

HOUSE OF SOLO



Pushing Boundaries

CHRISSY COSTANZA

£12.00 \$16.00



Hezake II, Parktown 2016
Photograph, gelatin silver print on paper
1000 x 720 mm
Courtesy of the Artist and Yancey Richardson, New York
© Zanele Muholi



Through the Revolutionary
Lens of Zanele Muholi

QMSO, THE SAILS, DURBAN 2019
PHOTOGRAPH, GELATIN SILVER PRINT ON PAPER
330 X 200 MM
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND YANCEY RICHARDSON, NEW YORK
© ZANELE MUHOLI



The poignant photographs of Zanele Muholi tell the story of humans who don't conform to society's norms; instead, they live their lives freely and unapologetically, unburdened by society's expectations. Zanele is a visual artist portraying the real faces of Black lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, and intersex people in South Africa. This work, more than a political statement, is a platform for artistic expression and the recognition of those who are somehow forgotten.

Born in South Africa, Zanele has explored the various levels of discrimination and violence faced by the LGBTQIA+ community in the country, challenging the myth that being gay or trans is un-African. Through their photographs, they give visibility to the Queer Black community and its need for self-expression, portraying personal, and sometimes painful, experiences through beautiful images.

Some of the photographer's most acclaimed work includes series such as *Only Half the Picture*, *Faces and Phases*, *Brave Beauties*, and *Being*, in which the depiction of Black Queer aesthetics aims to give visibility to people who are often unseen and unheard, and whose individuality is frequently devalued.

With *Faces and Phases*, the photographer sought to capture the vulnerability of the participants, while also highlighting their strength and defiance against social norms. The subjects' expressions are powerful, yet reveal the struggles they have endured. The images of lesbian women at various stages of life evoke a range of emotions in the observer — whether it be sympathy, awe, or love — and each participant vividly portrays their own history and the challenges they have faced in the search for identity. The body language in the photographs conveys a poetic blend of vulnerability and resilience, with a hint of fear visible in their eyes.

Intimacy and sexuality are central themes throughout Muholi's work. The series *Only Half the Picture* and *Being* challenge taboos surrounding same-sex relationships and reject the sexualization of Queer couples by offering intimate and romantic portrayals. The photographs feel deeply personal, a result of Muholi's close relationship with these communities. They serve as a form of resistance against societal norms, reflecting the place of the Black LGBTQ+ community in the world and within society while rediscovering them as humans beyond mere sexuality.

In *Brave Beauties*, Zanele explores self-portraiture, using the depth of their gaze and past traumas to flawlessly convey their personal history, forging a connection with the audience. The images celebrate Black beauty by exalting skin color. "I looked directly at the camera in order to create a sense of questioning or confrontation which could be read by viewers in different ways," the activist said about the series.

Their work speaks to a society that has forgotten the importance of difference in the construction of its identity. Muholi exalts the contrasts that enrich cultural narratives and creates a conversation around what's regarded as undesirable. Their practice is not only intrinsically connected to the marginalized but also to their very essence. As they uncover the beauty of Black queer bodies, they reclaim recognition and visibility and fight against the systemic oppression faced by natural bodies.

Muholi's photographs are exhibited at the Tate Modern in London until January 26, 2025, in the first major UK survey of the artist's work. With over 260 photographs, the exhibition will retrace their trajectory, showcasing the most acclaimed series throughout the years, from the very first body of work to the latest ongoing series.