

The Walther Collection: The Way She Looks. Ryerson Image Centre, Guest curator: Sandrine Colard. September 11–December 8, 2019

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Toshio Shibata, *Untitled* (#228), 2003



Kunihiro Shinohara, *Cosmic* #9, 1993-2000

photographique québécois en incluant quatre artistes montréalais ayant exploré à un moment ou à un autre ce médium : Louise Abbott, Benoît Aquin, Evergon et Charles Gagnon. Il est intéressant d'étudier les différentes fonctions qu'endosse le film Polaroid : tandis que Louise Abbott l'utilise pour sa fonction d'unicité et de souvenirs en tirant le portrait à des photographes de renom lors des Rencontres de la Photo à Arles, en France, Benoît Aquin propose une série sur les travailleuses du sexe à Montréal, avec des témoignages écrits à même le tirage, série qui énonce une forme documentaire que l'on retrouve peu dans l'utilisation du film Polaroid, certainement en raison de son prix.

Au-delà d'un phénomène social et économique, ce film est de toute évidence un support toujours chéri par les photographes et sujet à expérimentation dans les dérives de ses formes papier et de sa chimie, comme chez les artistes

Damien Hustinx et Ellen Carey. Peut-être que cette exploration du Polaroid dans sa matérialité aurait pu être un volet plus vaste de l'exposition. Néanmoins, cette magistrale présentation a su certainement combler les plus nostalgiques de l'image argentique tout en satisfaisant le jeune public qui ne cesse de faire renaître ce film « vintage ».

D'une photographie expérimentale au portrait en passant par la nature morte, l'exposition découpe cette rétrospective par thématiques et non en suivant une chronologie des œuvres. Les modèles du film Polaroid sont de tailles variées – certains instantanés sont de formats impressionnants – et se partagent l'espace muséal sous forme de chapitres tels qu'*Interrogations*, *Observations*, *Contemplation*, *Configurations* ou encore *Mises en scène*. Ces choix thématiques interrogent le processus créatif de ce film et de son instantanéité, au service d'une démarche artistique. Tandis que

certains photographes testent les prouesses techniques du film, d'autres vont l'explorer dans son esthétique et son immédiateté pour créer des séries dynamiques, des ambiances scénarisées ou cinématographiques. Dans une ambiance feutrée au spectre des couleurs mythiques de la marque, le visiteur campe dans un espace temporel agréablement flou pris dans les abîmes de l'histoire d'une photographie et peut librement décider de son parcours avant d'atteindre la dernière salle plus éclairée qui nous ramène au moment présent en présentant une collecte de Polaroid initiée par l'institution montréalaise auprès du public et d'organismes locaux, proposant ainsi, pour terminer, une expérience participative et immersive.

Le Projet Polaroid – Art et technologie reflète encore une fois parfaitement les missions du département de la photographie du McCord qui ne cesse de consolider le lien entre l'histoire – d'une

technique, d'une collection –, la photographie contemporaine et le citoyen montréalais. Après Vienne, Hambourg, Berlin, Singapour et Montréal, l'exposition itinérante *Le Projet Polaroid – Art et technologie* s'installera enfin sur les murs du MIT Museum à Cambridge à l'hiver 2020.

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Ellen Carey, *Pulls* (CMY), 1997, © Jayne H. Baum Gallery, New York et M+B Gallery, Los Angeles

Bruce Charlesworth, *Untitled*, 1979



David Goldblatt, *A Farmer's Son with his Nursemaid, Heimweeberg, Nietverdiend, Western Transvaal*, from the series *Some Afrikaners Photographed*, 1964 (printed 2010), gelatin silver print, courtesy of Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg

The Walther Collection: The Way She Looks

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Photography extends the gaze, making material its spectrum of desires and subject positions – whether violence, control, submission, negotiation, or resistance. Once etched as image – on plate, print, or screen – the momentary exchange circulates and is entrenched as truth. For *The Way She Looks*, curator Sandrine Colard expands John Berger's assessment of patriarchal visual dynamics – “Men look, women are looked at” – into realms of racial power. And then, she undoes it. Through over one hundred works drawn from the Walther Collection, of and by African women from the

mid-nineteenth century to the present, Colard prompts viewers to consider alternate ways of reading images.

The photographic encounter as performed for ethnographic archives, objectifying its subjects, is critiqued. The exhibition begins with a wide range of such images made to illustrate typological specimens for burgeoning fields of colonial ethnography and to support racial hierarchies. African women were staged performing traditions such as hairdressing, nude, and carrying babies on their backs. Postcards, cartes de visites, and albums, produced as exotic

and erotica, were distributed through European markets. Indigenous women were also photographed in European-style portrait studios using Western conventions of fashion, pose, lighting, and painted backgrounds to create sensitive character portraits suggesting Eurocentric respectability.

The anonymity of production of many of these images blocks our knowledge about transactions between the mostly white, male photographers and their subjects. The absence is useful for Colard, as it opens space for alternative interpretive strategies. Following Tina Campt's work of "listening to photographs," it is proposed that "frequencies" or "muscular tensions" in facial expressions may reveal sitters' experiences – whether resistant or willing. This subversive hermeneutics allows for a more fluid visual economy that challenges "truths" embedded in rigid ethnographic formats and can recuperate subjects' agency. Colard claims that

the threat to African cultural sovereignty that Steve Biko termed "mental colonization." But other subjects proudly display elements seen in nineteenth-century images – textile patterns, surface design, hair dressing, and social adhesion – indicating the strength of their traditions. One example is Keita's portrait of two women, wearing identical fabric designs signifying kinship and solidarity, standing before patterned backgrounds. This haptic surfeit of surface rippling across flattened pictorial space is favoured over the Western pictorial convention of realist perspective.

Enduring cultural traditions are similarly demonstrated in J.D. 'Okhai Ojeikere's project, *Hairstyles*. In the 1950s during Nigeria's independence movement, Ojeikere began travelling through his country to document women's regional hair designs – a subject that also fascinated colonial photographers. He made over two thousand negatives to celebrate and



Guy Tillim, Fiorinda Ngoma, Her Mother Rosalia Nahamba (Holding Baby Filomena Lasinda), and Her Sister Rosali Sindali, Holding Baby Guerra, from the series *Kunhinga*, 2002, inkjet print, courtesy of Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg

at times, "the female sitters' confident and forthright gazes rival that of the photographer." The concept collides provocatively with what is now the more established understanding of the medium: its inability to reveal truth.

The strategy becomes increasingly unnecessary as the exhibition jumps chronologically into the mid-twentieth century, when more production details are known and fomenting independence and women's movements were beginning to unravel power imbalances inside and outside the frame. A selection of prints by each of the Malian Bamako commercial studio photographers, Malick Sidibé and Seydou Keita, show their female subjects – paying customers commissioning portraits for their own use – as self-fashioned performers in their chosen outfits and poses. Some adopt Western styles, reflecting perhaps

promote African culture, four of which are presented here. Their square format, careful lighting, and fine printing situate them as fine art prints, but their strict adherence to the back or profile view associates them with both the colonial classificatory style and the modernist *Neue Sachlichkeit*. This curious amalgam of Western genres is corralled for the struggle for national sovereignty.

Cameroonian portrait photographer Samuel Fosso promoted African culture through his series *African Spirits* (2008). Fosso donned elaborate costumes to represent important cultural figures from Africa and its diaspora. His impeccable impersonation of Black nationalist Angela Davis, haloed by her magnificent afro, is a remarkable exploration of Black gendered identity.

In support of South Africa's anti-apartheid movement in the 1980s,



Jodi Bieber, *Babalwa*, from the series *Real Beauty*, 2008, inkjet print, courtesy of Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg

photographers David Goldblatt, Guy Tillim, and Santu Mofokeng captured racial conflict in the international black-and-white social documentary style of the period. Photojournalism organizations such as Afrapix and the educational Market Photo Workshop were and, in the latter case, remain important in nurturing young Black photographers. Goldblatt's *A farmer's son with his nursemaid*, *Heimweeberg*, *Nietverdiend* (1964) shows a tender exchange between his subjects in front of a barbed-wire fence that poignantly illustrates the pain of apartheid division.

Women step out of the frame in the exhibition's final sections. In two street portraits from Nontsikelelo "Lolo" Veleko's series *Beauty is in the Eye of the Beholder* (2003), in a style not dissimilar to ethnographic portraits, young women proudly display their colourful hybrid flair. The now-familiar African interest in pattern and textiles is employed in four videos from Grace Ndiritu's series *Still Life* (2005–07) to disrupt the Western tradition of visually accessing women's

bodies, as seen extensively in the exhibition's historical images. In each video, a woman shifts and slides between expanses of patterned fabrics, revealing only glimpses of her naked body. This playful melding of references – Henri Matisse's flat coloured canvases, the nude models upon whose bodies modernist abstraction was developed, and Western perspective.

The gender posturing seen in Fossi's work becomes full blown in other artists' works. South African "visual activist" Zanele Muholi dedicates her practice to celebrating and supporting LGBTI South Africans through portraiture. Although the post-apartheid Constitution enshrines their rights, marginalization and violent targeting continue. Muholi's committed purpose does not detract from the aesthetic value of her often beautiful large colour prints. Like the earlier ethnographic images and Ojeikere's *Hairstyles*, this project might also be considered typological. The five portraits from her series *Faces and Phases* (2006–ongoing) stage transgendered individuals. Muholi updates the tired old, pain-laden anthropological formats: the tall Black transgendered *Miss D'vine I* (2007), her flat chest bereft of the breasts so compelling for Western ethnographers, wears a plastic beaded Zulu skirt and red stilettos and sits centred against roadside grasses littered with plastic detritus.

The exhibition's celebratory dénouement is a large colour portrait that takes over the final wall – South African Jodi Bieber's *Babalwa* (2008) from her series *Real Beauty*. A formidably large Black woman wearing only white undergarments, heels, and jewellery, her body an undulating s-shape of fleshy folds, stares down the camera's, and our, gaze. Women, now as both photographer and subject, have arrived and are standing their ground.

Jill Glessing teaches at Ryerson University and writes on visual arts and culture.



Alfred Martin Duggan-Cronin, *Bakgatla*, South Africa, early to mid 20th century, gelatin silver print, courtesy of The Walther Collection, Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg, and The McGregor Museum, Kimberley