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Question: Explore how artists have approached the concepts around 'gender' in art practice; providing evidence from at least two artists.

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For centuries, the idea of gender has been an important subject in creative practice, varying with social, political, and cultural shifts. For a very long time, artists have explored, questioned, and reimagined gender concepts in their work, providing important insights on the construction, performance, and perception of identity. From classical art's portrayal of women to more recent investigations of fluid and non-binary identities, artists have influenced and challenged gender-related social norms. Gender is one of the most common themes in art, which has long been a potent medium for examining and questioning social structures. Insightful thoughts about gender identity, expression, and the body can be found in the works of contemporary artists Jenny Saville and Zanele Muholi. While Saville's work from the UK and Muholi's from South Africa come from different cultural backgrounds, they both aim to explore the intricacies of gender, albeit in different ways. This essay will examine how both artists approach gender in their work, considering their use of the body, identity, and social commentary.

Muholi describes herself as a visual activist¹ she has emerged as one of the most well-known characters in modern art due to her documentation and exposure of under-represented groups, especially Black LGBTI (lesbian, gay, transgender, and intersex) people. Although South Africa has one of the most progressive constitutions in the world regarding LGBTQI rights, violence and discrimination against these communities continue. Muholi, whose own gender identity is fluid, is an advocate for the rights of queer people in that country. Her works frequently explore themes of self-representation and empowerment.

¹ Tate (n.d.). *Zanele Muholi*. 2024 [online] Tate. Available at: <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/zanele-muholi>. (Accessed: 3 December 2024)

One of Muholi's most-known bodies of work, *Somnyama Ngonyama* (2015) directly addresses issues of race, gender and identity. The title, which translates to "Hail the Dark Lioness" in Zulu, shows how fiercely she embraces her queerness and Blackness. Using visual cues from historical and African portraiture, Muholi frames herself in a range of arresting positions in this series, frequently emphasizing her face and body with strong lighting. In this formative series, Muholi says "the aim of my project is to speak about historical cases, confronting the politics of race"² by presenting herself as both the subject and artist, empowered and vulnerability.

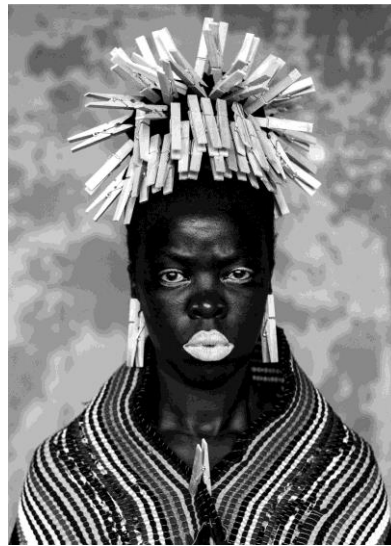


Fig 1 Somnyama Ngonyama "Hail the Dark Lioness", Zanele Muholi (2015)

She demonstrates her capacity to control her gender expression and disrupt strict identification categories through the use of performance, costume, and props. By addressing the issues that Black and queer communities face, such as assault, prejudice, and invisibility, Muholi's art challenges the narratives around these bodies and celebrates differences. The viewer's function as an observer is also called into question by the portraits, which forces them to acknowledge their own part in fostering negative biases and stereotypes. The idea that Blackness, queerness, and femaleness are complicated

² D'Aliesio, S. (n.d.). *Zanele Muholi's Somnyama Ngonyama - Hail the Dark Lioness - 1854 Photography*. [online] www.1854.photography. Available at: <https://www.1854.photography/2018/04/show-zanele-muholis-somnyama-ngonyama-hail-the-dark-lioness/>.

Accessed- 3 December 2024

and multifaceted is further unnerved by Muholi's reluctance to shy away from "ugly" or "difficult" language.

Other studies of Muholi's that applies to gender can be *Faces and Phases* 2006, which she dedicated to her friend who had died from complications of HIV in 2007³. She reinterprets gender as a space for action, resistance and self-definition by questioning traditional ideas of masculinity and femininity, the lack of representation in South Africa pushed her into creating intimate but powerful images of individuals that were suggested as invisible in society, mainly towards lesbians. The series showcases the complexities of gender and implies that the visual history of representation is minimal. Statistics show⁴ that one in two South African women would experience rape at least once in their lives. These attacks and discriminations inspired Muholi's *Faces and Phases*.

³ Willis, D. (2015). *Zanele Muholi's Faces & Phases*. [online] Aperture. Available at: <https://aperture.org/editorial/magazine-zanele-muholis-faces-phases/>.

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⁴ Researched by Africa Check (2018). *FACTSHEET: South Africa's crime statistics for 2018/19*. [online] The Citizen. Available at: <https://citizen.co.za/news/south-africa/crime/2178462/factsheet-south-africas-crime-statistics-for-2018-19/>.

Accessed- 3 Decmber 2024



Fig 2 Images from *Faces and Phases*, 2007- Present, Zanele Muholi.

By choosing to photograph LGBTQIA+ individuals from marginalized communities in South Africa, Muholi directly confronts the pervasive violence, discrimination, and erasure of these groups. Visibility is a crucial theme in *Faces and Phases*, with challenges of ongoing discrimination and violence within South Africa. By creating this series, Muholi not only provides representation for a group that has been traditionally sidelined but also creates a powerful counter-narrative to societal stigma. Within this series, Muholi provides them with a sense of authority over how they are viewed and portrayed by taking direct and impactful pictures of each individual. The subjects are portrayed as they desired, free from the prejudices and biases that are frequently applied by the media, as well as society. The fact that each of her photographs are presented in a monochromatic way. Their open-ended approach to gender representation challenges the binary gender system that often reduces identity to a fixed female/male division.

With Muholi revisiting several topics over the course of the series' many years, it provides a feeling of continuity and development in the lives of the characters as well as in the broader sociopolitical environment. As a result, the work includes a chronological

dimension that shows how identity and community change over time, as well as the continuous challenges LGBTQ+ people in South Africa confront.

The idea that the body is a site of resistance is fundamental to Muholi's work. Muholi uses the body as a means of questioning social norms and claiming the freedom to exist without being constrained by strict gender roles. Given South Africa's historical background, where laws and regulations have attempted to manage both gender and race, this resistance is particularly strong. The state attempted to regulate Black South Africans' bodies during apartheid, and the country still struggles with the effects of past oppression and violence, especially against women and LGBTQIA+ people. The strength and agency of the body are asserted in Muholi's images, where people frequently pose nude or semi-nude. Muholi asserts queer and trans people's freedom to exist without being objectified or policed by displaying their bodies in an unapologetic manner. The images offer a subdued opposition to the representational conventions that have traditionally silenced these people, rather than fetishizing the subjects.

The representation and defiance in Muholi's work are conceptually comparable to British painter Jenny Saville's work, whose examination of the human body also questions accepted notions of fragility, attractiveness, and identity. Saville's work, like Muholi's, presents the audience with unvarnished, unconstrained representations of the human form, frequently addressing gender concerns, the fragility of the body, and social expectations. Through her large-scale paintings and drawings, Saville not only explores the physicality of the body, but also delves into the way gender is perceived, constructed and internalized. Her work challenges the audience to consider the societal and cultural narratives around gender by showcasing the body in all of its unidealized, frequently confronting forms. At the same time, Saville confronts the viewer with the complexity, strength, and vulnerability that are inherent in human existence.

Society tends to describe Saville's work to be on the feminist side, though she resists easy categorization. Saville's paintings highlight the materiality and sensitivity of the female body rather than idealized or passive feminine forms. In an article, Saville comments "I wasn't interested in admired or idealized beauty" (Saville in Mackenzie 2005)⁵ This can imply that her focus lies within art expression, rather than having an aesthetically appealing piece of work, by rejecting conventional standards of beauty that are often idealized by society- such as thinness, youth and symmetry especially in the context of the

⁵ Rachel Colls (2012) BodiesTouchingBodies: Jenny Saville's over-life-sized paintings and the 'morpho-logics' of fat, female bodies, *Gender, Place & Culture*, 19:2, 175-192, Accessed- 4 December 2024

female form. Evidence from Saville's work that depicts the female body in such a way is her piece *Propped* (1992), a self-portrait that epitomizes vulnerability and self-confidence, the way that Saville presents herself within this piece can imply the female body as a site of power as she goes against the male gaze, she engages herself in a raw, unpolished way which challenges the traditional notions of beauty.



Fig 3. *Propped* 1992, Jenny Saville

A big, almost aggressive image of herself is depicted in the picture, her body spread out in a disconnected and awkward position. Her body is big, muscular, and imperfect, which contrasts with the smooth, slender, and frequently passive depictions of women in much of Western art history. Saville confronts conventional images of femininity through her scale, the rawness of the figure, and the portrayal of her body. Her skin is stretched and sagging, with creases and marks evident, defying the shiny, manipulated representations of women that are commonly found in fashion and popular media. By depicting the feminine figure in this manner, Saville challenges the expectations placed on women by society. The ideology of Saville's work can suggest that the female form should not solely

be consumed or viewed in terms of aesthetic pleasure, she depicts bodies that were never normally presented within art which can allow a sense of connection to some people.

Additionally, *Plan* (1992) is another influential and provocative artwork that challenges gender norms and expectations, especially regarding body depiction and how women are perceived in society. Although the figure's physique seems heavy and grounded, the way it is painted gives the impression that it is powerful, as if it were both physically large and commanding. Her flesh's rawness is portrayed as something to be cherished rather than something to be conquered or concealed.



Fig 4, *Plan* 1993, Jenny Saville

The rejection of idealized beauty can also be suggested by the absence of an 'idealized' colour palette. Her usage of earthy grounded tones is deliberate and challenges the viewers expectations of what the female body should look like in art. The reddish hues, which are particularly prevalent in skin creases and tense spots, highlight the sensation of living flesh and imply the physicality of the body. It gives the body a sense of power and vitality but also vulnerability, inviting a more nuanced understanding of the female form. The painting's thick application of colours creates a texture that evokes an emotional response from the viewer. Another important factor of this piece is the actual scale of the piece, it transforms the female body into a monumental object, it reinforces Savilles intentions to show the female body for what it is, rather than what society says it should be.

It is evident from the examples provided that Saville's aim to examine and honour the body in all of its authentic, flawed complexity is reflected in her work. She consciously chooses a more authentic representation of the female body above the masculine gaze. Her paintings challenge the patriarchal idea that a woman's value is determined by how she looks.

The politics of beauty, representation, and the female body are all openly addressed in Jenny Saville's work, which challenges conventional notions of beauty while putting out a more nuanced, inclusive view of the female form. Saville demands a confrontation with the realities of women's life experiences through her potent portrayals of the body in all its unvarnished and imperfection. By presenting the female body as a subject—strong, independent, and unabashedly human—she dismantles the notion that it is an object for the male gaze. Saville's writings challenge not only the representation of women's bodies but also how society views and values them, making them an important contribution to feminist discourse.

Another piece of work of Saville's that encapsulates the representation of gender can be her piece *Branded* (1992). It is said by Saville herself that she found it useful to consider Goffman's (1976)⁶ representation of gendered bodies in advertisements in the United States in the 1970s. In order to identify any patterns based on the gender of the body in the advertisement, he compiled hundreds of magazine ads and classified particular types of tactile relationships that are unique to men and women. He refers to the behaviour of women as "self-touching," which is "readable as conveying a sense of one's body being a delicate and precious thing," and the "feminine touch," in which women are more frequently observed than men cradling or caressing the goods they are promoting. He distinguishes between these types of touching and what he refers to as a "utilitarian" touch that "grasps, manipulates, or holds," which better characterises the squeeze or clutch of skin in *Branded*.

⁶ Rachel Colls (2012) *BodiesTouchingBodies: Jenny Saville's over-life-sized paintings and the 'morpho-logics' of fat, female bodies*, Gender, Place & Culture
Accessed December 5



Fig 5 *Branded* (1992). By Jenny Saville.

In *Branded*, the branding marks on the body literally imply a loss of agency right away. Traditionally used to identify cattle or property, branding suggests an imposition and ownership procedure. This might be interpreted as a metaphor for how women's bodies are subjected to social norms and expectations. Feelings of violence and oppression are evoked by the obvious scars and body deformity in Saville's picture, which suggests that the body has been exposed to outside influences, whether they be social, cultural, or psychological. The body in *Branded* is not passive, nonetheless, in spite of the marks' terrible meaning. In addition to being signs of victimisation, the scars or brands also show the marks these forces have made on the body. In the aftermath of this branding, the body endures and persists. In the extent that the body endures and keeps showing itself to the observer, although marked, this survival implies agency.

Jenny Saville and Zanele Muholi both utilize their art to critically examine the idea of gender, but they do so from different thematic and cultural angles. Muholi's photography, which shows the lives of Black LGBTQIA+ people in South Africa after apartheid, is a potent weapon for advocacy and exposure. Muholi defends the right of marginalized communities to exist and is seen by challenging conventional gender norms through her personal, dignified pictures. Saville, however, challenges how the female body is portrayed in art and culture through painting. By rejecting the passive, sexualized representations of women's bodies that are frequently found in traditional art, her emphasis on fleshy, unidealized shapes criticizes the commodity of women's bodies. Both artists employ the body as a source of empowerment and resistance, despite the differences in their mediums and

settings. By highlighting the significance of authenticity, visibility, and the rejection of normative norms in favour of a more expansive, inclusive conception of identity, Muholi and Saville challenge us to reevaluate how gender is portrayed. Their creations highlight how art can be a revolutionary tool for questioning and changing gender politics.

In conclusion, despite having a similar interest in the body, identity, and questioning conventional representations, Jenny Saville and Zanele Muholi's work is very different in terms of focus, medium, approach, and cultural context. While Muholi's art tackles the political reality of black queer and trans bodies in South Africa, Saville's art primarily challenges Western conceptions of femininity and the portrayal of the female body. Both, however, challenge social conventions and call for increased exposure, acceptance, and acknowledgment for marginalised bodies through their art as a means of resistance. Both artists significantly add to the current discussions around gender, sexuality, identity, and the politics of representation, despite the variations in their methods.

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