





GAZE OF OUR LIVES

ZANELE Muholi arrived an hour late for this interview. On any other occasion I might have been tempted to walk away, but this day, a Tuesday, I did not have somewhere else to be, nor a more punctual subject to interview, so instead I spent another hour strolling around the gallery as Muholi's series of self-portraits were being hung for the opening of her exhibition that evening. For that hour and a bit I really looked at them, studied each one, trying to understand what Muholi was trying to get across in each frame.

It was the eyes that made me stay. Two black circles set in impenetrably white sclera. You could

say "penetrating" or "piercing", but neither comes close. They're real and angry and sorrowful, throbbing with that specific feminine strength and wisdom that the world still hasn't really fully taken notice of or comprehended.

Muholi's eyes are a clear reminder that the eyes are directly connected to the brain and that all the things that the brain ever sees and hears and feels and touches and smells somehow come out through the eyes. Forget all that "rite 'windows to the soul'" stuff, these eyes are mirrors, reflecting not just Muholi's experiences, but the viewer's too. Go on, see how long you can hold the gaze of one of the photographs on this page before you have to look away.

Muholi, 43, laughs when I ask if she practises that searing gaze for her photographs.

"I don't need to practise it," she says. "I confront the image. That's when I feel like there's engagement. I want people to engage with the image, not just look at it in passing. I need you to question and say, 'Why am I forced to look at this image? What is it about that person? You kind of demand to know the facts, you need that visual narrative.'"

This self-portrait stuff is all new to Muholi. For the past decade or so she's been exclusively photographing members of the South African LGBTI community. The ongoing project, entitled "Faces and Phases", is a vast series of black-and-

After more than a decade photographing the queer community, Zanele Muholi turns the lens on herself. The result is a series of haunting portraits of someone who is an activist before she is an artist, writes Oliver Roberts

Main photograph:
Lauren Mulligan

white portraits of black lesbians, gays and transgender men in the townships or suburbs, most of them dressed like fashion models. Most of the participants have been photographed repeatedly over the years.

The project is a clear response to the hateful, brutal, even murderous homophobia prevalent in South Africa and much of the rest of Africa. Muholi has stated that her intention with "Faces and Phases" is to defuse those prejudices while at the same time challenging the backward, even warped ideas of sexuality, gender and race that exist worldwide.

So what's with the decision to turn the camera on Zanele Muholi?

"It's a chance to get connected with my own feelings," she says. "There's a lot that we go through as human beings and I think that personal approach and experience is very important because when you photograph other people, it's other people's lives and the question is, 'What about you? What is your life in relation to other people's lives?' Because obviously when I photograph people I interview them, to find what's going on in the LGBTI community, and I respond to those things as an artist. [With the self-portraits] I'm responding to

communications and the conduct of different cultures."

Portrait of Muholi with multiple chopsticks in her hair. "The politics of black hair." "The meaning of a head of a sheep being chopped. It changes the meaning of chopsticks, you know, like, chop/sticks."

Muholi pointing at the photographs around us, specifying the locations where they were shot: "Paris, Amsterdam, London, Sweden, Parktown in Johannesburg."

Portrait of Muholi with miner's hat and goggles, in response to Masikana: "How do we project ourselves into those situations without only being behind the camera? How do we memorise situations as we continue to remember them? The recent past that is painful?"

Random statement: "You're looking at geography, the space, the movement, the moment that I have shared with so many people in the space that I occupy. The heritage and the histories that are connecting us as a people before anything else."

"Virginia, US." Portrait of Muholi lying naked on a bed, holding a mirror up to her face: "This was taken in the space of 10 seconds. I mirrored myself and reflected my own present and past, the person that I was and the person that I am now, my level of thinking, the way I think about different events, et cetera, et cetera." "This is Brooklyn, New York."

"This is Oslo, this year."

"Being alone and the meaning of being alone in a space that is not familiar, that is not my home."

Muholi is also concerned with materials, cultural markers, and the way certain national or ethnic objects that one civilisation believes are its own, are really just a weird conglomeration with another's, even when that civilisation is opposite to yours, even when it could be a civilisation that has oppressed you and demeaned or even tried to destroy those objects, despite those objects being the oppressor's own, just worn or presented in a different way, for different reasons.

"Two of Muholi's portraits specifically portray this. One is of Muholi wearing African beads and cowtails that were bought in an African market in New York. In the other, Muholi is wearing a tall, black feather hat that resembles an elaborate tribal headdress when in fact it is also a somewhat frayed Beekman's hat."

"Modernisation," Muholi says. "But I'm reversing it. Owning the object in an African way."

Then: "Paris. London. Move-

many events in life and using my body to speak about a particular event in history."

Muholi walks me through the photographs, which she took in hotel rooms and residences all over the world, and also in her own bedroom in Johannesburg. She's dressed in baggy jeans, a shirt with colourful vertical stripes, and a black tall hat perched just so atop her deadlocks. This setup has become a kind of uniform for her.

Muholi speaks rapidly. In fact, I have never had to ask so few questions during an interview. In the course of an hour I asked maybe five, and mostly they weren't really questions but asides, affirmations that, yes, I understood whatever it was that Muholi was saying. She'll talk and talk and then suddenly drop in a sentence that is incredibly complex and sometimes quite degrading in its perception.

Here's sort of how it goes:

Portrait of Muholi with two leopard-print stings around her neck and a scarf on her head. "I don't need to paint my face black because I am black. I'm reclaiming that natural beauty." "The notion of the female and the headscarf, the covering of your hair, the meaning. Where does it come from? Who decided that we should cover our heads? In that way it changes the context in terms of

communications and the conduct of different cultures."

In the exhibition there is a photograph that Muholi says is one of her favourites and another that is "one of my most painful shots."

The favourite is a straightforward shot of Muholi staring at the camera, deadlocks touching her bare shoulders. She says it's the real her, "Paris, Amsterdam, London, Sweden, Parktown in Johannesburg."

The photograph is titled *Miana*, which is the name of her brother who was knocked down and killed by a car when he was 30. Muholi, who was 10 at the time, believes it

'NOBODY REALLY KNOWS WHAT'S GOING ON IN THE MIND OF THE ONE WHO HAS BEEN VICTIMISED'



OBJECTS: Above, Zodwa, Paris, 2014; left, Babhele II, Oslo, 2015

was the events that followed this tragedy that sparked her vehement activism for the disadvantaged and the downtrodden, her mission for fairness.

"I remember the funeral very well, remember the history and how difficult it was to lose someone. At that time I was reaching my level of consciousness and realised some things were not right. The car was driven by a boy whose parents owned the local butchery. The case

went to court and the rich family won. My mother going through that pain... no justice."

And here's the thing: in the photograph, Muholi looks like a man. She has somehow made herself look like her brother, those mournful eyes talking to you from a place of terrible sadness and pain, and also serene release.

The most painful shot is of Muholi, naked from the waist, side-on, wearing a tall headscarf, bowing her head, right shoulder concealing her face a little, the muscles in her arm and back very apparent, tense, holding onto something or on the verge of retaliation. The stabbing eyes are not apparent in this instance, it's the somberness of the gesture — which is like a prayer or a plea — that demands you keep looking even when you want to look away.

"Curative tapes, lesbians being brutally murdered, and so on and so on," Muholi says. "Nobody really knows what's going on in the mind of the one who has been victimised. Listening to the survivor is one of the most painful experiences. [For this shot] I thought about my own past, things I have experienced, things I have spoken about. All of these things speak to the history of what we know, are aware of. [From that] we are forced to create a visual vernacular of some sort."

I'm glad I didn't walk away. LS

• Zanele Muholi: Somnyama Ngonyama is on at Stevenson Gallery, Bramfontein, until December 19, then again from January 4 to 29.
• Visit smesive.co.za/sundaytimes/lifestyle for a slideshow of Muholi's work

• Tell us what you think lifestyle@sundaytimes.co.za



CHOPSTICKS: Ndlovu II, Malmo, 2015