

Life & Style

Artist Muholi brings us face to face with performed authenticity

LIKE most people, I live more and more in the virtual world. Sometimes, however, immediate sense data are more reliable. Earlier this week, my sixth-storey perch at Wits University overlooking Braamfontein afforded me a bird's-eye view of the protest by the South African Municipal Workers Union against waste-management company Pikitup. Facebook and Twitter were curiously silent. Perhaps the journalists I follow were preoccupied with a bigger story: the gathering at which the Congress of South African Trade Unions was rather unconvincingly trying to reclaim its legitimacy.

Still, my phone beeped away. Through the neighbourhood WhatsApp group, I learned that my rubbish would not be collected. The disjunction between the experience of my bourgeois fellow residents and striking municipal workers could not be more starkly demonstrated.

When I then walked through Braamfontein, now awash with litter, the daily friction between those who have and those who have not was everywhere on display.

South Africans of vastly contrasting means may occupy the same spaces, if only in passing, but this contact results mostly in friction and not in meaningful interaction.

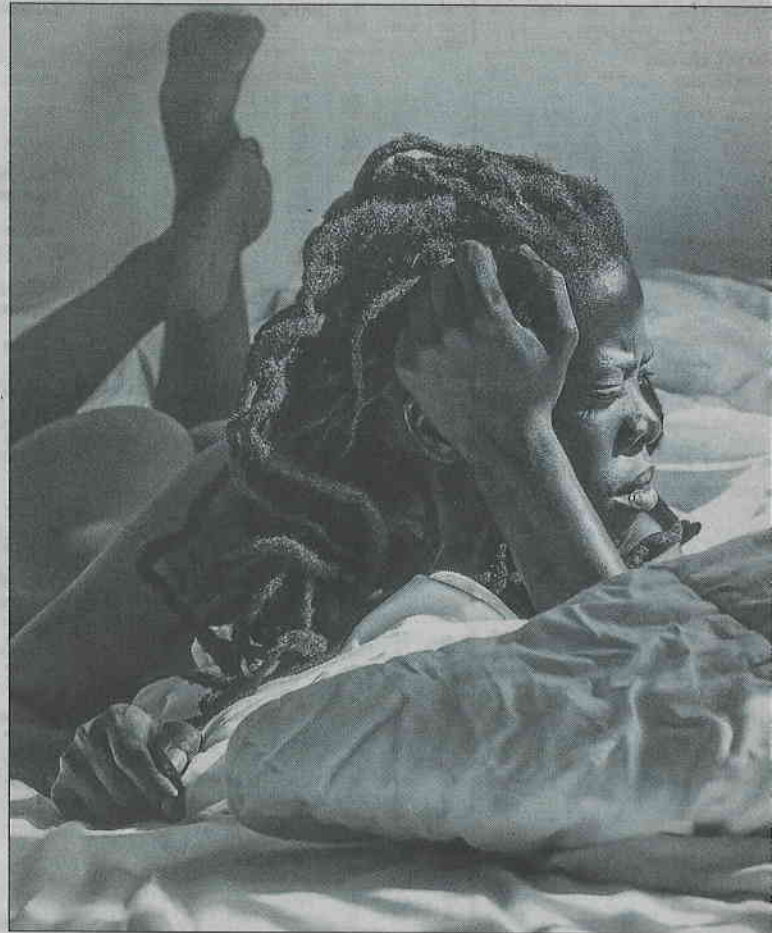


Chris Thurman
HALF ART

Sometimes I despair at our inability to communicate with one another through words. No wonder we resort to violent gestures, to the language of overturned rubbish bins and revving car engines.

Perhaps our salvation lies in pictures. My destination was the Stevenson Gallery in Juta Street where Zanele Muholi's *Brave Beauties* and *Somnyama Ngonyama* will be exhibited for the next two months.

Muholi's reputation as an artist rests on her documentary and portrait photographs of the LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex) community. *Brave Beauties* is a continuation of this project. Most of the subjects in these photos have been participants in Miss Gay beauty pageants, a series of contests that are mercifully more interesting and diverse



Zodwa II, taken in Amsterdam this year, is a self-portrait by Zanele Muholi and forms part of her exhibition, *Somnyama Ngonyama*, at the Stevenson Gallery in Braamfontein. Picture: STEVENSON GALLERY

than their "straight" equivalents — as indicated by the range of looks, poses and fashion choices on display.

Some of the images elicited chuckles from two other visitors. Is that one a he or a she? Sex change or just drag? It is precisely this kind of heteronormative response that Muholi seeks to undermine.

In *Somnyama Ngonyama*, she turns the camera on herself in order to subvert a different kind of categorisation: beyond and behind distinctions between class or sexual orientation are the ancient fallacies of race and gender. Muholi emphasises her blackness, wanting to "reclaim" it. She feels this blackness is "continuously performed by the privileged other".

Recent controversial depictions of blackness by white South African artists

such as Brett Murray, Brett Bailey and Anton Kannemeyer come to mind here, but Muholi's iconographic (and iconoclastic) frame of reference ranges from colonial-era anthropology to contemporary fashion. She invokes and mocks "ethnic" or exotic black caricatures, simultaneously appropriating them to render the subject — herself — with intimacy, beauty and dignity.

The roles "performed" by Muholi depict the black face and black body as both regal and vulnerable, expressing sanctity, sorrow, resoluteness, fear, anger and playfulness.

■ *Brave Beauties and Somnyama Ngonyama* run at the Stevenson Gallery until January 29.

■ The full version of this column is on www.bdlive.co.za