

*Sometimes I disappear*

Zanele Muholi

Cindy Sherman

Oana Stanciu

Francesca Woodman



Zanele Muholi, *MaID III*, Philadelphia, 2018, silver gelatin print, 90 x 60 cm. Courtesy of Stevenson Gallery, South Africa

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Ingleby Gallery's 2019 exhibition programme opens with an exhibition of photography by four artists who use self-portraiture as a kind of challenge to both confront, and yet avoid, the viewer's gaze. In doing so something of themselves is simultaneously revealed and concealed; exposed but held back.

It is a beguiling contradiction achieved through one of the most direct mediums in which the Self becomes both subject and object; laid bare but distanced by the artifice of props and costume.

The unrivalled master of this way of working is Cindy Sherman, (b.1954) represented here by a small but captivatingly intense portrait from 1975. It is an image that subverts conventions of femininity and religion to present the artist as film star, sex-bomb, the Madonna. In Sherman's words:

*"I feel I'm anonymous in my work. When I look at the pictures, I never see myself; they aren't self-portraits. Sometimes I disappear."*

(The New York Times, 1 Feb 1990)

In this statement she might have been describing the work of her near contemporary Francesca Woodman (1958-1981) who, despite her death at age 23, created an extraordinarily mature and absorbing body of work in which ideas of presence and absence are constantly entwined. For one who died young Woodman has had a huge influence on a more recent generation of photographers, especially perhaps in her use of props and objects (including her own body) within architectural settings.



Francesca Woodman, *Untitled - New York*, 1979, gelatin silver estate print

The Romanian photographer Oana Stanciu's (b.1988) series *!EU(!ME)* owes something to Woodman in the way she poses herself in often uncomfortable domestic tableaux; occupying space with the self-awareness and control of a dancer, and distorting the viewer's expectations in a kind of off-kilter riddle.

This sense of the image as a fragment of a half-told story is also present in the photographs of the South African artist and self-described 'visual activist' Zanele Muholi (b.1972) whose extraordinary series *Hail the Dark Lioness* is one of the most compelling and politically powerful bodies of self-portraiture made anywhere in recent years. She too uses props, or *materials* as she refers to them to layer the imagery with meaning and association, with the ultimate tool being herself:

*"The black body itself is the material, the black body that is ever scrutinised, and violated and undermined".*

(The Guardian, 14 July 2017)



(left) Oana Stanciu, *!EU (!ME)* #5, 2013, giclée print, 84 x 56 cm  
(right) Cindy Sherman, *Madonna*, 1975 - 1977, gelatin silver print, 17.5 x 13cm