

PearlLam Galleries

Hong Kong

Somnyama Ngonyama, Hail the Dark Lioness: A Solo Exhibition by Zanele Muholi

In conjunction with Hong Kong Art Basel 2021

Exhibition Dates 18 May – 15 August, 2021, Monday – Saturday (10AM – 7PM)
Venue Pearl Lam Galleries, 6/F, Pedder Building, 12 Pedder Street, Central, Hong Kong

Pearl Lam Galleries is delighted to present *Somnyama Ngonyama (Hail the Dark Lioness)*, a solo exhibition by South Africa-based artist Zanele Muholi in collaboration with Muholi Arts Project (BaMu).

Zanele Muholi is a Durban-based photographer. They first studied Advanced Photography at the Market Photo Workshop in Newton, Johannesburg and completed their Master's Degree in Documentary Media at Ryerson University in Toronto, Canada in 2009.

Presented as a photographic archive in the gallery is a collection of self-portraits from the *Somnyama Ngonyama (Hail the Dark Lioness)* series that the artist has been working on since 2012. These autobiographic and highly personal portraits express in the artist's own words: "the journey, self-image, and possibilities of a black person in today's global society." As a footnote, one of the photographs, *Bester II*, on display is in honour of Muholi's late mother, Bester Muholi, who worked as a domestic worker and experienced a lot of hardship during apartheid. A selection of paintings and beadwork related to the photographs will also be on view to provide a broader perspective for understanding Muholi's multifaceted art practice.

The exhibition features over fifty staged photographs of Muholi's portraits with the photographer taking on a dualistic role of subject and participant. Besides their variety of poses and costumes, Muholi also utilizes daily objects drawn from their immediate environment. As a long-time photographer, Muholi has always observed how different people present themselves in front of the camera. In their *Somnyama Ngonyama (Hail the Dark Lioness)* series, the artist invites the viewer to probe the power relations and voyeurism amongst the subject, the photographer, and the beholder. This series speaks to the politics of representation and black pride. Muholi believes that each entity is entitled to his/her/their right of representation and to be proud of who they are, as they assert, they need "for this black face to be recognized as belonging to a sensible, thinking being in their own right."

Taking advantage of a busy travel schedule, Muholi realized these in situ self-portraits in different locations around the world. A lot of considerations went into the making of the work beforehand; for each body, the posture was calculated with the overall chiaroscuro effect in mind. Muholi's work focuses on topics that make the viewer uneasy, including identity politics aimed at undoing racism. This series depicts a celebration of black beauty and ownership in ways that have never been broached in visual history. Muholi said "Experimenting with different characters and archetypes, I have portrayed myself in highly stylized fashion using the performative and expressive language."

In the photographs on display, it is impossible to escape from Muholi's forceful and piercing gaze. No doubt the gaze sets a difficult atmosphere and creates an uncomfortable dialogue with the audience.

The black face and its details become the focal point forcing the viewers to question their sense of lack when being confronted by an artificial “exoticized” other. Such visual estrangement, therefore, proposes new questions on where the power of interpretation lies in an open representational process.

Following this preamble, the narrative flow of this exhibition is broken down into different sections. Upon entering the gallery, the public will see their reflections from a mirror film installed on the glass panel facing the main entrance. This is intended to first disorient the audience and then to make them conscious of their imageries. The first section of the exhibition presents Muholi’s authentic self-portraits without any costumes or props. This is then followed by two large opposing walls showcasing multiple self-portraits that expose the issue of objectification of the body. At the end of the gallery’s corridor, the visitors will see a composite of paintings, beadwork, and photographs that alludes to an ad hoc photography studio. People are encouraged to take selfies in front of a set. A standalone gallery space will be devoted to showing a series of highly stylized photographic prints that criticize of the language of fashion photography. The exhibition narrative ends with artworks signifying the making of a new self to counter the normalisation of systemic racism.

About the Artist

Zanele Muholi is a visual activist and photographer. Born in Umlazi, Durban, KwaZulu-Natal, they work from Durban and 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 SA and beyond.” Muholi co-founded the Forum for Empowerment of Women (FEW) in 2002, and in 2009 founded Inkanyiso, a forum for queer and visual activist media. They continue to train and co-facilitate photography workshops for young women in the townships and run the Art Sessions for Youth development programme around KwaZulu-Natal.

Selected shows include: a mid-career retrospective at Tate Modern, London (2021); a solo exhibition at Cummer Museum in Jacksonville, USA, and a solo show at Stevenson Gallery, Amsterdam (2021). Some previous solo exhibitions have taken place at various institutions including the Norval Foundation, Cape Town (2020); the Ethelbert Cooper Gallery of African and African American Art at Harvard University (2020); the Seattle Art Museum (2019); Colby Museum of Art, Maine (2019); the Spelman College Museum of Fine Art, Atlanta (2018); New Art Exchange, Nottingham (2018); Museo de Arte Moderno de Buenos Aires (2018); and Fototgrafiska, Stockholm (2018).

About Pearl Lam Galleries

Pearl Lam Galleries is a driving force within Asia’s contemporary art scene. Founded in 2005, the gallery plays a vital role in stimulating international dialogue and cross-cultural exchange between the East and West.

Following a rigorous programme, Pearl Lam Galleries presents museum-quality exhibitions that re-evaluate and challenge perceptions of cultural practice in Asia. With a thoughtfully balanced roster of Chinese and international artists, the gallery is strategic in its curation, positioning itself as an educator.

The gallery maintains a flagship space in the historic Pedder Building in Hong Kong, whilst the Shanghai gallery is situated in the heart of the Bund district. With a team of international staff, Pearl Lam Galleries’ reach is global, having presentations at major international art fairs including The Armory Show, Art Cologne, Art Basel Hong Kong, Frieze Masters, and West Bund Art and Design.

Press Enquiries

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