

ZANELE MUHOLI

OF LOVE AND LOSS
STEVENSON, JHB



ABOVE Zanele Muholi, *ZaVa, Arles*, 2013. Diptych, C-print, 33 x 49 cm each. ©Zanele Muholi. Courtesy of Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg

“For most people love is the most profound source of pleasure... while the loss of those whom we love is the most profound source of pain. Hence, love and loss are two sides of the same coin.... It is the very transience of life that enhances love... For [many] of us, the fact that we shall one day lose the ones we love, and they us, draws us closer to them but remains a silent bell that wakes us in the night”
– Colin Murray Parkes¹

In times of increasingly homophobic rule enacted by numerous countries on the African continent and in a climate of intolerance towards homosexuals in the Western world, South Africa sets itself apart with a progressive constitution that enshrines democratic principles of equality and human rights for all. South Africa has been exalted as the first country in the world to outlaw discrimination based on sexual orientation, and only the second country outside of Europe to legalise same-sex marriage.

Muholi is an artist and visual activist who seeks to verify and celebrate the multiplicity of human identity and sexuality.

A lesbian herself, Muholi’s work has vitally and candidly represented the black female body, as well as revealing the tenderness and beauty within her own and other LGBT’s relationships.

‘Of Love & Loss’ represents the stark contrast between a rainbow nation that acknowledges the celebration of love, no matter its gender, and a scarred post-apartheid landscape of which homophobic victimisation is an endemic feature.

Over the course of 2013, Muholi has been documenting both weddings and funerals in the black LGBTI community of South Africa, joyful and painful events that appear to be “two sides of the same coin”. Her most recent show at Stevenson features photographs, video works, and an installation that highlight how demonstrations of mourning and merriment bear similarities. Flowers, ceremoniously utilised at both weddings and funerals, lie dying atop a glass coffin in which Muholi spent twenty minutes during the opening night, in celebration of twenty years of democracy. The flowers have been allowed to decay, symbolising the on-going process of loss, the very transience of life that, as Parkes points out, only enhances our proclivity for love.

The work of Zanele Muholi speaks to the intricacies, liberties, and dangers of living beyond the gender binary. It is a valuable document, a historically important record even, of a previously hidden population, one that confronts the conservative social culture of South Africa and exposes the contradictions between the country’s progressive state policy and the daily lives of LGBT citizens living within it.

For some people living in South Africa, the simple act of loving someone puts them at risk of social stigma, hostility, and even death. Black lesbians are particularly vulnerable and are regularly victims of brutal murders and ‘curative rapes’.

This fear then, which Parkes speaks of, of losing a loved one, is often much louder than a silent bell that wakes us in the night.

It can be a wailing siren, a perpetually vociferous alarm.

¹ Colin Murray Parkes, 2009. ‘Love and Loss: The Roots of Grief and its Complications’

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