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photographie 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, certains photographes testent les poussées techniques du film, d’autres vont l’explorer dans son esthétique et son immédiateté pour créer des séries dynamiques, des ambiances scénarisées ou cinémographiques. 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 la durée, pour se retrouver en peau de chien ou cinématographiques.

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 poussées 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 la durée, pour se retrouver en peau de chien ou cinématographiques.


Sophie Bertrand est photographe et rédactrice photo indépendante. Depuis 2018, elle poursuit un cursus universitaire en muséologie à l’UQAM dans le but de développer des projets de recherche et de commissariat en photographie.

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

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 exotica
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 photo-interpretive strategies. Following Tina subjects. The absence is useful for transactions between the mostly Eurocentric respectability.

sensitive character portraits suggesting conventions of fashion, pose, lighting, and women’s regional hair designs – a subject that also fascinated colonial photographers. He made over two thousand negatives to celebrate and

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 modern abstraction was developed, and Western perspective.

The gender posturing seen in Fossi’s work becomes fully blown in other artists’ works. South African “viscous 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, painladen 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 formidable 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.

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

Photographs by: Alfred Martin Duggan-Cronin, Babalwa, 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