

# ART PROBE

ISSUE #27

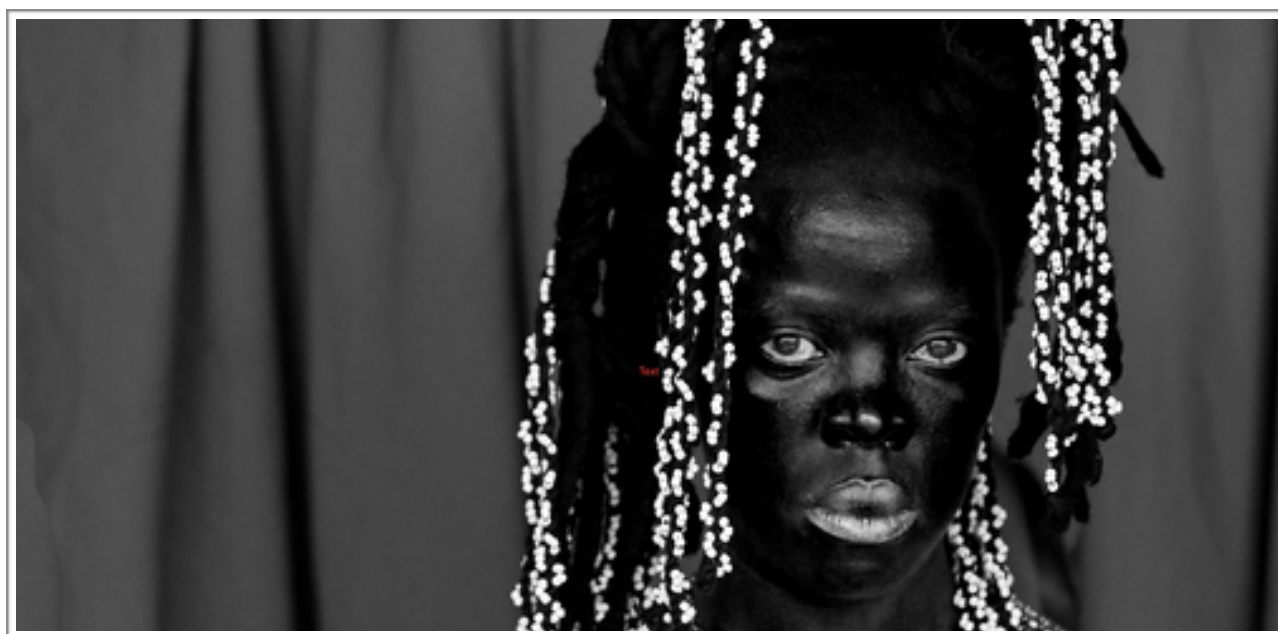
- Shristi Sainani

**Exhibition :** *Somnyama Ngonyama (Hail the Dark Lioness)*

**Artist :** *Zanele Muholi*

**Venue :** *Pearl Lam Galleries (Hong Kong)*

**Dates :** *18th May – 15th August 2021*



*Khanyile, The Sails, Durban (detail, 2019)*

*Source : Pearl Lam Galleries*

Durban-based, South African visual artist and activist, *Zanele Muholi*, explores the issues of identity through her work, particularly those belonging to the Black LGBTIQ+ community. *Muholi* identifies as a non-binary and uses they/them pronouns. They are one of the most acclaimed artists, working in the medium of photography, video and installation. They first completed Advanced Photography at the Market Photo Workshop in Newton (Johannesburg) and then went on to graduate with a Master's Degree in Documentary Media at Ryerson University in Toronto (2009, Canada). They are the recipient of the *Infinity Award* from the *International Center of Photography* (2016) and an *Honorary Fellowship* from the *Royal Photographic Society* (2018).

For this exhibition, '*Somnyama Ngonyama*' which translates from Zulu to '*Hail the Dark Lioness*', *Muholi* produces a range of self-portraits, they have been working on since 2012. The photographs in the show are deeply personal. Each portrait is their alter ego, the title being the their character's name. *Muholi* states, "*I am producing this photographic document to encourage individuals in my community to be brave enough to occupy spaces*"

*Favourites from the show 'Somnyama Ngonyama' are:*

## 1) **Qiniso, The Sails, Durban 2019**



*Source : Pearl Lam Galleries*

In the gelatin silver print, *Qiniso, The Sails, Durban (2019)*, *Mushi* photographs themselves with multiple African Rakes (also called African Picks) placed in their hair. Rakes are inherently symbols of African culture, utilitarian items that have been used for generations for the creation and maintenance of hair. In the 19th and 20th century, the Yoruba people (of Nigeria) celebrated this object as a gift of goodbye, a seal of friendship and even, a lucky charm. Through this image, *Mushi* invigorates the character of *Qiniso*, while referencing to the politics and identity cultural objects hold.

## 2) SiyikhoKonke I, Brooklyn N.Y, 2019



Source : Pearl Lam Galleries

Just like the rake, the hair it grooms has also had a dense historical narrative in Africa. Every hairstyle carried by an African woman, disclosed specific social position of the wearer. For instance, in this image, *Muholi* sports twisted locks which are associated with Jamaican and Rastafarian culture. In Ghana, the Akan people refer to them as ‘*Mpese*’ which are usually reserved for priests of *Akomfo*. Additionally, African hair in contemporary times is no less political. One may be familiar with the lyrics of the *Solange and Sampha* ensemble:

*You know this hair is my shit  
Rolled the rod, I gave it time  
But this here is mine*

*SiyikhoKonke I* (2019) highlights hair, a distinctive feature of the body, which is continuously used as a medium to intrude space — physical and conversational. When Solange said ‘*don’t touch my hair*’, she insists on the inappropriateness of examining one’s uniqueness — especially without permission.



### 3) Ndlunkulu, 2021



Source : Pearl Lam Galleries

Taking a stark turn from their usual high contrast monochromatic production of photographs, *Muholi* puts forth a dominantly cool-toned assemblage. They use beads glued on plywood, to fabricate a 77 x 59.5 cm piece.

Beads have had immense cultural and historical significance for Africa. Beadwork expressed power. For example, The Masai people of Kenya make use of beads to represent status and tribal hierarchy. This self portrait, *Ndlunkulu* (2021), is extraordinary due to *Muholi's* shift in materiality, as well as its quality to remind the Black viewer of his/her/their power, encouraging them to revisit Baldwin's say in *The Fire Next Time* —“If you know whence you came, there is really no limit to where you can go.”

## REFERENCES

### **Hail The Dark Lioness, An Important Series Addressing Identity Politics And Racial Injustice - IGNANT, 2021:**

"Hail The Dark Lioness, An Important Series Addressing Identity Politics And Racial Injustice - IGNANT". 2021. *IGNANT*. <https://www.ignant.com/2019/03/14/hail-the-dark-lioness-an-important-series-addressing-identity-politics-and-racial-injustice/>.

### **Somnyama Ngonyama, Hail The Dark Lioness | Pearl Lam Galleries, 2021:**

Somnyama Ngonyama, Hail The Dark Lioness | Pearl Lam Galleries. 2021. *Pearl Lam Galleries*. <https://www.pearllam.com/exhibition/somnyama-ngonyama-hail-the-dark-lioness/>.