

“How to look”

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Each new epoch teaches us how to look, and how to be seen. Contemporary art in South Africa since 1990 shows an intense awareness of the history of visibility in the country, how we have been trained to look at bodies and landscapes. Art after 1990 not only registered the tectonic changes of the times in which it was crafted, but created a new way of seeing the world.

What do we find in these artworks, and how do they train us to see? In my view two patterns have emerged. Firstly, the art of the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the first of the 21<sup>st</sup> is expansive in theme. It encompasses the necessary terrains of history and violence, but also, thrillingly and dangerously, a private sphere of beauty and intimacy. Contemporary South African visual art has mapped the body, its aetiologies, its violations, and its pleasures. Secondly, it has invented new languages through which to speak about its world – what the critic Desiree Lewis calls ‘documentary dialects,’ which take the words and images that pre-exist and constrain us, and re-articulate them to produce unimagined and subversive new ruptures and affinities.

Walking further inside the National Gallery, works by Willie Bester, Guy Tillim and Zanele Muholi hail me directly, stop me and draw me in compelling and sometimes unnerving ways. Their view of the nation leaks outward to other parts of our continent in Tillim’s portraits, it heads into the foreign country of its own past in Bester’s sculptures, it touches the stark truths of our present in Zanele’s unafraid intimacy. The works hold our bodies before images of pain, of pleasure, of recognition.

Museums and galleries accumulate a weight beyond the sum of the individual works they present to us. They are subtle arbiters of visibility – and in South Africa they have generated a certain vision of the body and the landscape. From the art of the colonial period forward, an archive of the visual has taught us how to look at ourselves, at nature, at history, at others. The period 1990 to 2007 has seen an ambitious project, still

incomplete, to revise not only the parameters of the art we display in our galleries, but a new way of seeing in South Africa. What we choose to display in our public spaces, who curates our perspectives, who becomes visible to us in art — represents a national conversation who “we” are.

The body plays a central role in the mediation of the visible and the invisible. South Africa’s notions of race and sex have been profoundly shaped by its 350-year history of colonialism and apartheid. The past is written on the bodies and subjectivities of its inhabitants. How we see such bodies and landscapes has been shaped by history. The period 1990 to 2007 covers the tumultuous period of the negotiations that would end apartheid, but was also marked by growing violence of the transition period, and the drafting of a constitution that includes an Sexual Non-discrimination Clause, which unprecedentedly expressly outlawed discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. Ten years later, the Civil Unions Act of 2006 legalized gay marriage, making South Africa the first country in Africa and the fifth in the world to permit such rights to gays and lesbians. Contemporary South African art is haunted by the country’s visual history. The artists I discuss below engage with two lingering effects of that history: the picturesque landscape and the hypervisible Black body. Below I explore the visual body and landscape that emerged in this period through Zanele Muholi’s photographs.

#### Radical Privacy - Zanele Muholi

Zanele Muholi came to national prominence as an art photographer with her solo exhibition *Visual Sexuality* in 2004. Her work was immediately arresting and controversial. The images in the exhibition constituted an intimate documentary of Black lesbian life in South Africa, and, in major exhibitions since then, her dominant themes have been drawn from the experiences of gays and lesbians in the country. Muholi is also an activist and is a member of the Forum for the Empowerment of Women, an advocacy group for Black lesbians based in Johannesburg. Her photographs have helped to reframe ways of seeing the Black body, and brought the details of Black lesbian and gay life closer to the urgent center of South Africa’s political and artistic debates.

In an essay in the compilation *Go Home or Die Here: Violence, Xenophobia and the Reinvention of Difference in South Africa* (2008), Pumla Gqola argues that the xenophobic attacks which led to the deaths of 62 people in South Africa in May 2008 followed closely the model of spectacular violence against Black lesbians, a pattern of brutality which had become normalised in the country's statistics for sexual violence. This is the price we pay for ignoring the lives and deaths of those we deem marginal, such as sexual minorities, Gqola argues. Instead of being relegated to the edges of society's attention, what happens to lesbians and gays is central to how society views and treats itself. While Muholi's photographs "permit a collective lesbian coming-to-voice," as Gqola notes, they have not been invisible in South Africa (2006, 83). "The range of names given to them in various languages, along with the very unambiguous attacks on these women within South African society, suggest that they are in fact *highly visible* manifestations of the undesirable" (ibid). This context of hostile visibility gives a heightened charge to Muholi's photography.

Because Black lesbians in South African are "hypervisible," according to Gqola, "Muholi's work is less about making Black lesbians visible than it is about engaging with the regimes that have used these women's hypervisibility as a way to violate them" (2006, 84). How one looks at the bodies of Black women is therefore crucial. Muholi's artistic focus on Black lesbians is intent on seeing the complexity of their lives. Her photographs "underline the importance of seeing the agency – life choices, decisions, failures, confusions, discoveries, rejections – of the Black lesbian in the picture" (Gqola, 2006, 84). The lesbian bodies in the images in Muholi's book *Only Half the Picture* (2006) trust the lens in places it has never been before. Indeed, her images of the daily details of lesbian lives, whether of preparing the body for work or sex, reclaim women's bodies away from pornography and headlines about crime. This is the re-imagining of the private not into the public, but into an intimate normality.

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