

The Way She Looks: A History of Female Gazes in African Portraiture – Photographs from the Walther Collection. Ryerson Image Centre, Ryerson University, Toronto, Ontario. September 11 – December 8, 2019. Guest curated by Sandrine Colard.

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Facing each other in a way symbolic of a shift from forced submission to agency, the two separated galleries that house *The Way She Looks: A History of Female Gazes in African Portraiture* focus on the Black female body from dual perspectives, as both sitter and photographer, over 200 years. Guest curated by Sandrine Colard, the exhibition draws upon the vast private Walther Collection, including photographs, prints, *cartes de visite*, postcards, albums, illustrations, videos, and books from as early as the 19th century, and concentrating on western, southern, and eastern Africa. Utilizing this collection, Colard juxtaposes often static archival photographs of subservient, colonial subjects with far more dynamic images taken by 20th- and 21st-century African artists who reclaim the lens and the gaze, using Black femininity as their catalyst.

The exhibition is twofold: the segment in the University Gallery, titled “Encountering the Lens,” presents photography from the 19th and early 20th centuries, while that in the Main Gallery, “The Modern Studio: The Visual Soliloquy,” showcases photographs from the mid-20th century onward. In the former gallery, the curator begins from the premise that the white male’s photographic capture of a “primitive” Black female body is a metaphor for a literal form of “capture.” Here, the visitor experiences a sense of aesthetic unease when



FIGURE 1 A.C. Gomes & Sons, Natives [sic] Hair Dressing, Zanzibar, Tanzania, late 19th century, collodion printed-out print. Source: Courtesy of the Walther Collection and Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg.

confronted with eerie black-and-white photographs and *cartes de visite*,¹ which line monotonous, grey-green walls. Colard uses these archival photographs and the surrounding heavy colour scheme to force the visitor to engage with the visible discomfort of the sitters in these images. She emphasizes the problematic ethnographic frameworks from which these photographs stemmed by displaying the photographers' original taxonomic descriptions of their sitters alongside their images. Accompanying text panels include racist terms like *kafir girl* and *Hottentot*, which were written on the original photographs in addition to other offensive designations historically used to describe these sitters.

In this gallery, Colard reminds us that the colonial, white male gaze underlying photographs of Black African women from South Africa and Tanzania stripped the individuals being photographed of their agency. This is especially evident in the standardization of the sitters' poses, which are replicated again and again throughout the gallery space, obscuring the individuality of the photographic subjects. The viewer easily becomes lost in a continuum of sameness when almost every sitter is positioned aimlessly, in the same stance – though this is actually common for *cartes de visite*.² A.C. Gomes & Sons' photograph *Natives [sic] Hair Dressing, Zanzibar* (Figure 1) provides one example, echoing a common hairdressing position with which members of the Black diaspora may be familiar. By including such images, Colard highlights the erasures of identity that occurred through colonial photography while also confronting the viewer with the typically exoticized understanding of African women as represented in hairdressing and grooming scenes, which, as the exhibit text notes, were “historically coded as feminine.”³ The text panel for this image includes the original inaccurate and offensive descriptors applied to these subjects, emphasizing the problematic views of Africans held by white European colonialists. This juxtaposition of text and image disrupts the viewer's assumption that the sitters might

1 For further information on the *carte de visite*, see Lara Perry, “The Carte de Visite in the 1860s and the Serial Dynamic of Photographic Likeness,” *Art History* 35, no. 4 (2012): 728–49; and Stephen Burstow, “The Carte de Visite and Domestic Digital Photography,” *Photographies* 9, no. 3 (2016): 287–305. These small photo-cards are integral to understanding ethnographic photography and to recognizing that the circulation of images of Black African bodies as “primitive” in this form was popularized due to easy reproduction and distribution.

2 Perry, “The Carte de Visite,” 728–49.

3 Ryerson Image Centre, “Natives [sic] Hair Dressing, Zanzibar, late 19th century,” Didactic panel to accompany the photograph *Natives [sic] Hair Dressing, Zanzibar*, late 19th century, in the exhibition *The Way She Looks: A History of Female Gazes in African Portraiture – Photographs from the Walther Collection*, Ryerson University, Toronto, September 11 – December 8, 2019.

have been at ease in what initially appears to be an intimate moment. As Colard makes clear, these subjects are far from being comfortable; rather, they are “captured” both photographically and literally. Yet, in spite of these visual and textual layers and the photographer’s probable intention, the sitters’ positioning offers diasporic viewers an opportunity for connection and interpretative protest against the discomfort present in the images that surround them.

Visitors’ experience on entering the second installation in the Main Gallery is strikingly different from the unease of the University Gallery. In this gallery, black walls signal a shift toward diasporic control; here, the artist and interpreter take control of the photography back from the white photographer. Using the physical separation of the galleries to her advantage, Colard steers the viewer away from the forced submission of African subjects – in the works of Samuel Baylis Barnard, A.C. Gomes & Sons, and other unidentified photographers – and toward the agency of African artists like Seydou Keïta and Samuel Fosso. The photographs of these latter two artists represent an inclusive exploration of both femininity and individual intervention on the African continent. These artists achieve this through portrait photography that draws on the immediacy of event and street-style fashion photography⁴ to oppose the exoticization and othering enacted through the staid portraiture represented in the University Gallery.

Also shown in the Main Gallery, Malian photographer Malick Sidibé’s commercial photography from as early as the 1950s combines studio sessions with candid shots of individuals at various social outings. His images reveal an important, intimate link between the photographer and the sitters, as signified by the sitters’ relaxed and unguarded demeanour. When compared to the artificially posed images in the University Gallery, the ease of Sidibé’s sitters signifies a clear change in the dynamic surrounding the photographer’s capture of the Black body – away from control and toward dynamism and freedom. Representing a similarly candid approach, the work of Nontsikelelo “Lolo” Veleko reveals her as a pioneer of street-style photography. Images from the streets of South Africa, such as *Nonkululeko* (Figure 2), capture the personal style and identity manifested by her models. In dialogue with the entirety of the exhibition, Sidibé and Veleko offer a revision of the notions of “authenticity” historically represented in photographic prints of scenes in Africa with African women as subjects.

4 Kathryn M. Orzech, Wendy Moncur, Abigail Durrant, Stuart James, and John Collomosse, “Digital Photographic Practices as Expressions of Personhood and Identity: Variations across School Leavers and Recent Retirees,” *Visual Studies* 32, no. 4 (2017): 313–28.



FIGURE 2 Nontsikelelo “Lolo” Veleko, *Nonkululeko*, from the series *Beauty is in the Eye of the Beholder*, 2003, inkjet print, © The artist. Source: Courtesy of the artist and Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg.



FIGURE 3 S.J. Moodley, *[Two women wearing Western attire]*, 1981 (printed 2016), inkjet print. Source: Courtesy of the Walther Collection.



FIGURE 4 Unidentified photographer, *Zulu Mothers*, South Africa, late 19th century, gelatin silver printed-out print. Source: Courtesy of the Walther Collection.

Elsewhere, two works included in the Main Gallery – S.J. Moodley’s *Two women wearing Western attire* (Figure 3) and Zanele Muholi’s *Miss D’Vine II* (Figure 5) – are directly juxtaposed with works featured in the University Gallery. Moodley’s photograph mirrors *Zulu Mothers*, a 19th-century image by an unidentified photographer (Figure 4). Yet, where *Zulu Mothers* places two women and their children – misidentified as Zulu by the photographer – in a position of vulnerability, the subjects of *Two women wearing Western attire* adopt a similar positioning but exude the confidence and individuality of those who have commissioned a studio photoshoot. In a similar juxtaposition, South African photographer Zanele Muholi’s *Miss D’Vine II* disrupts the racist stereotyping inherent in many 19th- and early-20th-century images of women from rural African communities. Referencing these images, Muholi’s photographs protest the perception of what a woman should appear to be and highlight



FIGURE 5 Zanele Muholi, *Miss D'Vine II*, from the series *Miss D'vine*, 2007, chromogenic print, © The artist. Source: Courtesy of the artist and Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg.

LGBTQ+ visibility by representing transgender women in rural areas around Cape Town and Johannesburg. By placing her subjects in contexts similar to those of ethnographic photography of Africa, her work creates upheavals in perceptions of femininity, of the agency of the contemporary Black body, and of the historicity of the colonial gaze.

The Way She Looks uses archival images to create an environment of both diasporic connection and historically oppressive representation, of both comfort and discomfort. It forces the spectator to reconsider how identity is created and represented through the photographic record, and it raises issues of colonialist remembering and the negative remnants of this system, both on the African continent and in the wider Black diaspora. This is evident especially in the South African elements of the exhibition, which attempt to contend with the legacies of apartheid and for which the photographic spectre of Phindezwa


Mnyaka's "native sitter"⁵ are ever present. The exhibition uses new methods of photojournalism to effect a repositioning of the African female gaze, from a context of colonial oppression and racial division to one of post-colonial individualistic control and self-identification. Equally, archival photographs from notable mid-20th-century African artists, such as Malick Sedibé and Seydou Keïta, act as visual counter-arguments to the forced submissiveness presented in the exhibition's University Gallery display. Opposing the staid portraiture of the earlier era, the spectral images of Sedibé, Keïta, and others take on an active and dynamic role. The sitters are subjectively fluid, their bodies rejecting the overwhelmingly standard positions found in "Encountering the Lens": they are modelling rather than posing.

This is an important exhibition to be mounted in Toronto, where the African and Caribbean diasporas run deep. The exhibition has the potential to empower by creating a common ground artistically linking African-Canadian communities to their diasporic backgrounds. Colard carefully navigates the representation of the various African ethnic groups present in *The Way She Looks*. She echoes the curatorial style of the late Okwuchukwu Emmanuel Enwezor, who also juxtaposed contemporary images with archival photographs from the Walther Collection in his 2010 exhibition of African photography, *Events of the Self: Portraiture and Social Identity*.⁶ The issues presented in both exhibitions inherently connect to the decolonizing methodologies in archival studies, which, though currently heavily invested in settler colonialist contexts, aim to dismantle the power dynamics at play in historic records, including the African colonial period photography present in the Walther Collection and displayed in this exhibition.⁷ *The Way She Looks* approaches archives as a vehicle for visibility and agency and for shifting control systems that have been historically one-sided. Here, the archival record is a visual documentation of the change possible in photography and beyond when women achieve agency behind and in front of the camera.

5 Phindezwa Mnyaka, "From Salons to the Native Reserve: Reformulating the 'Native Question' through Pictorial Photography in 1950s South Africa," *Social Dynamics* 40, no. 1 (2014): 106–121.

6 Okwui Enwezor, ed., *Events of the Self: Portraiture and Social Identity – Contemporary African Photography from the Walther Collection* (Burlafingen: Walther Collection; Göttingen: Steidl, 2010).

7 Taylor R. Genovese, "Decolonizing Archival Methodology: Combatting Hegemony and Moving Towards a Collaborative Archival Environment," *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples* 12, no. 1 (2016): 32–42.



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