Being Muholi: Portraits as Resistance Presents
Powerful Works by South African Visual Activist

Exhibition at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum Unites
Iconic Black and White Photographs Alongside New Paintings and Sculpture

BOSTON, MA (January 27, 2022) — The powerful images of visual activist and internationally-acclaimed photographer Sir Zanele Muholi are highlighted in *Being Muholi: Portraits as Resistance*, on view February 10 through May 8 at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum (ISGM). Encompassing more than 50 works, *Being Muholi: Portraits as Resistance* is the first museum exhibition to pair Muholi’s iconic black and white self-portraits with recent paintings and a sculptural bronze. Artist and activist, Muholi has made it their mission to document the lives of Black LGBTQIA+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex and Asexual) individuals in their home country of South Africa and beyond, building a visual archive while raising awareness of inequality and social injustice. In their work, Muholi, who uses they/them/their pronouns, is sustained by the spirit of “ubuntu,” a Zulu quality that embraces our shared humanity and compassion.

“Zanele Muholi is internationally-recognized for their expressive photographs that have been displayed at museums around the world. The Gardner is pleased to be the first
museum exhibition to unite Muholi’s well-known black and white photographs with their vibrant new paintings and sculpture,” says Peggy Fogelman, the ISGM’s Norma Jean Calderwood Director. “In addition to creating works of astounding and provocative beauty, Muholi combines art and activism as a form of resistance — using the power of imagery to combat racism, gender discrimination and homophobia — critical issues in this moment of our global history.”

Though apartheid was abolished in 1994, and, in 1996, South Africa was the first country to ratify a Constitution outlawing discrimination based on sexual orientation, Black LGBTQIA+ people have been and continue to be targets of prejudice, hate crimes and violence. In the face of these realities, Muholi began their practice of visual activism nearly two decades ago.

Being Muholi: Portraits as Resistance features works from the artist’s series of self-portraits, Somnyama Ngonyama, translated as “Hail the Dark Lioness” in Zulu, Muholi’s mother tongue. In this group of stylized black and white photos (2012-ongoing), Muholi assumes a range of archetypes and personas, referencing their personal experience and Zulu heritage, as well as South African apartheid and other histories of Black representation. They often incorporate everyday objects and artifacts to deliver layers of meaning. In post-production, Muholi increases the contrast of their complexion, darkening their skin to confront Eurocentric beauty standards, interrogate misogynoir and challenge the white gaze.

There are self-portraits on view that pay tribute to the photographer’s late mother, Bester Muholi, who worked tirelessly as a domestic worker to support her family. Utilizing items like clothes-pins and scouring pads to create a crown, Muholi elevates the daily chores of manual labor and acknowledges the dedication, strength and resilience of their mother and our collective maternal ancestors.

“To me, Somnyama Ngonyama is one way of reckoning with this past — to address its politics of race, racism and colonialism — and it is also a way of addressing a past that still informs the present,” says Zanele Muholi. “Photography for me is always first and foremost a tool of activism, driven by the idea of social change.”

Muholi has photographed the Somnyama Ngonyama series across the globe — Africa, Europe, Asia and North America — with a significant number of the portraits being given Zulu names in recognition of their ancestry. The most recent, Aphelile IV, Durban, 2020, taken in their home city, depicts Muholi wearing surgical masks and gloves to reflect the socio-economic inequities experienced during the global pandemic. There
is an intimate moment in the exhibition of images created at the ISGM in 2019, during Muholi’s time as a [Gardner Artist-in-Residence](https://www.gardnermuseum.org/), which includes [Vumani II, Boston, 2019](https://www.gardnermuseum.org/visit/art-exhibitions/being-muholi-portraits-as-resistance), speaking to the presence and sharing of space across nations, ethnicities and nationalities.

"Merging art and activism, Muholi guides us to reflect deeply on what unites and divides us as human beings," says Pieranna Cavalchini, co-curator of the exhibition and Tom and Lisa Blumenthal Curator of Contemporary Art at the ISGM.

Before turning the camera on themself, Muholi chronicled South Africa’s Black gay, lesbian, trans, queer, non-binary and intersex communities for over a decade. Muholi’s photographic process is a shared one in which participants are collaborators, not subjects. Public locations are often selected for these shoots as a reclamation of space, as in [Miss D’vine I and II, 2007](https://www.gardnermuseum.org/visit/art-exhibitions/being-muholi-portraits-as-resistance) and [Melissa Mbambo, Durban South Beach, 2017](https://www.gardnermuseum.org/visit/art-exhibitions/being-muholi-portraits-as-resistance), photographed on the shoreline, and now on view in the ISGM’s Fenway Gallery.

The series Being (2006–ongoing) captures everyday lives of same-sex couples. These photos illuminate moments of joy, connection and intimacy between lovers and partners. A selection of color images of Katlego Mashiloane and Noshipo Lavuta, Ext. 2, Lakeside, Johannesburg, 2007 photographed in their home is on view in the Fenway Gallery. Muholi’s portraits are titled with participants’ names, intending visibility and agency to Black LGBTQIA+ individuals and empowering their identity and sense of belonging. A grouping of landscape photographs taken by Muholi joins the portraits in the Fenway Gallery.

Muholi, unable to travel due to COVID-19, devoted their time at home in Durban, South Africa to expanding their practice in painting and sculpture. [Being Muholi: Portraits as Resistance](https://www.gardnermuseum.org/visit/art-exhibitions/being-muholi-portraits-as-resistance) debuts — for the first time in a museum — the artist’s paintings created over the last two years. In these vivid works, Muholi transforms themself into a range of personas, both real and reimagined. In [Phiwokwakhe, 2021](https://www.gardnermuseum.org/visit/art-exhibitions/being-muholi-portraits-as-resistance) and [Phupho, 2021](https://www.gardnermuseum.org/visit/art-exhibitions/being-muholi-portraits-as-resistance), the artist is depicted as confident masculine figures, while Muholi’s double portrait, [Zibuyile, 2021](https://www.gardnermuseum.org/visit/art-exhibitions/being-muholi-portraits-as-resistance) references the Zulu tradition of dowry in which the bride is considered an asset traded for cattle. Muholi deploys a vibrant palette to deliver this series of portraits, furthering their continuum of hyper-imaging of self to challenge stereotypes and prejudices rooted in race, class, gender identity and sexual orientation.

[Being Muholi: Portraits as Resistance](https://www.gardnermuseum.org/visit/art-exhibitions/being-muholi-portraits-as-resistance) includes the artist’s first bronze sculpture, a self portrait bust, [Muholi (2021)](https://www.gardnermuseum.org/visit/art-exhibitions/being-muholi-portraits-as-resistance), which translates the sculptural qualities of Muholi’s
photography into 3D. They are adorned in jumper cables and extension cords to reference the disproportionate impact of South Africa’s daily, regulated power outages on the lives of the society’s most vulnerable. In this work, Muholi harnesses their energy to galvanize generations past, present and future.

“The fashioning of agency and visibility Sir Zanele Muholi offers as they shapeshift through photography, sculpture, and painting is an affirmation and reclamation of Blackness and queerness,” says Theo Tyson, co-curator of the exhibition and Penny Vinik Curator of Fashion Arts at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. “Their consistent and insistent representation through self-portraiture is an inspirational testament and declaration to their visual activism — reminding us that the personal is political.”

Works in Being Muholi: Portraits as Resistance are on view in both the ISGM’s Hostetter and Fenway Galleries. Qhamukile, Mauritius, 2019, a large-scale self-portrait from the Somnyama Ngonyama series, is displayed as a piece of public art outside the Museum on the Anne H. Fitzpatrick Façade along Evans Way. Visitors to Being Muholi: Portraits as Resistance can learn more about the life and work of Zanele Muholi — through a short film with an exclusive interview, the exhibition’s gallery guide and here: Being Muholi | Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum.

Porsha Olayiwola, Poet Laureate for the City of Boston, who is also a Gardner Artist-in-Residence (2021), was commissioned to author two new poems in response to the exhibition. Untitled (2021) responds to Thulile I, Delaware, 2016 from the Somnyama Ngonyama series (Hostetter Gallery), and In Lieu of Writing about the Mother Recaptured into Chattel Slavery (2021) acknowledges the works on view in the Fenway Gallery. Recordings of Olayiwola reciting these poems, as well as an excerpt from the existing Choreopoem Black and Ugly as Ever, which responds to the Muholi façade work, are available online (and accessible by QR codes in the exhibition spaces).

Reflecting the visual activism of Zanele Muholi, a community project, Future Archive, will take place during the run of the exhibition. Artist, writer and WBUR producer, Arielle Gray, and photographer OJ Slaughter will convene an intergenerational group of Boston-based artists, creative professionals and cultural producers to document the intersectionality of Blackness and queerness here and now. Collaborators on the project include photographer Tyahra Angus, activist Chastity Bowick, artist Ifé Franklin, rapper Mercédes Loving-Manley and creator JD Stokley. The Museum is also offering a suite of public programs exploring themes of gender and sexuality, race and representation, photography, poetry and social justice. More information is available on the website.

More about Zanele Muholi
The first solo show of Sir Zanele Muholi (b. Durban, South Africa) took place at the Johannesburg Art Gallery in 2003 after Muholi graduated from the Market Photo Workshop. Since then, their photographs have been displayed around the world, including exhibitions at the Brooklyn Museum (New York), the Stedelijk Museum (Amsterdam) and most recently (2021) a career retrospective at Tate Modern (London). Muholi has received many awards for their sensitive depiction of the Black LGBTQIA+ community. With activism at the core, Muholi has produced documentaries, including the award-winning Difficult Love, and founded a number of human rights organizations including the non-profit organization, Forum for the Empowerment of Women (FEW) in Gauteng. Zanele Muholi is represented by Yancey Richardson Gallery (New York) and Stevenson (Cape Town/Johannesburg/Amsterdam).

Link to Dropbox images can be found here.

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The Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum — a magical creation of one woman’s daring vision — invites you to awaken your senses and be transported. Modeled after a Venetian palazzo, unforgettable galleries surround a luminous courtyard and are home to masters such as Rembrandt, Raphael, Titian, Michelangelo, Whistler, and Sargent. The Renzo Piano wing provides a platform for contemporary artists, musicians, and scholars, and serves as an innovative venue where creativity is celebrated in all of its forms.

Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum • 25 Evans Way Boston MA 02215 • Hours: Open Weekends from 10 AM to 5 PM and Weekdays from 11 AM to 5 PM except Thursdays until 9 PM. Closed Tuesdays. • Admission: Adults $20; Seniors $18; Students $13; Free for
members, children under 18, and all named “Isabella” • Advance reservations are required. Being Muholi: Portraits as Resistance is included as part of general admission.
• Please note: The Gardner follows the updated guidelines issued by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, and mandates issued by the City of Boston. People ages 12+ must show proof of one dose of vaccine, and on February 15, proof of full vaccination. Additional information, including requirements for children ages 5-11, is available on the City of Boston’s B Together initiative website. Introducing B Together | Boston.gov Face masks must be worn. Please see our website for additional information Know Before You Go | Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum • $2 off admission with a same-day Museum of Fine Arts, Boston ticket • For information 617 566 1401 • Box Office 617 278 5156 • www.gardnermuseum.org

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