

Brooklyn Museum

Teaching Resource: Special Exhibition

Zanele Muholi: Isibonelo|Evidence

Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art

May 1–November 1, 2015





Zanele Muholi: *Isibonelo|Evidence*

About This Teaching Resource

This packet features three works of art from the special exhibition *Zanele Muholi: Isibonelo|Evidence*. It is intended as a tool to help classroom teachers, community-based educators, and youth development workers discuss Muholi's work with children and teens. You can prepare for your inquiry-based discussion by reviewing the descriptions and background information provided. Then use the Questions for Viewing and full-page reproductions to look closely, think critically, and respond to the art together. Extend your investigations with one or more of the suggested activity ideas. If you are new to these concepts, we recommend familiarizing yourself with **key terms and ideas**, such as gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation.¹

Some of the concepts presented in this packet may not directly reflect current ideas around gender identities on a global scale. For example, in the United States, the acronym LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and/or Questioning) has become commonplace, while in South Africa, LGBTI (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex) is preferred.

The use of pronouns within LGBTQ communities is complex and can take different forms, depending on cultural context and individual preferences. For this very reason, many activities organized in LGBTQ spaces often begin by asking people to share their preferred gender pronoun (PGP) so that individuals can self-identify. In writing about people featured in Muholi's work, we have used each person's PGP when it is available and gender-neutral terms when it is not.

Selected artworks, resources, and activities appropriate for early childhood learners and middle and high school students are included here. However, we advise educators to preview the exhibition.

About the Artist

Zanele Muholi (born 1972) is a photographer, artist, media advocate, teacher, and visual activist based in Johannesburg, South Africa. Born in the township of Umlazi near Durban, South Africa, Muholi lived the first half of her life during apartheid, a system of racial segregation enforced throughout the country of South Africa between 1948 and 1994.² Apartheid touched many aspects of daily life, with laws prohibiting marriage between white people and people of color, and instituting “white-only” jobs. In addition, people who were not white were forced to live in segregated townships, urban living areas that were often underdeveloped and built on the outskirts of cities. The artist's mother, Bester Muholi, was a domestic worker in an affluent, white-only neighborhood and commuted from her township daily.

Apartheid officially ended in 1994, when Nelson Mandela became the country's first democratically elected president. In 2006 South Africa became the fifth country in the world to legalize gay marriage. Despite the end of apartheid and the inception of progressive legislation for LGBTI people in South Africa, black LGBTI communities there continue to experience hate-motivated violence. Responding to this violence, Muholi often describes herself as a visual activist: “[W]hat are we doing about it? Do we always go and attend funerals and then after funerals, you go home and wait for another funeral, what? You have to document! You are forced to document.”³ Using photography as her primary medium, she began documenting weddings and funerals, and creating portraits of members of her community. In 2006 she founded Inkanyiso, a platform for queer activism and media with a focus on visual arts, media advocacy, and visual literacy training. “My work is about observing and taking action,” she says. “I take pictures of myself and other women to heal from my past.” Within her art, she explores “queer politics, gender politics, [and the] politics of race.”⁴

About the Exhibition

Zanele Muholi: Isibonelo/Evidence features several of the artist's ongoing projects that highlight her work as a visual activist, documenting the lives of lesbian and transgender communities in South Africa. She combines photography, video, and installation with human rights activism to explore documentation as a practice that can transform and uplift communities. Her artwork reveals the power of both individual and community expression by exploring violence and tragedy alongside everyday moments of joy, intimacy, and celebration.

The exhibition presents eighty-seven works created between 2007 and 2014, including Muholi's *Faces and Phases* portrait series, which uses firsthand accounts to speak to the experience of living in a country that constitutionally protects the rights of LGBTI people but often fails to defend them from targeted violence. Also included is the new series *Weddings* and the video *Being Scene*, both of which focus on love, intimacy, and daily life within Muholi's close-knit community.



Description

This black-and-white three-quarter photograph shows a figure standing in front of a concrete-block wall. Thick lines of dried mortar outline each of the blocks. The subject poses comfortably with her hands in her pockets and looks directly back at the camera with a serious expression. She wears dark pants with a leather belt, a long-sleeve button-down shirt with rolled-up cuffs, and a bow tie. A bright white sash with the phrase “2nd PRINCE 2012, Mr. Uthingo” is draped over her right shoulder and crosses her torso, with the loose end tucked through the belt.

About the Artwork

This photograph is one in a growing series of portraits called *Faces and Phases*. Muholi began this project in 2006 as a way to document the lives of LGBTI people in South Africa, but the project grew to be much more as she was let into the lives of people she photographed and “learned of their individual joys, hopes, longings, scars, suffering, and endless love.”⁵ In recognition of this level of collaboration, Muholi refers to the people she photographs as “participants” rather than subjects or sitters.

This portrait features Collen Mfazwe, a member of the Inkanyiso collective, friend of the artist, and resident of the lesbian boarding house in the Hillbrow neighborhood of Johannesburg, described by another resident as “a shelter for all, a place for intellectuals.”⁶ Here, Muholi documents Mfazwe’s second-place win in the 2012 Miss Gay and Mr. Lesbian competition, an annual pageant for LGBTI people in the township of Daveyton.

Questions for Viewing *Collen Mfazwe, August House, Johannesburg, 2012*

Take a moment to look at this photograph. What do you see?

The title is *Collen Mfazwe, August House, Johannesburg, 2012*. What information does the title provide?

Portraits often include five elements: pose, gesture, facial expression, clothing, and props. Mimic the pose. What words describe how you feel in this pose?

Look closely at gesture and facial expression. What can you tell about this person based on gesture and facial expression? How do you think this person is feeling? What might this person be thinking? What do you see that makes you say that?

What do you notice about what the person is wearing? Can you find any props? What more do the clothes and props tell us about the person?

Can you think of some traditional expectations about gender and sexuality in our society? What are they? Based on what you see in this portrait, how is Mfazwe challenging traditional expectations of gender identity and sexuality?

As a visual activist and artist, Zanele Muholi explores ideas about race, gender, and sexuality in her art. “As black lesbian women and gay men today we are resisting homophobia, queerphobia and transphobia simply by living our lives. We put ourselves at risk in the townships by coming out and being seen, but we refuse to comply and to deny our own existence.”⁷ In what ways does this photograph resist these phobias?

What are some of the issues that you face day to day? Think about people in your communities (neighborhood, school, borough, and city). Are there issues that your communities face as a whole? What are some issues that people of color are facing today? What are issues that LGBTQ people face? Are any of these issues the same? Do they overlap or intersect?

In your opinion, what is the artist trying to capture in this photograph? What do you think Mfazwe is trying to convey?

Muholi wants the people in her portraits to “look good” and “to be fresh”⁸ in order to capture the beauty of LGBTI communities. Look at this portrait and others in the series: how do you think the artist defines beauty?

Pearl Mbali Zulu, a participant in the *Faces and Phases* series, said: “They might swear at us as much as they want to, beat us up, rape and murder us, but they won’t get to our souls. Our inner beauty will remain and it will be expressed in every special way.”⁹ Does this portrait capture Mfazwe’s “inner beauty”? Why or why not?



Description

This colorful photograph includes nine people posing together in a sunny, outdoor setting. Six people stand shoulder to shoulder behind two people who are crouched down on either side of a third central figure, who is seated on the grass. The central seated figure wears a

three-strand pearl necklace with a peach and white lace top, open lace jacket, and long, shiny white gown. Her hair is braided with an intricate white fascinator secured at her left side, and she wears a large pearl earring in her left ear. She holds a bouquet of white and orange flowers wrapped in greenery and bound with orange ribbon in her left hand while leaning to her right. Her head is turned to her right, as she smiles and looks away from the camera. All of the other figures wear identical dark suits with light trim, white button-down shirts with black buttons, and bow ties, except one, standing in the middle of the back row, who wears a tie, secured with a silver tie clip. A four-level brick embankment is visible in the background, as well as several trees and a light pole.



Description

In this installation a large, clear rectangular box sits on the floor. The lid is partially open. A large arrangement of colorful flowers and ribbons lies on top. Inside, white cottonlike material fills a third of the box, and a framed black-and-white photograph leans against one end. The three-quarter-length portrait

shows a figure with a black-rimmed hat and thick black glasses. Both the button-down top the figure wears and the background are leopard print. Draped over the edge of the box, behind the photograph, is a large piece of white, velvetlike fabric.

About the Artworks

These artworks first appeared together in 2013 as part of Muholi's *Of Love & Loss* exhibition. The photograph documents Ayanda Magoloza and Nhlanhla Moremi's wedding, which took place in Kwanele Park, Katsieng, on November 9, 2013. The coffin installation, titled *Koze Kubenini XX (Until When XX)*, features the artist's self-portrait inside a coffin. The pairing is intended to highlight how weddings and funerals in the black LGBTI community are "joyful and painful events that often seem to go hand in hand."¹⁰ Muholi is interested in how both of these experiences represent social rituals that often bring this community together.

Questions for Viewing *Ayanda Moremi & Abakhaphi II. Kwanele Park, Katlehong, 9 November 2013* and *Koze Kubenini XX (Until When XX)*

Take a minute to contemplate each of work of art.

Look closely at the photograph. What do you notice? What stands out for you? Now turn your attention to the installation (a three-dimensional work of art that is often site-specific). What's going on? What do you see that makes you say that? What else stands out for you?

What elements or details do these artworks share? How are they different from each other? How do they “speak” to each other?

Muholi and other LGBTQ activists strive to have people reflect on their deeply held assumptions around gender roles and gender identities. Look closely at the photograph *Ayanda Moremi & Abakhaphi II*. What do you see in the photograph that reinforces traditional gender roles? What do you see that challenges these roles?

Muholi identifies herself as a black lesbian. As such, she is aware of how the fight for racial equality in South Africa is reflected today in her community's struggle for LGBTI rights. She says, “We, as lesbians, have been given the right to express our love yet there is ongoing persecution. [I'm] thinking back to the history [of apartheid], how people were vilified and degraded and persecuted for being in inter-racial relationships—today we are fighting a different kind of war where we have to deal with hate crimes that persist. All the hate connects because history informs who we are today.”¹¹ Why does Muholi compare the need for LGBTI activism with the history of apartheid? What do they have in common? How are they different? In what ways do these objects reflect this ongoing “war”? How do they suggest hope for a brighter future?

Look closely at *Koze Kubenini XX (Until When XX)*. What materials do you see?

A symbol is an object used to stand for an idea or belief. Which items do you see that may represent symbols? Why do you think the artist might have chosen to include these particular symbols?

Why might Muholi have chosen a transparent coffin instead of a wooden one? How else might themes of transparency, visibility, and invisibility relate to both of these artworks?

Muholi is interested in documentation as a tool to empower individuals and communities. Documentation can be defined as any material “that provides official information or evidence, or that serves as a record.”¹² Do you think these two artworks meet these criteria? Why or why not? What does each artwork document?

Activities

For Early Childhood Audiences

Pretend Play

Teachers: Create a play area using a variety of household objects, fabrics, and accessories to encourage open-ended, imaginative play. Select gender-neutral dress-up items to encourage children to determine for themselves what roles to play. For example, colorful fabrics offer multiple possibilities (a cape, gown, blanket, and more) in comparison to a dress, which presents one static option. Invite children to freely explore a variety of activities and identities without imposing preconceived notions of what boys or girls should do, be, or look like.

For Older Audiences

Out in the Open

Create a series of four or five photographs to document a facet of your community usually kept out of view that you want to bring to attention. For example, you might identify police searching or interrogating young people in your neighborhood, restaurant workers who work in kitchens behind closed doors, or domestic workers who clean offices and private homes. Consider why the activities portrayed in your photos are often done out of view. Why is it important for you to bring this out into the open? Record your opinion in an artist statement to share alongside your photographs.

Your True Colors

First, find three to five photographs of yourself taken by someone else, and then use a camera or camera phone to create a series of three to five self-portraits. When creating your selfies, think about how they might reflect or challenge the way you have been seen by others. Choose your pose, facial expression, background, props, and clothing with intention. Each is an important element that reflects aspects of your identity. Compare and contrast the two series of photographs. Which series is a more accurate portrayal of your inner beauty or true self? Write an artist statement that explores this topic. Be sure to include visual evidence from the photographs.

Resources

New York–Based Community Organizations

Callen–Lorde Community Health Center, <http://callen-lorde.org/>
A center providing sensitive, quality health care and related services targeted to New York’s lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender communities—in all their diversity—regardless of ability to pay.

Fierce, <http://www.fiercenyc.org/>
A membership–based organization building the leadership and power of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) youth of color in New York City.

Hetrick–Martin Institute, <http://www.hmi.org/>
An institute committed to providing a safe and supportive environment for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) youth between the ages of 13 and 24 and their families.

The Audre Lorde Project, <http://alp.org/>
A center for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Two Spirit, Trans, and Gender Non-Conforming People of Color community organizing in the New York City area.

Recommended Books for Early Childhood Learners

Titles and descriptions provided by Katherine Schaffer from the New York Early Childhood Professional Development Institute.

James Howe and Amy Walrod. *Horace and Morris but Mostly Dolores*. 1999; New York: Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 2003.

A story of three young mice—Horace, Morris, and Dolores—who go everywhere together until Horace and Morris join the boys–only Mega–Mice club. Abandoned by her friends, Dolores joins the all–girl Cheese Puffs, only to become quickly fed up by their insistence on what girls “should be like.” Fortunately, she finds a kindred spirit in Chloris, and the two create a third, gender–inclusive group. With joyful prose and collaged images, this book playfully points to the absurdity of rigid gender roles and the needless limits they place on friendships.

Campbell Geeslin. *Elena’s Serenade*. New York: Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 2004.

In a magical realist style, this book tells the story of a young Mexican girl who admires her father’s glassblowing and dreams of also blowing glass. However, her father, pointing to her size and gender, is skeptical and disapproving of her aspirations. Hurt by her father’s doubts, she disguises herself as a boy and journeys to Monterrey, the home of the great glassblowers. Engaging with animals and creatures on her journey, she gains confidence. Despite the laughter of the glassblowing men of Monterrey, she blows a beautiful, giant bird out of glass

and flies home to show her father, who is moved by her talent and determination. Incorporating Spanish words into the text, the story explores the limiting nature of gender roles and the power of children to challenge adult thinking.

Cheryl Kilodavis. *My Princess Boy*. New York: Simon & Schuster Children’s Publishing, 2010.

Dedicated to the author’s son, this book describes a boy who loves pink, wears dresses (as well as jeans), and rocks his princess tiara, even when climbing trees. While many books focus on the limiting nature of gender roles and stereotypes, this book celebrates a boy’s gender–expansive choices and his family’s support of him.

Resources for Middle School and High School Students

It’s Elementary: Talking About Gay Issues in School, 1996. Directed by Debra Chasnoff. Available for purchase online,

<http://groundspark.org/our-films-and-campaigns/elementary>, and accessible in segments on YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EzrznSpf8V4>.

A documentary film about discussing LGBTQ issues in elementary and middle schools in the United States. The GroundSpark site describes it as “the first film of its kind to address anti–gay prejudice by providing adults with practical lessons on how to talk with kids about gay people. Hailed as ‘a model of intelligent directing,’ *It’s Elementary* shows that children are eager and able to wrestle with stereotypes and absorb new facts about what it means to be gay or lesbian.”

Developing LGBT–Inclusive Classroom Resources,

<http://www.glsen.org/sites/default/files/LGBT%20incl%20curr%20guide.pdf>.

Published by the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN).

This classroom resource provides justification, guidelines, and curriculum project ideas for creating a LGBTQ–inclusive classroom. GLSEN’s mission is “to ensure that every member of every school community is valued and respected regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression.”

A Gender Spectrum Glossary,

<http://www.tolerance.org/LGBT-best-practices-terms>.

A glossary compiled by Teaching Tolerance, a project of the Southern Poverty Law Center.

Resources for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Youth

Safe Schools Coalition,

http://www.safeschoolscoalition.org/RG-teachers_highschool.html.

A comprehensive list of resources, including books, curricula, videos, films, webcasts, and music about or inclusive of LGBT issues.

Notes

1. See *A Gender Spectrum Glossary* in the Resources for Middle School and High School Students section of this packet.
2. For a historical chronology, see <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-14094918>.
3. *Zanele Muholi, Visual Activist*, directed by Zanele Muholi, Malika Zouhali-Worrall, and Katherine Fairfax Wright, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9aiufq04dp0>.
4. Ibid.
5. *Zanele Muholi: Faces and Phases 2006–2014* (Göttingen, Germany: Steidl; New York: Walther Collection, 2014), 6.
6. Ibid., 47.
7. Ibid., 7.
8. *Zanele Muholi, Visual Activist*.
9. Pearl Mbali Zulu, "The importance of self-acceptance," in *Zanele Muholi: Faces and Phases 2006–2014*, 216.
10. *Zanele Muholi: Of Love & Loss*, <http://www.stevenson.info/exhibitions/muholi/index2014.html>.
11. "Zanele Muholi's New Work Mourns and Celebrates South African Queer Lives," Africa Is a Country blog, <http://africasacountry.com/zanele-muholis-new-work-mourns-and-celebrates-south-african-queer-lives>.
12. http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/documentation.

Zanele Muholi: Isibonelo/Evidence is organized by Catherine J. Morris, Sackler Family Curator for the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, with Eugenie Tsai, John and Barbara Vogelstein Curator of Contemporary Art, Brooklyn Museum.

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Cover: Zanele Muholi (South African, born 1972). *Faces and Phases* installed at dOCUMENTA (13), Kassel, Germany, 2012. (Photo: © Anders Sune Berg)

Page 1: Zanele Muholi (South African, born 1972). *Zanele Muholi, Vredehoek, Cape Town, 2011* (detail), 2011. Gelatin silver photograph, 34 x 24 in. (86.5 x 60.5 cm). © Zanele Muholi. Courtesy of Stevenson Cape Town/Johannesburg and Yancey Richardson, New York

Pages 3, 8: *Collen Mfazwe, August House, Johannesburg, 2012, 2012*. Gelatin silver photograph, 34 x 24 in. (86.5 x 60.5 cm). © Zanele Muholi. Courtesy of Stevenson, Cape Town/Johannesburg and Yancey Richardson, New York

Pages 4 (detail), 9: *Ayanda Moremi & Abakhaphi II. Kwanele Park, Katlehong, 9 November 2013, 2013*. Chromogenic photograph, 10 7/16 x 14 9/16 in. (26.5 x 37 cm), framed. © Zanele Muholi. Courtesy of Zanele Muholi; Stevenson, Cape Town/Johannesburg; and Yancey Richardson, New York

Pages 4, 10: *Of Love & Loss* exhibition, installation view, 2014. Courtesy of Stevenson, Cape Town/Johannesburg and Yancey Richardson, New York





