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Zanele Muholi, a South African Artist Who Uses Self-Portraits as Visual Activism

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Zanele Muholi, *Fisani, Parktown, Johannesburg*, 2016.

If storytelling is one of humanity's most powerful gifts, then visual activism feels like alchemy. Especially when the work in all of its detail, subtle or overt, moves you in a way you don't all the way understand.

The first thing to note about "Zanele Muholi: Somnyama Ngonyama, Hail the Dark Lioness" is that it begins before you open it. The striking cover portrait itself — "Ntozakhe II, Parktown, Johannesburg," from 2016 — demands ample time to be taken in. A black figure against a silver background, the mesmerizing head and shoulders of Zanele Muholi, her eyes focused in an upward glance, brings to mind a classic artifact. This is how the book starts on you, its front and back cover working together to prepare you for what lies within. A hint at its insides.

In many ways "Somnyama Ngonyama," the book's Zulu title, reads as the artist's response to societal exclusion and racism, to what Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie coined "the single story" — an invitation to the marginalized to take up space.

As Muholi puts it in a conversation with the curator Renée Mussai, transcribed in the book: "My practice as a visual activist looks at black resistance — existence as well as insistence."

The photographs throughout serve as multidimensional affirmations of those who have previously been seen as invisible, less than, other. Muholi is known for dramatically increasing the contrast in her self-portraiture so as to appear stunningly pitch black, her gorgeous darkness and regal stoicism heightened. When met with this technique again and again in her work, you are confronted by your own thoughts and beliefs regarding beauty, race and cultural identity. You're stirred to action, to discomfort, to see and be seen.

Most of Muholi's previous work focused on the documenting and archiving of black L.G.B.T. and gender nonconforming people. Throughout "Somnyama Ngonyama," Muholi expertly uses her body as a canvas to reclaim blackness as not just statement, but performance. Many questions arise from the works, and those often have more than one answer. Much of the self-portraiture is based on personal experience and speaks to the aggressions that black people suffer globally. In "Dalisu," the artist appears with woolen strings wrapped around her face and neck, which she says relates to a bad experience she had in a New York hotel. "'Dalisu' talks about the feeling of being strangled alive," Muholi explains. "I felt entangled and confined, confused and angry."

This brings me to the book's self-conscious and ubiquitous use of accessories, many of them practical day-to-day items. Scouring pads as a headdress, jumbo safety pins as drapery; in one piece, "Kwanele," part of her "MaID" series, she adorns herself in packing tape as a response to an unpleasant run-in with airport security. The uses of such props are both literal and not, an apparent mixture of Afrofuturism and imagination, and the very African sense of the biblical injunction to "use well what we have."

Much of the visual narrative in "Somnyama Ngonyama" is accompanied by text from various contributors. Paired with the images, the text too becomes almost visual in its way, ranging from descriptive prose contextualizing what is shown in the portraits, to poetry, to statements on the social experience of blackness. The book closes with the conversation between Mussai and Muholi — that is, with the artist's own voice.

There is something to be said too about the way this book physically feels, how it is made up. The materiality of its pages is solid and rich, those pages overlaid with gloss, silver typeface, black matte and a deliberate use of white negative space, sometimes on the right-hand side — a space typically reserved in portfolio work for what is most important. This feels like breath. Like punctuation. In some cases, these blanks are so arranged as to encircle the black moment in a perimeter of white.

These feel like images you might have dreamed, both of the kind that slip away and the ones you manage to keep tenuously in your grasp, slippery, otherworldly. Most of the photographs make you feel as though you may know her. The hundreds of her. Before our eyes, Zanele Muholi transforms into a mother, a domestic worker, an Afrofuturist, an oracle. It is fiction and it is not.

The paradox: Although poised and intentional, these moments appear candid and natural, as though if you weren't here to witness them right now you might just miss them. Hers is a work perfectly timed. This feeling we have is one that stays.