



Ntozakhe II, Parktown, 2016
© Zanele Muholi
Courtesy of Stevenson, Cape Town/
Johannesburg and Yancey Richardson,
New York

The exhibition features photographs taken between 2014 and 2017 in Europe, North America, Asia, and Africa. In Muholi's work, found objects are transformed from the everyday into dramatic and historically-loaded props, merging the political with the aesthetic. Scouring pads and latex gloves address themes of domestic servitude, while alluding to sexual politics, violence, and the often-suffocating prisms of gendered identity. Rubber tires, cable ties, or electrical cords invoke forms of social brutality and exploitation, often commenting on events in South Africa's history; materials such as plastic draw attention to environmental issues and global waste. Accessories like cowrie shells and beaded fly whisks highlight Western fascinations with clichéd, exoticized representations of African cultures. Gazing defiantly at the camera, Muholi challenges viewers' perceptions while firmly asserting their cultural identity on their own terms.

"The Museum has presented Muholi's visually stunning, thought-provoking photographs in original group exhibitions including *Undercover: Performing and Transforming Black Female Identity* (2006) and *AFRICA FORECAST: Fashioning Contemporary Life*

(2016)," said Museum Director Andrea Barnwell Brownlee, Ph.D., C'93. "It is a privilege to watch their career unfold over the course of more than a decade and present this work within the context of a solo exhibition." The Museum partnered with Autograph in 2016 to present *Black Chronicles II*. Regarding their current collaboration, Brownlee asserts that, "Autograph shares the Museum's commitment to presenting challenging, dynamic, and relevant exhibitions, which explore timely contemporary concerns. *Somnyama Ngonyama* is no exception and exemplifies our mutual engagement with contemporary practice."

Renée Mussai, exhibition curator and Autograph's senior curator and head of archive and research, explains that "*Somnyama Ngonyama* presents a compelling and visionary mosaic of identities, an exquisite empire of selves. Inviting us into a multilayered, visceral conversation, each photograph in the series, each visual inscription, each confrontational narrative depicts a self in profound dialogue with countless others: implicitly gendered, non-conforming, culturally complex and historically grounded Black bodies. It's a great privilege to be working with the Spelman College Museum of Fine Art again, and I cannot imagine a more fitting and appropriate institution to debut our Zanele Muholi touring exhibition in the United States - especially considering the current socio-cultural climate."

The Museum's presentation of *Zanele Muholi: Somnyama Ngonyama, Hail The Dark Lioness* is made possible by the Wish Foundation and LUBO Fund. Major funding provided by the Fulton County Board of Commissioners under the direction of Fulton County Arts & Culture. Additional funding provided by the Massey Charitable Trust. Program support provided by the Spelman College Office of the President.

RELATED EVENTS

Opening Reception

On Friday, September 14, at 7:00 p.m., the Museum presents Art Papers LIVE: Zanele Muholi in partnership with Art Papers and Atlanta Celebrates Photography. Muholi will be in conversation

with *Somnyama Ngonyama* curator, Renée Mussai. A reception follows. Muholi will sign their latest monograph, which is published and now available by Aperture Foundation. Registration is required through museum.spelman.edu.

Gallery Walk

On Sunday, September 16, at 3:00 p.m., join Zanele Muholi for an artist-led tour of *Zanele Muholi: Somnyama Ngonyama, Hail the Dark Lioness*.

For a complete list of exhibition-related programs, visit museum.spelman.edu.



ABOUT ZANELE MUHOLI

Zanele Muholi is a visual activist and photographer based in Johannesburg. Muholi's self-proclaimed mission is "to re-write a Black queer and trans visual history of South Africa for the world to know of our resistance and existence at the height of hate crimes in South Africa and beyond."

Muholi co-founded the Forum for Empowerment of Women (FEW) in 2002 and Inkanyiso (www.inkanyiso.org), a forum for queer and visual (activist) media, in 2009.

Muholi studied Advanced Photography at the Market Photo Workshop in Newtown, Johannesburg, and in 2009 completed an MFA: Documentary Media at Ryerson University in Toronto. In 2013, they became an honorary professor at the University of the Arts/Hochschule für Künste Bremen. Most recently, Muholi was bestowed France's highest cultural honor, the Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts des Lettres.

They were included in the South African pavilion at the 55th Venice Biennale (2013) and took part in the São Paulo Biennial (2010) and documenta 13, Kassel (2013). Recent solo exhibitions include the Brooklyn Museum, New York (2015); Rencontres D'Arles (2016); and Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (2017). Their photographs are represented in the collections of Centre Georges Pompidou (Paris), the Guggenheim (New York), Museum of Contemporary Photography (Chicago), Tate Modern (London), South African National Gallery (Cape Town), and others. They are represented by Yancey Richardson, New York, and Stevenson, Cape Town/Johannesburg.

ABOUT SPELMAN COLLEGE MUSEUM OF FINE ART

The Spelman College Museum of Fine Art inspires and enriches the Spelman College community and the general public primarily through art by women of the African Diaspora. In *Six Reasons to Love Atlanta*, CNN.com praised the Museum for its "fantastically curated exhibitions" that focus on art by and about women of the African Diaspora. Since the Museum opened in 1996, it has established an impressive track record for organizing first-rate, mission-specific, art exhibitions that expand art offerings in Atlanta and the southeast region. It has garnered a reputation for organizing exhibitions that merit national and international attention. Milestones include being selected as the first institution from the United States that jointly (along with the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston) represented the United States at the 2012 Havana Biennial in Havana, Cuba. In 2015, with support from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the Museum, in collaboration with the Department of Art & Visual Culture, launched a Curatorial Studies Program, a pilot initiative to prepare and develop the next generation of curators. The Museum is poised to continue its trajectory of pursuing ambitious relevant projects that have a lasting impact. For more information, visit museum.spelman.edu.

ABOUT SPELMAN COLLEGE

Founded in 1881, Spelman College is a leading liberal arts college widely recognized as the global leader in the education of women of African descent. Located in Atlanta, the College's picturesque campus is home to 2,100 students. Spelman is the country's leading producer of Black women who complete Ph.D.s in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM). The College's status is confirmed by U.S. News and World Report, which ranked Spelman No. 61 among all liberal arts colleges and No. 1 among historically Black colleges and universities. The Wall Street Journal ranked the College No. 3, nationally, in terms of student satisfaction. Outstanding alumnae include Children's Defense Fund Founder Marian Wright Edelman, Starbucks Group President and COO Rosalind Brewer, former Acting Surgeon General and Spelman's first alumna President Audrey Forbes Manley, global bioinformatics geneticist Janina Jeff and author Pearl Cleage. For more information, visit www.spelman.edu.

ABOUT AUTOGRAPH

Autograph is an arts charity based in London, UK, that shares the work of artists who use photography and film to highlight issues of identity, representation, human rights and social justice. <https://autograph.org.uk>

AUTOGRAPH



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