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***Zanele Muholi: Somnyama Ngonyama, Hail The Dark Lioness***

The Cummer Museum of Art & Gardens

April 15 – June 20, 2021

March 4, 2021 — Jacksonville, Fla. — The Cummer Museum of Art & Gardens is proud to present *Zanele Muholi: Somnyama Ngonyama, Hail The Dark Lioness*, an internationally touring exhibition organized by Autograph, London and curated by Renée Mussai. The Museum will be the final venue for this exhibition in the United States.

In more than 80 self-portraits, celebrated visual activist Zanele Muholi (South African, b. 1972) uses their body as a canvas to confront the deeply personal politics of race and representation in the visual archive. Their ongoing series *Somnyama Ngonyama*, which translates to ‘Hail The Dark Lioness’ from isiZulu, one of the official languages of South Africa, playfully employs the conventions of classical painting, fashion photography and the familiar tropes of ethnographic imagery to rearticulate contemporary identity politics. Each black and white self-portrait asks critical questions about social (in)justice, human rights and contested representations of the Black body.

Muholi states, *“I’m reclaiming my blackness, which I feel is continuously performed by the privileged other. My reality is that I do not mimic being Black; it is my skin, and the experience of being Black is deeply entrenched in me. Just like our ancestors, we live as Black people 365 days a year, and we should speak without fear.”*

Throughout the series, the dark complexion of Muholi’s skin (intensified through enhanced contrast applied in post-production) becomes the focal point of a profound, multilayered interrogation of beauty, pride, desire, self-care, well-being and the many interlinked phobias and isms navigated daily such as homophobia, transphobia, xenophobia, racism and sexism, to name but a few.

“Zanele Muholi’s visually arresting self-portraits compel viewers to consider

timely topics such as contrast, dignity, solidarity, difference, history and activism in meaningful ways,” said Andrea Barnwell Brownlee, Ph.D., the Museum’s George W. and Kathleen I. Gibbs Director and Chief Executive Officer. “Each one invites deep looking and, ultimately, encourages viewers to ask themselves critical questions about empathy, courage and the power of each and every voice.”

The exhibition features photographs taken between 2012 - 2019 in cities across Europe, North America, Asia and Africa. Muholi's socially-engaged, radical brand of self-portraiture transforms found objects and quotidian materials into dramatic and historically loaded props, merging the political with the personal, aesthetics with history — often commenting on specific events in South Africa’s past, as well as urgent global concerns pertinent to our present times: scouring pads and latex gloves address themes of domestic servitude while alluding to sexual politics, cultural violence and the often-suffocating prisms of gendered identities. Rubber tires, cable ties or electrical cords invoke forms of social brutality and exploitation; sheets of plastic and polythene draw attention to environmental issues and global waste, while accessories like cowrie shells and beaded fly whisks highlight Western fascinations with clichéd, exoticized representations of African cultures and people.

Gazing defiantly at the camera, Muholi challenges viewers’ perceptions while firmly asserting their cultural and sexual identity on their own terms.

Renée Mussai, exhibition curator and Autograph’s Senior Curator and head of Curatorial & Collections, explains that *Somnyama Ngonyama* presents “a compelling and visionary mosaic of identities, an exquisite empire of selves. Inviting us into a multilayered, visceral conversation, each photograph in the series, each visual inscription, each confrontational narrative depicts a self in profound dialogue with countless others: implicitly gendered, non-conforming, culturally complex and historically grounded Black bodies. It’s a great privilege and honour to be working with the Cooper Gallery again, after numerous curatorial collaborations over the years, to present the work of one of Africa’s most celebrated and courageous contemporary artists – especially poignant considering the current socio-cultural climate globally.”

### **Exhibition Host Committee:**

The Museum’s Exhibition Host Committee is a group of art and culture enthusiasts interested in bringing our community together to create meaningful experiences with one another. The committee comprises Kimberly Allen, Julia Baker, Andrea and Byron Boston, Caroline Brinton, Nancy Broner, Shawana Brooks, Lory Doolittle, Cindy Edelman, Rachel Tutwiler Fortune, Charles B. Garrison, Ric Goodman and John Hurtubise, Dr. Diana L. Greene, Stephanie Henderson, Branitta and Eric Mann, Velma Monteiro-Tribble, Audrey Moran, Erica Paul, Pam Y. Paul, Sabeen Perwaiz and Asghar Syed, Joni Poiter, Elaine and Jim Stallings, Julie Stanford, Julia and John Taylor, Angela Timberlake, Adonnica Toler, Nina Waters, Cindy Watson and Elli Zimmerman.

**Exhibition Season Presenter:**

Lory C. Doolittle

**Exhibition Sponsors:**

City of Jacksonville, Cultural Council of Greater Jacksonville, Director's Circle Donors at the Cummer Museum, State of Florida, The Arthur Vining Davis Foundations, The Robert D. and Isabelle T. Davis Endowment, The Schultz Family Endowment, and The Winston Family Foundation.

**Related Programming:**

Advance registration is required for all Museum events. Capacity for on-site events will be limited to ensure a safe and fun experience. For additional event details and register to participate, visit [cummermuseum.org](http://cummermuseum.org).

**Tuesday Night Talk Backs**

Tues., April 20 | 7 to 8 p.m.

Tues., May 4 | 8 to 9 p.m.

Tues., May 18 | 8 to 9 p.m.

Tues., June 1 | 8 to 9 p.m.

Free program, Registration required

**Mobile Photography Studio in the Gardens**

Sat., April 24 | 11 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Free with Museum admission

**Gallery Walk with the Director**

Thurs., May 6 | 6 to 7:30 p.m.

Members \$50, Non-Members \$60

**Poetry Slam Night**

Fri., May 21 | 7 to 8 p.m.

Presented as part of PNC Bank Free Fridays

**A Socially Distanced Dance Party in the Gardens with Geexella**

Fri., June 4 | 6 to 9 p.m.

Presented as part of PNC Bank Free Fridays

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**About the Cummer Museum of Art & Gardens:**

For nearly 60 years, the Cummer Museum of Art & Gardens has been committed to engaging and inspiring through the arts, gardens, and education. A permanent collection of more than 5,000 objects and historic gardens on a riverfront campus offers nearly 140,000 annual visitors a truly unique experience on the First Coast. Nationally recognized education programs serve adults and children of all abilities, and is committed to ensuring that diversity and inclusion are woven into the fabric of the Museum. For further information, including hours, visit [www.cummermuseum.org](http://www.cummermuseum.org).

### **About Zanele Muholi:**

Zanele Muholi is a visual activist and photographer based in 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 South Africa and beyond."

They (Muholi's preferred pronoun) co-founded the Forum for Empowerment of Women (FEW) in 2002 ([www.inkanyiso.org](http://www.inkanyiso.org)), and in 2009 founded Inkanyiso ([www.inkanyiso.org](http://www.inkanyiso.org)), a forum for queer and visual (activist) media. They continue to train and co-facilitate photography workshops for young women in South African townships, and engage in a variety of community support programmes.

Muholi studied Advanced Photography at the Market Photo Workshop in Newtown, Johannesburg, and in 2009 completed an MFA: Documentary Media at Ryerson University, Toronto. In 2013 they became an Honorary Professor at the University of the Arts/Hochschule für Künste Bremen.

Awards and accolades received include the Humanitarian Award from for the Lucie Foundation (2019); Rees Visionary Award by Amref Health Africa (2019); a fellowship from the Royal Photographic Society, UK (2018); France's Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres (2017); the Mbokodo Award in the category of Visual Arts (2017); ICP Infinity Award for Documentary and Photojournalism (2016); Africa'Sout! Courage and Creativity Award (2016); Fine Prize for an emerging artist at the 2013 Carnegie International; Prince Claus Award (2013); Index on Censorship – Freedom of Expression art award (2013); and Casa Africa award for best female photographer and Fondation Blachère award at Les Rencontres de Bamako biennial of African photography (2009).

Muholi won the 2019 'Best Photography Book Award' by the Kraszna-Krausz Foundation for *Somnyama Ngonyama: Hail, The Dark Lioness* (Aperture) and was shortlisted for the 2015 Deutsche Börse Photography Prize for the publication *Faces and Phases 2006-14* (Steidl/The Walther Collection). Other publications include *Zanele Muholi: African Women Photographers #1* (Casa Africa and La Fábrica, 2011); *Faces and Phases* (Prestel, 2010); and *Only half the picture* (Stevenson, 2006).

*Somnyama Ngonyama* was exhibited in *May You Live in Interesting Times*, the 58<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale (2019); and in 2017, they produced a city-wide project titled *Masihambisane – on Visual Activism* for *Performa 17*, New York, and their work featured in the inaugural exhibitions at the Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa, Cape Town. Recent solo exhibitions include Tate Modern, London (2020-21); The Cooper Gallery at Harvard University (2020); Seattle Art

Museum (2019); Spelman College Museum of Fine Art, Georgia (2018); Museo de Arte Moderno de Buenos Aires (2018); LUMA Westbau (2018), and Market Photo Workshop, Johannesburg (2017) Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (2017); Autograph, London (2017); and the Brooklyn Museum, New York (2015). Their work was also showcased at the South African Pavilion at the 55th Venice Biennale (2013); dOCUMENTA 13 (2012), and the 29th São Paulo Biennial (2010).

Their photographs are represented in major collections globally, including Centre Georges Pompidou (Paris), the Guggenheim (New York), Museum of Contemporary Photography (Chicago), Tate Modern (London), South African National Gallery (Cape Town), and others.

They are represented by Yancey Richardson, New York, and Stevenson, Cape Town/Johannesburg.

## AUT GRAPH

### **About Autograph:**

**Autograph** is an arts charity based in London, UK, that advocates internationally for the work of artists who use photography and film to highlight issues of identity, representation, human rights and social justice. <https://autograph.org.uk>