

SOUTHERN GUILD

For immediate release:



ZANELE MUHOLI
Faces and Phases 19
16 May – 6 September, 2025

Southern Guild Los Angeles
747 N Western Ave, Melrose Hill
Los Angeles, California

Southern Guild is pleased to present *Faces and Phases 19* by Zanele Muholi at its gallery in Melrose Hill, Los Angeles, opening 16 May (until 6 September, 2025). The solo exhibition celebrates 19 years of Muholi's seminal photographic project documenting the lives of Black lesbian, bisexual and Queer women, Trans and gender non-conforming people. Initially focused on South Africa, the new series of portraits expands the project's geography into the US, UK, Brazil and Portugal. This now-historic body of work comprises a collection of close to 1,000 photographs, collectively forming a "living Queer archive".

Moved into action by both love and loss, Muholi began the work of *Faces and Phases* in 2006. That year marked the 10th anniversary of the passing of the 1996 Civil Union Bill in South Africa, which legalised same-sex marriage and civil partnership. While this move for Queer institutional inclusion is notable for being 'ahead of its time', South Africa's progressive branding is rarely indicative of its reality: A situation of extreme homophobic, Transphobic and patriarchal violence

forms the backdrop of a nation in which poor Black Queer people find themselves at particularly high risk of being the victims of horrific, often-fatal hate crimes.

In the face of the LGBTQIA+ community's experience of grief, often exacerbated in the media by traumatising imagery or faceless statistics, Muholi sought to assert a counternarrative. In the collection of minimally staged, non-glamorised black-and-white portraits, *Faces and Phases* offered stories of Black lesbian life as beautiful, defiant, and crucially, as *normal*. As it has gained international recognition for its historical importance, the *Faces and Phases* archive has grown not only in size, but in its scope and philosophy, too. While its initial focus was on Black lesbians, it has since made way for more fluid understandings of gender and sexuality, and now includes the images and stories of Black Trans men and gender non-conforming people.

Accompanied by Muholi's rich, interdisciplinary practice exploring self-portraiture and identity, race and the notion of becoming racialised, pleasure and sexuality, as well as other photographic engagements with Queer life, *Faces and Phases*, while ever-evolving, continues to provide solid ground to the artist's work.



The project's representational diversity of Black Queer expression and personal history is contrasted only by the singular, hard gaze of each participant, which meets, challenges (and potentially flusters) the viewer. Configured around this gaze, Muholi's photographic strategy can be imagined as an ongoing exercise in *portrayal*, prioritising the carriage of the participant's power over the photographic potential to capture the subject or hold them still.

The *Faces and Phases*' gaze stares directly at the colonial archive, and at modern histories of patriarchy and violent attempts on Black Queer life; it stares down escalating global fascism, which chooses the Trans body, the colonised body, the diasporic, immigrant, or otherwise 'foreign' body as the site upon which to wage war. As Muholi describes it, "it's like everyone is looking at you no matter what direction you take", ultimately landing these gazes on the body of the viewer, who is unable to escape either their scrutiny or their beauty. Sakinah, an LA participant, finds freedom here: "Seeing someone else's expression broadens your ability to be human."

Muholi's production of an archive of self-fashioned Black Queer people must thus be recognised first as an expression of love for the community of which they are a part. And like any good love, Muholi's is active, curious, and committed to its cause, extending beyond the photographic zone into the building of a connective social universe that affirms, validates and deeply admires Black Queer existence.

Less visible than the portraits is the foundational labour of the project — the extensive interviewing and documentation of participant testimonials that precedes and shapes how, or even if, participants are photographed. This work is the enactment of Muholi's curiosity, highlighting listening as the central ethic and strategy of their photographic practice.

The act of *return* is absolutely central to the work, with Muholi often revisiting and rephotographing participants over the years, allowing time and the joyous instability of identity to do its work. Formerly-identifying lesbians transition, their pronouns changing, sometimes along with their voices, muscle mass, facial hair and preferred clothing silhouettes; sometimes not. *Faces and Phases* does not pretend to 'conclude' the impossible, slippery task of Queer representation, but through frequent return, commits to remaining alive with the concerns and tensions of its community.

In the colonial 'tradition', the archive is static and consumable, instrumentalising its power to still histories through category, where *Faces and Phases* is enlivened by what participant Farai thinks about as "that energy that Queer people carry". 'Home' for the Black Queer body, is a repeated attempt to reckon with the histories of violence and social rejection that have caused self-abandonment, where return marks a defiant rescue mission towards a deeper, and still deeper, repressed internal self. Participant Alyx says, "None of us are free until we liberate ourselves from all of those societal and cultural norms... being yourself is the biggest first step toward freedom." Muholi's commitment to witnessing and grappling with Queer return is echoed throughout their practice, as they honour the work of transition — in all its iterations — as an ongoing and largely internal process of self-discovery. Centralising identity's phasic nature, their work ultimately struggles against the historic limits of photographic capture, resisting ending, holding open the openings, and ritualising the sacred practice of return.

In *Faces and Phases 19*, Muholi's practice subverts 'top-down' global dynamics of knowledge production, with the artist's South African roots offering the framing perspective and context from which the project and its participants — from Britain, Brazil, Portugal and the US — are understood. Operating from this position, Muholi, and thus the body of work, seem to exhibit an intrinsic understanding of participants' wounds, whether inherited colonial histories, or personal experiences of oppression. In its current iteration in LA, *Faces and Phases* presents a particular defiance of the current US administration, which makes one of its missions the violent targeting of Trans bodies. The nation's dominance has global consequences, not least of which is in the withdrawal of funding from Global South initiatives that provide support and healthcare to Queer and Trans people, including in South Africa. These larger stories underlie the personal narratives of Muholi's *Faces and Phases* portraits, which are both a demonstration of solidarity-across-borders and a refusal of the idea that 'true' knowledge is only produced by the West.

This energy of defiance echoes throughout the project, which *always* prioritises the invitation and celebration of the participants to whom the archive first belongs. So although making good use of its modes of exchange and circulation, the work of *Faces and Phases* is ultimately at home well

beyond the art spaces in which it is displayed. It finds potent relevance in contexts from gender studies departments and high school classrooms, to Queer friendship groups, who are made collectively breathless by the archive's ever real and always beautiful faces.

In its many hundreds of gazes, and its embrace of Queer transition, the project is a force of life. Muholi's ongoing reckoning with histories of violent representation commits itself, in *Faces and Phases*, to the life work of unconditional Black Queer love: a practice of militant curiosity, care and deep admiration.

Faces and Phases 19 runs concurrently with *In Us is Heaven*, a group exhibition featuring interdisciplinary artists from Africa and North America exploring the heterogeneity of Queer experience and expression. Coinciding with Los Angeles' Pride Month, the exhibition will be accompanied by a programme of talks and events featuring Zanele Muholi and the broader Queer community.

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Text: Thulile Gamedze

For hi-res images and media enquiries, please email Southern Guild's communication team at communications@southernguild.com

Images:

Page 1 (left to right): Zanele Muholi, *Daisha Jiménez*, Los Angeles, 2024; Zanele Muholi, *Fatumata Djabula*, Porto, 2025; Zanele Muholi, *Yvonne Taylor*, London, 2024.

Page 2 (left to right): Zanele Muholi, *Anjelus Manuel Santos Silva*, Parque Augusta, São Paulo, 2024; Zanele Muholi, *Rory Hayes*, Los Angeles, 2024; Zanele Muholi, *Starr Williams*, Los Angeles, 2024.

2025 LOOK AHEAD

Southern Guild Cape Town

Dominique Zinkpè: *Ejire (Double Rhyme)*, Until 22 May 2025

Seejarim, *Unfolding Servitude*, Until 22 May 2025

Thresholds (Group Exhibition), 29 May - 13 August 2025

Kamyar Bineshtarigh: Solo, 21 August – 23 October 2025

Andile Dyalvane: Solo, 30 October 2025 – February 2026

Southern Guild Los Angeles

Zanele Muholi, *Faces and Phases 19*, 16 May – 6 September 2025

In Us is Heaven (Group Exhibition), 16 May – 6 September 2025

Mmangaliso Nzuza: Solo, 13 September – 1 November 2025

Madoda Fani: Solo, 13 September – 1 November 2025

Frieze New York, New York, 7-11 May 2025

RMB Latitudes, Johannesburg, 23 – 25 May 2025

The Aspen Art Fair, Colorado, 29 July – 2 August 2025

The Armory Show, New York, 5 – 7 September 2025

Frieze London, London, 15-19 October 2025

ABOUT SOUTHERN GUILD

Established in 2008 by Trevyn and Julian McGowan, Southern Guild represents contemporary artists from Africa and its diaspora. Based in Cape Town and Los Angeles, the gallery's programme furthers the continent's contribution to global art movements. The gallery's artists explore the preservation of culture, spirituality, ancestral knowledge and identity within our current landscape. Their work has been acquired by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, LACMA, Art Institute of Chicago, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Pérez Art Museum, Mint Museum, Harn Museum, Denver Art Museum, Vitra Museum, Design Museum Gent and National Gallery of Victoria.

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