Examining agency in self-portraits by selected black female artists

by

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree Magister Artium (Visual Studies)

in the

FACULTY OF HUMANITIES

UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA

DATE (October 2024)

Supervisor: Professor Jenni Lauwrens

ABSTRACT

Global feminism and global black feminism are central to this study as I investigate the agency of (black) women in the Western art canon because it shows how women's empowerment has developed over time. Feminist art is a crucial part of this study because it shows that female artists have navigated and challenged a traditionally patriarchal industry. This is explored through artists like Judy Chicago from the United States of America (USA) as well as Penny Siopis and Sue Williamson from South Africa, alongside critical perspectives of theorists like Marion Arnold (1996), Brenda Schmahmann (2015), and Karen von Veh (2006; 2019). In recent decades, there has been an apparent shift in the representation of black women in visual culture with global artists like Mickalene Thomas, Amy Sherald, and Wangechi Mutu expressing themes of assertiveness, confidence, and beauty in their art. By examining the works of artists like Jean-Marc Nattier and Edouard Manet, I also trace the evolution of black women's representation in the Western art canon.

I examine self-portraiture as a feminist strategy, analysing the works of famous self-portraitists like Amrita Sher-Gil, Frida Kahlo and Cindy Sherman who have challenged gender stereotypes along with Carrie Mae Weems and Renee Cox who convey black female subjectivity in their artwork. My primary objective for this study is to show how selected prolific black female artists, namely Mary Sibande, Zanele Muholi, Billie Zangewa, and Zandile Tshabalala assert agency in their self-portraits through different (black) feminist strategies such as the oppositional gaze, self-definition, and self-love.

Key terms:

agency, black women, black feminism, feminism, feminist art, the oppositional gaze, self-definition, self-portraits, self-love, and self-representation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding, in all your ways submit to him and he will make your paths straight – Proverbs 3:5-6

I want to thank the almighty God for blessing me with such an amazing opportunity to further my studies. I want to thank my wonderful parents, Kgaakge and Linda Yanta for funding my Master's studies, for their unconditional love, for driving me to consultations, and for their prayers, constant encouragement and support throughout this journey. They are indeed my pillars of strength! I would also love to thank my elder brother, Thabiso for always being there for me, especially during the first year of my studies, for protecting me, or driving me to consultations, and supporting me in many other ways. My sisters Kgau, Koki, Boipelo and Keke have my gratitude for always checking on me, and for praying for me. Additionally, I appreciate my friends, Enha, Lesedi, Tapiwanashe, Thato, and Fezeka, for always expressing how proud and happy they are of me. I always give an honourary mention to the formidable Athenkosi Kwinana and Odette Graskie. Thank you for our memorable time together. Another big thank you to the Mokgehles, Seales, Mahloeles, Sitholes, and my Aunty Nombali for loving and caring for me during this time.

I truly appreciate Dr. Rory du Plessis for welcoming me into the programme, for guiding me through the first year of my studies, spending many hours reading each draft of my proposal, and guiding me through it. Your kind words of encouragement are immeasurable. I also appreciate Dr. Janine Engelbrecht for assisting me in every way possible to get to this point, for her politeness, for taking the time to read my proposal, and for making me feel at ease. I sincerely thank the incomparable Ms Zandile Tshabalala for allowing me to interview her. Your beautiful insight brought much value to the study. I also extend gratitude to my editor, Dr. Olumuyiwa Kehinde. I am grateful to Gabrielle Goliath, my inspiration, for emphasising the value of research, particularly when it comes to representation. Thank you to Dr. Palesa Munzara, for always being such an incredible influence in every way possible and, for inspiring me to further my studies.

I am so incredibly grateful to God to have been blessed with a supervisor like Professor Jenni Lauwrens, an intellectual powerhouse. Jenni has looked after me so well, has widened my knowledge horizon during my studies, and has shown me what it truly means to be a writer. I would also like to thank Jenni for spending hours reviewing my chapters, providing me with fruitful suggestions to further my research, and reminding me of the importance of this study. She has been incredibly professional, patient, loving, thoughtful, gracious, kind, and sweet but very critical, tough, and thorough, which is a fair balance. Although the criticisms at the consultations and while reviewing my chapters were hard to stomach at times, I knew she wanted to see me succeed. I am forever grateful for the positive impact that Jenni has had on my life. I have enjoyed my time with Jenni this year, and learned so much from her. I promise to employ those lessons throughout my career, and to serve humanity.

In loving memory of my uncle Kgaka Moses Seale.

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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background and context

Black women have historically been marginalised in a variety of spheres of society because of aspects like their physical attributes such as their skin, hair and bodies. As a black woman and artist, I have personally experienced discomfort in my skin as a result of this marginalisation that has shaped perceptions of black identity. Moreover, living in post-apartheid South Africa as a black woman has compelled me to confront these complex issues, which include embracing my darker skin tone and asserting my identity in spaces that historically silenced the voices and narratives of black women. Observing powerful and beautiful self-portraits produced by black female artists in galleries has encouraged me to investigate both the past representations of black women in the Western canon of art and the motivations for their current practices of self-representation.

It is also crucial to investigate how black female artists' self-representation has developed over the decades in South Africa. Black women have been underrepresented in art institutions as subjects and producers of artworks (Crenn 2016:2). Additionally, they have also been misrepresented in the Western art canon through harmful stereotypes. However, since the twentieth century, certain black female artists have been challenging their underrepresentation and misrepresentation in art. One of the ways they have gone about this is through the use of self-portraiture. Two noteworthy examples of artists include the African-American Lois Mailou Jones (1905-1998) and Tanzanian Everlyn Nicodemus (1954-present) who were important because they established a tradition for placing themselves at the forefront of their artworks and having control over how they portrayed themselves in self-portraits.

Figure 1: Lois Mailou Jones, *Self-portrait*,1940
Casein on board, 44.5 x 36.7cm
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington
(Smithsonian American Art Museum [sa])

Lois Mailou Jones, an African-American visual artist rose to prominence as the first black female artist to be accepted into the Society of Washington Artists in 1962 (Archives of Women Artists [sa]). Jones is an important figure in art history because she refused to produce work within the bounds of what was expected of Black artists, and influenced the cultural production of the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s and 1930s. In her painting titled *Self-portrait* (Figure 1), her brushstrokes evoke her presence as a black female artist (Scherker 2019). Jones depicts herself in a studio space, holding paintbrushes and looking at what seems like a canvas, implying that she is painting, dressed in a red shirt. On top of the shirt, Jones is wearing a light blue blazer. Noticeably, in the background are two African figurines (Liberman 2019).

Figure 2: Everlyn Nicodemus, *Sjalvpotratt Akersberga*, 1982
Oil on canvas, 82 x 62 cm
National Portrait Gallery
(National Portrait Gallery [sa])

More so, Nicodemus from Kilimanjaro, Tanzania made history as the first black female artist to have her self-portrait included in the National Portrait Gallery's Collection in 1982 in London, England (National Portrait Gallery [sa]). Nicodemus produced artworks centred around healing from personal and cultural trauma, and she has been noted as one of the strongest feminist voices to emerge from Eastern Africa (National Portrait Gallery [sa]). Nicodemus's self-portrait *Sjalvpotratt Akersberga* (Figure 2) is about how she depicts herself at angles as seen by the multiple colourful faces she painted. *Sjalvpotratt Akersberga* (1982) is also a reflection of her identity as a black woman and the racism she has endured, the various roles she is expected to play which are a mother, daughter, friend and lover (National Portrait Gallery [sa]). In these self-portraits, Jones and Nicodemus emphasise agency; they have used self-portraiture as a means to define themselves by documenting their life experiences. These artists amongst many other female artists are important because they have set the scene for how black female artists' agency in self-portraiture has evolved throughout the centuries. In recent decades, many black female artists have

challenged marginalisation in various ways, and they reclaimed agency for their subjects. These artists include Amy Sherald, Lorna Simpson, Kara Walker, Mickalene Thomas, Wangechi Mutu, Thenjiwe Nkosi and many other prolific artists . In this study, I aim to demonstrate how black female artists have portrayed themselves in self-portraits, how they are still reclaiming their agency, and how they continue to present themselves as powerful, and desirable individuals.

1.2. Research questions

This study primarily investigates the ways in which South African black female artists represent themselves to claim their agency both as subjects of art and producers of art. The study centres around the following questions:

- How has global and black feminism influenced the autonomy of (black) female artists in the art institution?
- How have selected South African black female artists defined themselves in self-portraits?
- How do the selected South African black female artists develop the oppositional gaze through self-definition and self-love in their self-portraits?
- In what ways do their self-representations challenge Western canonical art?
- In what ways do the selected artworks reflect black feminist ideals and black feminist strategies?

1.3. Aims of the study

The objectives of the study are to:

- Contextualise black feminism within the broader theoretical framework of feminism.
- Explore the historical representation of black women in Western art.
- Analyse a selection of artworks by South African artists Mary Sibande, Zanele Muholi, Billie Zangewa and Zandile Tshabalala through the lens of black feminism.

- Evaluate how black female artists in South Africa use self-portraiture to challenge the Western canon of art.

1.4. Brief literature review

This brief literature review introduces the theories and theorists I have engaged with for each of the topics discussed in Chapter Two, and Chapter Three, thus highlighting how their arguments correlate with the analysis of the artworks in Chapter Four.

1.4.1. Second and third-wave feminism

The most important theorists referenced in this study regarding second-wave feminism (also defined as radical feminism) are Charlotte Krolokke and Anne Scott-Sorenson in *Three Waves of Feminism: From Suffragettes to Grrls* (2005) with additional insights from Becky Thompson in *Multiracial Feminism: Recasting the Chronology of Second Wave Feminism* (2002). Claire Snyder, also known as Claire Snyder-Hall is important in the discussion of third-wave feminism as shown in her articles *What Is Third-Wave Feminism? A New Directions Essay* (2008) and *Third-Wave Feminism and the Defense of Choice* (2010). Snyder-Hall (2010) establishes the goals of this movement, and she argues how it was different from second-wave feminism by incorporating race, class, sexual liberation, the narratives of different women and sexual orientation, making it more inclusive and less judgemental

1.4.2. Global feminism in art

I examine the role of feminism in art in the United States of America (USA), focussing on Judy Chicago's contribution to the movement. Jane Gerhard (2013) likewise offers a critical analysis of Chicago's famous installation, *The Dinner Party* (1974-1979). I also explore feminist art history through the lenses of Norma Broude and Mary D Garrard in *Reclaiming Female Agency: Feminist Art History* (2005), and Heather

Anderson in *Making Women Artists Visible* (1992). While feminism in art in the USA gained momentum in the 1960s and 1970s, feminist art in South Africa emerged in the 1980s. The theorists I engage with are Marion Arnold, who mainly investigates the histories and contributions of female artists in South Africa in *Women and Art in South Africa* (1996); Brenda Schmahmann who explains how feminist art in South Africa emerged in *Shades of Discrimination: The Emergence of Feminist Art in Apartheid South Africa* (2015); and Karen von Veh, who explores the aims of feminism art in South Africa as well as how feminist art was overlooked due to the amount of focus that was on apartheid in *Feminism as Activism in South African Art* (2019).

1.4.3. Global black feminism

I explore black feminism since the study is based on examining the agency of black female artists, thus, it is critical to understand black women's unique experiences in that phenomenon. I consider theorists like Patricia Hill Collins in her article *WHAT'S IN A NAME? Womanism, Black Feminism and Beyond* (1996), which addresses the meaning of black feminism; and Collins and Sirma Bilge (2020) whose work shows the necessity of intersectionality in black feminism. Barbara Smith, in her book *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (1983) mainly emphasises the goals of black feminism, also the book discusses the misconceptions of black feminism. bell hooks examines the historical devaluation of black womanhood in the nineteenth century in her prolific *book Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (1981), emphasising the severe experiences of women like abolitionist Sojourner Truth. Keeanga-Yahmatta Taylor (2017) looks into the importance of The Combahee River Collective, a black feminist organisation formed to address how black women are valuable, and that their liberation is a necessity. While this study focuses on the South African context, it is important to investigate black feminism's roots in the USA because both movements address interconnected oppressions of race, gender, and class.

1.4.4. Black feminism in South Africa

In her article, *Feminisms in South Africa* (1993), Desiree Lewis discusses how the intersections between race and gender amongst South African feminists were ignored.

Thereafter, I engage with Gabeba Baderoon and Desiree Lewis's *Surfacing: On Being Black and Feminist in Southern Africa* (2021), which highlights the different perspectives of contemporary black feminists in South Africa.

1.4.5. Black feminism art in the USA

After investigating black feminism in the USA and South Africa, I then examine black feminism in art in the USA by discussing Valerie Smith's (2011) theories on the emergence and growth of the movement in addition to Lois Jones Pierre-Noel's (1976) insights. I also highlight significant efforts of Faith Ringgold who not only made an invaluable contribution to the movement, but also established platforms where black female artists could participate in critical discourse and showcase their artworks.

1.4.6. Black feminist art in South Africa

When investigating black feminist art history in South Africa, I refer to the above-mentioned Schmahmann's (2015) article, which emphasises the invisibility of black women from the art institution in the 1980s, with growing exposure in the 1990s. Avitha Sooful (2018) also provides essential insight into how black women's artwork has been received. The renowned artist Bongi Dhlomo (1956-present) is examined by Schmahmann (2015:31), who highlights how Dhlomo made a breakthrough in a career like Fine Art that few black women pursued since it was unheard of.

1.4.7. The historical representation of (black) women in fine art and popular culture

First, I outline how women have historically been portrayed as the nude in visual art in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century as well as women's lack of agency, using Roszika Parker and Griselda Pollock's theory in *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* (1981). Secondly, Lisa E Farrington in *Reinventing Herself: The Black Female Nude* (2004) and Charmaine Nelson (2010) in *Representing the Black Female Subject in Western* (2010) both explored the aesthetics of the female nude and argued that the reception of a nude white woman was different from that of a black woman.

The important key theorist when discussing the representation of black women in Fine Art, starting with the brief analysis of the odd placement of the black servants in *Mademoiselle de Clermont en Sultane* (1733) would be Adrienne L Childs. Later in the eighteenth century came the famous painting *Olympia* (1863) by Edouard Manet, which has a similar odd placement of the black servant, Laure, and analysed by Darcy Grisby (2015) and Denise Murrell (2018).

1.4.8. Self-portraiture

Shearer West's theory of self-portraiture is integrated into the section named *Self-portraiture as a feminist strategy,* which examines the genre and development of female artists' agency as self-portraitists. Some of the examples are Amrita Sher-Gil, Frida Kahlo, and Cindy Sherman. In order to understand why Amrita Sher-Gil and Frida Kahlo are significant figures in twentieth-century art as well as how their diverse backgrounds and experiences shaped their creative processes, I consider Guneeta Chadha's (2016) analysis of their respective bodies of work. Saloni Mathur (2011) also has an insightful investigation into Sher-Gil's painting *Self-portrait as a Tahitian Woma*n (1934). In contrast, Joanna Latimer (2009) mostly speaks about Kahlo's distinctive facial features that make her work unique. Relatedly, Anna Kérchy (2003) engages with Cindy Sherman's series *Untitled Film Stills* (1977-1980) by considering feminine roles and gendered identity that Sherman uses in the series. Although Sherman is a white female in a study based on black women and women of colour, her photographs critique the roles and expectations placed on women and deconstruct gender stereotypes comparable to the goals of Sher-Gil and Kahlo.

Furthermore, the oppositional gaze is examined as the first black feminist strategy for agency. Theorists like bell hooks (1992) provide insight into what the oppositional gaze is, and how black women have used it to oppose negative imagery of themselves. Patricia Hill Collins (1986,1990) is another theorist who keeps establishing what self-definition is. In contrast, other key thinkers like Idrissa Snider (2018) expands on self-definition by explaining the characteristics and attempting to explain the similarities between self-definition and the oppositional gaze. Self-love is important in this study as a strategy of resistance and agency for black women who have long been subjected

to negative imagery such as the mammy figure, and those having feelings of invisibility. I draw on the theories of Audre Lorde (1988) and hooks (1999) who emphasise the necessity of self-love and care in resisting oppressive narratives. Additionally, I engage with Donna J Nicol and Angela Yee (2017) as well as Maushmi Patel and Alastair Pipkin (2022). I use these theorists to show how the selected artists in Chapter Four express self-love in their self-portraits.

1.4.9. Selected South African artists

In this study, I examine the artworks by Mary Sibande, Zanele Muholi, Billie Zangewa and Zandile Tshabalala through the lens of black feminism. Mary Sibande (1982-present), a sculptor, photographer, and painter, was born in Barberton, Mpumalanga. Sibande is known for her performative, larger-than-life fibreglass sculptures dressed in extravagant ballgowns (that depict her alter-ego 'Sophie'), which are inspired by her mother and grandmother's reality of being a domestic worker (de Kock 2018:100). I selected Sibande for this study because her work pushes conversations about power, visibility and representation while reclaiming black female subjectivity. Sibande's work also focuses on the legacy of domestic servitude, and the desire for empowerment. When analysing Sibande's artwork and practice, I engage with the research by Alexander Dodd (2010), Mary Corriggall (2015), Patricia Henderson (2018), and Sharlene Khan (2021).

Talking about visual artist and activist Zanele Muholi (1972-present) who was born in Umlazi, Durban; the artist identifies as non-binary and uses the they/them pronouns. Muholi's art practice is situated around race, gender, and sexuality, and documenting the lives of South Africa's black lesbian, gay, transgender, and intersex communities. In this study, I focus on their series *Somnyama Ngonyama* (2012-present), which consists of 365 black and white self-portraits, where Muholi exaggerates the darkness of their skin. The photographs are taken in different cities globally, using different props and materials to set the tone of different versions of Muholi (Poulain 2020:1). My reason for selecting Muholi was that they portray themselves as bold, assertive, and vulnerable as well as their piercing gaze. In analysing Muholi's selected self-portraits, I draw on other theories by Alexandra Poulain (2020) and Mbali Khoza (2021).

Another artist, Billie Zangewa (1973-present) is a Malawian based in Johannesburg. She sews silk fabrics to create collage tapestries by hand. Zangewa uses self-referentiality as a framework to represent the modern African woman, and helps redefine cultures where patriarchy and traditional values still hinder women's emancipation, according to Koyo Kouoh (2017:60). The reason I selected Zangewa was how she engages with her medium and incorporates themes like self-love, feminism and domesticity into her tapestries. To support the analysis of Zangewa's tapestries, I refer to Priya Raghavan (2022), Basia Silwinska and Catherine Domor's (2022) perspectives.

I also present Zandile Tshabalala (1999-present), who was born in Soweto, South Africa. She is an artist whose paintings are situated around the representation of black women, focussing on themes such as beauty and femininity. Tshabalala's vibrantly coloured paintings are inspired by French painter Henri Rousseau (Motsumi 2021), and Kerry James Marshall. I chose Tshabalala because of her ability to portray herself in her self-portraits as beautiful, sensual, rested, and assertive; all while addressing present-day issues. The way Tshabalala paints herself in a dark black tone is another reason why I selected her. Tshabablala paints herself in that tone because colonialism's effects are still seen in society, which is felt in forms of colourism and the artist embraces blackness without having to "dilute it" (Hart 2019). When examining Tshabalala's paintings, I reference both my interview with her and Farrington's (2004) thoughts on the femme fatale.

1.5. Research methodology: theoretical framework and research methods

The research method selected for the study is qualitative consisting of primary and secondary research. An interview with Zandile Tshabalala was conducted as a part of the primary research since there is minimal academic discourse on the artist. The secondary method of research include the use of iconography, iconology and hermeneutics.

According to Marion Müller (2011:285), the best way to define iconography is as qualitative content analysis and interpretation impacted by cultural norms and directed by research interests in the humanities and social sciences. Derived from the Greek word: eikon and graphein, the word iconography can also be translated into “image writing” or “image describing”, and it deals with describing the form of a visual symbol (Moore 1977:21). Erwin Panofsky presented the method of iconology in 1939. Iconology is defined as the interpretation and the meaning of visual symbols, and images according to Albert Moore (1977:25). This research approach was chosen because it is “based on critical analysis of visual and textual and the original contexts” (Gritmann 2007:134; Müller 2011:5). Therefore, it would be an appropriate method for analysing artworks.

Hermeneutics is the study of how people read, understand, and interact with literature produced in a different time or context of life according to Anthony Thiselton (2009:1). Hermenuetics initially started as a method for analysing biblical texts, known as biblical hermeneutics (Thiselton 2009:1). Hermeneutical philosophy also recognises the historical nature of culture (McCraffey et al. 2012:216). Hermeneutics was utilised in this study to comprehend the aim behind the diverse artists' visual language and place their work within the cultural and theoretical context within which they are embedded, and in particular, black feminist discourse.

1.6. Feasibility and ethical implications

In this study, images and texts are analysed as well as an interview with one artist, Zandile Tshabalala. The interview was conducted after the ethical approval was obtained from the Faculty of Humanities Ethics Committee (HUM016/0624).Thus, there will be ethical implications because the artist's name and year of birth were used in the study. The artist’s information (such as public interviews and artists’ catalogues) is also available online. The images were obtained from the public domain, and the information that substantiated the arguments made can be found in books and online journals in many libraries, and on library databases.

1.7. Significance of the study

The main significance of the study cannot be overemphasied. First, the study contributes to the literature on black female artists. Most importantly, it addresses a gap in the literature on specific black female South African artists namely Tshabalala and Billie Zangewa since there is already extensive academic discourse on Sibande and Muholi's work. This study is also significant because of its potential to contribute to black feminist theory, particularly in the art space of South Africa. Some feminist theorists of colour in South Africa are Gabeba Baderoon (2021), Desiree Lewis (2021), Pumla Dineo Gqola (2015, 2021), and Zoe Wicomb (2018. These key thinkers add to the feminist theories in South Africa, and this study is an addition.

1.8. Overview of chapters

Chapter One provides the background and context of the study, highlighting two of the first black female self-portraitists recognised in the art institution and the significant improvements in the representation of black women in visual art. In Chapter Two, I examine global feminism which includes the so-called first, second, and third waves. This leads to a discussion of feminism in art in the USA, and then feminism in South Africa. Thereafter, I investigate black feminism in the USA and South Africa. In order to contextualise black feminism in art, I provide a brief overview of the historical representation of black women in the Western canon of art. Some of the historical representations are seen in Jean-Marc Nattier's painting *Mademoiselle de Clermont en Sultane* (1733) and Edouard Manet's popular painting *Olympia* (1863).

In Chapter Three, I discuss self-portraiture, an important component in the study, and explore the history of the self-portraiture of women, including a brief analysis of artworks by Amrita Sher-Gil, Frida Kahlo and Cindy Sherman. The traditional way of rendering self-portraits was challenged over the years by Sher-Gil, Kahlo, and Sherman. Furthermore, themes like the oppositional gaze, self-definition, self-love and self-representation are explored in self-portraiture as black feminist strategies to challenge the historical representations of black women. These themes then establish a framework for Chapter Four.

Chapter Four serves as an analysis of the artworks of Sibande, Muholi, Zangewa and Tshabalala with the implementation of black feminist ideals as well as strategies such as self-love, self-definition and the oppositional gaze. The purpose of Chapter Four is to conclude how black women's agency has been emphasised in the self-portraits they produced.

Chapter Five concludes the study with a summary of previous chapters. It also presents limitations to the study, and it offers suggestions for further research.

CHAPTER TWO
FEMINISM AND REPRESENTATION

2.1. Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to lay the foundation for my later investigation of agency within self-portraits produced by black female artists. To analyse the selected artwork by black female South African artists in the next chapter, I first show that it is necessary to situate their art in the greater context of feminism and its so-called 'waves'. While I touch on first-wave feminism, I focus on second-wave feminism in depth to provide a historical background about the movement, and to show how black women and women of colour were excluded from this movement. The discussion of third-wave feminism highlights a new phase in the movement, charaterized by the inclusion of women of colour, diverse sexual orientations, sexually liberated women, and respect for the choices women make as "they attempt to balance equality and desire" as opposed to the second-wave which was detached from race and class (Snyder-Hall 2010:259).

From feminism in general, I move on to explore feminism in art. Feminist art challenged the fact that female artists were often invisible and excluded in the historical art canon (Trotot 2016:1). In terms of feminist artists, Judy Chicago is briefly covered in the study. Chicago is well-known for her prolific artworks, feminist art education, and artistic contributions that helped pioneer the feminist art movement. I also discuss South African art historian Brenda Schmahmann (2015). This discussion involves a thorough analysis of South African feminist art, which dates back to the early 1980s during the apartheid era when most of the art was created as an act of resistance. As Baderoon and Lewis (2021:1) argue, black South African feminists have always expressed themselves through "action, creativity and words"(Baderoon & Lewis 2021:1).

While feminism in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s made successful efforts to challenge the inequity of power dynamics between men and women, problems of age, race, class, and sexuality were frequently disregarded, necessitating the discussion of black feminism (Springer 2015:169). Black feminism is discussed at length, since the study

investigates black female artists whose practices, I will show, are steeped in feminist ideologies. This discussion also highlights how they have reclaimed their agency in the art space. The themes that are often expressed within black feminism are self-love, self-definition, and representation (which are also concepts in Chapter Three). Theorists like Lorde (1984; 1988), Collins (1990; 1996), and hooks (1981; 1992) have addressed these themes in their literature. bell hooks is an important key theorist when it comes to explaining black feminism because her scholarship marked a shift in black feminism. After all, she asserted that "personal experience" could "not take the place of theory" (Taylor 1998:250). Patricia Hill Collins is significant in terms of self-definition, whereas Lorde is important in terms of self-love and wellness. Barbara Smith who is a feminist and socialist also provides insight into different black feminist experiences in the form of essays by different authors in her anthology *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology.* In the introduction of the anthology, Smith explores the misconceptions of black feminism, which will be explained in greater detail in the study.

The Combahee River Collective was an important organisation in developing black feminism in America. Although this collective was an American organisation, my focus is on black feminism in South Africa, and how it has evolved since the apartheid era. In that context, I discuss Gabeba Baderoon and Desiree Lewis's anthology of essays by South African women of colour, titled *Surfacing: On Being Black and Feminist in Southern Africa* (2021). Afterwards, I touch on the image of the naked female model in historical artworks created by men for their own consumption when discussing the representation of (black) women in art. From that point, the problematic historical representation of black women in Western art is then addressed by analysing French painter Jean-Marc Nattier's painting *Mademoiselle de Clermont en Sultane* (1733), and French modernist painter Edouard Manet's painting *Olympia* (1863). Both works are discussed in depth to shed light on how black female subjects were depicted in historical artworks. *Mademoiselle de Clermont en Sultane* (1733) and *Olympia* (1863) are good examples since the painting provides historical context for the representation of black female subjects in the art canon.

2.2. Feminism

According to bell hooks (2000:1), feminism is defined as a movement that seeks to eradicate “sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression”. At its core, feminism has emphasised, among others, equal pay, the right to vote, and reproductive and sexual freedom (Soken-Huberty [sa]). Feminism began in the eighteenth century in Europe, whereas the movement referred to as the first wave of feminism began in the USA during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries according to Charlotte Krolokke and Anne Scott Sorenson (2005:1).

Feminism is divided into different periods, which are popularly known as the first, second, third, and fourth waves. The first wave of feminism was concerned with women’s voting rights, and it was also distinguished by various forms of intervention that paved the way for future waves (Krolokke & Sorenson 2005:4). This wave arose from the abolitionist movement and resulted in the suffragist's successful enactment of the nineteenth amendment (Taylor 1998:235). Sojourner Truth, Maria Stewart, and Frances E Harper (who fought for the rights of women of colour) backed the first wave since it was concerned with other reform movements such as abolition and temperance, and it initially involved the working class women (Krolokke & Sorenson 2005:4).

2.2.1. Second-wave feminism

Second-wave feminism (sometimes referred to as hegemonic feminism) took place in the early 1960s, and it questioned women’s roles in society. The key theorists of second-wave feminism remain American feminist Betty Friedan, who wrote *Feminine Mystique* (1963); French writer and philosopher Simone de Beauvoir famous for *The Second Sex* (1949); and Canadian-American radical feminist writer Shulasmith Firestone known for *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (1970). Some of the key statements that drove the second wave were “the personal is political”, “sisterhood is powerful”, and “raising consciousness”, therefore making it a radical movement (Krolokke & Sorenson 2005:9). According to theorists like Krolokke and Sorenson (2005:7), the term second wave was concerned with the “radical

feminism of the women's liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s". This wave sparked an extensive theoretical discussion about the roots of women's oppression. It also helped bring about professional sufficiency of women, which also paved the way for future feminisms. However, it undeniably marginalized the activism and worldview of women of colour (Thompson 2002:335, Sandoval 2002).

Radical second-wave feminism is theorised by a combination of Neo-Marxism and psychoanalysis, which were outlined by feminist theorists Juliet Mitchell and Shulasmith Firestone (Krolokke & Sorenson 2005:9). Mitchell and Firestone claimed that patriarchy is inherent to a bourgeois society and that sexual difference is more fundamental than race and class (Krolokke and Sorenson 2005:9). Relatedly, Becky Thompson (2002:337) asserts that the second-wave feminists ignored class and race analysis and saw strictly understanding equality with men as their only objective. This implies that it is based on individual rights specifically for white heterosexual middle-class women, rather than a holistic justice-based vision. By the same token, Krolokke and Scott Sorensen (2005) highlight that second-wave feminism has been critiqued by different marginalised groups such as African-American women, antiracist white women, and lesbians for excluding them (Maxwell & Shields 2018:3). One of the main differences between second-wave and third-wave feminism is that the latter advocates an intersectional approach. The second wave eventually ushered in the third wave of feminism in the late 1980s, and the beginning of the 1990s, which was shown to be inclusive of sexually liberated women, black women, and women of colour. The reason why it ushered the third wave was that there were critiques of the second wave, third-wave feminists collapsed the category of 'women' and it foregrounds personal narratives that illustrate an intersectional multiperspective version of feminism, therefore offering a non-judgmental approach (Snyder-Hall 2010:175).

Meanwhile, the emergence of feminism in art was fuelled by second-wave feminism, which gave women's voices greater visibility in an otherwise patriarchal sphere (Brand 2006:170). Female artists' work that was undermined and disrupted eventually led to the establishment of hierarchies of power (Brand 2006:170). In terms of artistic production in feminism, women who labelled themselves as feminist artists wanted to produce work that opposed the patriarchal parameters in the art industry (Stace [sa]). When it comes to challenging the art institution, the Guerilla Girls, formed in 1985,

were an outstanding example of an anonymous female artist collective that aimed to eradicate discrimination and had a reputation for fighting misinformation regarding women's art (Brand 2006:173; Tate [sa]). They have produced a large number of posters that are still relevant as they reveal racism and sexism in politics, the art world, and films. According to Peg Brand (2006:175), the Guerilla Girls were known for using wit, humour, stealth, anonymity and direct confrontation; they often questioned why nude models were constantly present in paintings produced by men.

2.2.2. Third-wave feminism

Third-wave feminism emerged in the 1990s and it developed a new generation of feminists who criticised the previous waves for women-centered social and political advances (Springer 2002:1063). This wave was developed in response to the second wave and was led by so-called Generation X-ers (Snyder-Hall 2010:258). According to Claire Snyder-Hall (2010:257), the third wave of feminism was needed due to the judgmental and rigid nature of the second wave. Authors like Naomi Wolf have criticised the second-wave feminists for being too judgmental of other women for the choices they made, and she has praised the third-wave feminists for "tolerating other women's choices", which is fundamental in the third wave (Snyder-Hall 2010:255-256). Another important characteristic of the third wave is women having the choice of how they want to live their lives. For example, Snyder-Hall (2010:256) asserts that women should not have to choose between being a mother and a working woman (Snyder-Hall 2010:256). Thus, third-wave feminism is concerned with expanding the choices for women (2010:256). This wave seeks to steer clear of exclusions based on race, gender identity, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, and so forth which are all included an intersectional approach (Snyder-Hall 2010:259). Moreover, the goals of third-wave feminism are to be inclusive and respectful of the variety of choices that women make as they balance equality and desire (Snyder-Hall 2010:259).

There are significant events that took place during the third wave. An example is when an American lawyer, Anita Hill testified in the Senate Judiciary Committee against the Supreme Court Justice nominee, Clarence Thomas for sexual harassment in 1991 (Fossett 2021). It was a significant moment in third-wave history, because Hill fought

for the justice of women and people of colour. After Anita Hill's testimony in 1991, the third wave was credited to Rebecca Walker who announced the arrival of the third wave (Pruitt 2022). Some of the key pioneers include Leslie Heywood, Kimberle Crenshaw theorised intersectionality[1], and Jennifer Drake. Claire Snyder (2008:175), proclaims that the third wave was "more than simply a rebellion against second-wave mothers." More precisely, third-wave feminism makes strategic moves in response to the second-wave theoretical concerns. The first strategic move in response to second-wave feminism was to make the movement intersectional by highlighting personal stories of third-wave feminists, having a deeper understanding of feminism, and answer to the issues of defining women (Snyder 2008:175). The last move emphasised inclusivity, and non-judgmental methods that refuse to police the boundaries of feminist political borders (Snyder 2008:175). Snyder (2008:178) asserts that the third-wave feminists strive to address the unique difficulties they face and their distinct societal circumstances through their brand of feminism. Moreover, some third-wave feminists are more media-savvy than feminists from second feminism, owing to the dominance of information technology and mass media in their environment (Snyder 2008:178). Relatedly, most of the third-wave literature highlights the significance of cultural production and critique, focusing the attention on female pop culture icons, and beauty culture rather than politics (Snyder 2008:178).

2.2.3. Feminism in art in the USA

While the third wave of feminism saw a significant increase in the visibility and inclusivity of women's art production in the institution of art, it is important to recognise the reasons for the emergence of the feminist art movement. Feminist art emerged between the late 1960s and 1970s, and included a constellation of artists, curators, and art historians (Brodsky & Olin 2008:328). This movement began in the USA (United States of America), and England during the second wave of feminism. Feminist art is also defined as a medium for expressing feminist ideals, advocating for gender equality, and challenging established gender stereotypes through the content and the artwork itself (Dekel 2014:3, Museum of Modern Art [sa]). An example of an artist who defied these stereotypes, and has made an immense contribution to feminist art and

[1] For more detailed information on intersectionality refer to 2.3

history is Judy Chicago. According to Chicago (2015), feminist art also “affirms women, validates their experiences, and makes them feel good about themselves”.

Chicago is a feminist artist and arts educator from Chicago, Illinois. She turned to feminist content in the 1960s during the second wave of feminism. Along with artist Miriam Schapiro, Chicago founded the Feminist Arts Programme at the California State University in Fresno (National Museum of Women in the Arts [sa]). The reason why Chicago and Schapiro started this programme was because they believed that there was a need for feminist education for female art students (Museum of Women in the Arts [sa]). These programmes enabled collaborative art from a female perspective, which then initiated a global feminist art movement (Brooklyn Museum [sa]). Her most prominent art that pioneered her art career was *The Dinner Party* (Figure 3). *The Dinner Party* (1974-1979) is composed of a large ceremonial banquet, arranged on a triangular table with thirty-nine place settings. Each banquet therefore commemorates an important woman from history. Additionally, the settings include painted porcelain plates with elevated central designs inspired by vulvar and butterfly forms, portrayed in styles appropriate to each of the specific women being honoured as well as embroidered runners, gold chalices, and cutlery. Notably, 999 women's names are engraved in gold on the white tile floor beneath the triangular table (Brooklyn Museum [sa]). Jane F Gerhard (2013:2) contends that the women's names engraved on the tiles and place settings are “women of merit” due to their outstanding contributions to different periods such as the Roman Empire, the American Revolution, the Women’s Revolution and so forth. Some of the notable women’s names engraved are: Sojourner Truth, Susan B. Anthony, and Georgia O’Keefe. *The Dinner Party* (1974-1979) was of notable importance in the feminist art movement because it portrayed feminist representations of women as a “sex class” that shared not only female anatomy but also a history of oppression and a culture of resilience across time and place, according to Gerhard (2013:2).

Figure 3: Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party, 1974-1979*
Installation
Brooklyn Museum, New York
(Brooklyn [sa])

Apart from discussing feminism in art, it is also equally crucial for this study to explore feminist art history, which investigates how female artists have historically been marginalised, and how gender relations have shaped the production and perception of art. Art historians, Norma Broude and Mary D Garrard (2005:1) assert that feminist art history's main objective was to rectify gender inequalities by disclosing "gender distortions in the canonical record". Rectifying those gender inequalities was done by challenging and questioning culture as a whole, exposing its biases and hierarchies of value from the near monolithic standpoint of an undifferentiated feminist impulse (Broude & Garrard 2005:1). Other objectives include challenging phallocentrism, illuminating female sexuality and eroticism and criticising visual economies that restrict women to heterosexual and maternal identities and, celebrate modes of existence that transcend patriarchy and white supremacy (Brodsy & Olin 2008:329). Historically, women were expected to be submissive housewives, retain their beauty and be sexual objects (Broude & Garrard 2005:3). Furthermore, it was thought that women and

children were incapable of being great artists because they were " farther than men from God" (Broude & Garrard 2005:4).

Parker and Pollock (1992:115) assert that one of the reasons for some of the stereotypical attitudes against women in art is that, in the art world, "The male establishment not only determined the criterion of greatness, but also had control over who had access to the means to achieve it". Heather Anderson (1992:14) explains that nude models were historically important for artists to study and work from, except for female artists, who were not permitted to work from the nude models, whether male or female. Moreover, women's artwork has been characterised as weak, pretty, fancy, sentimental, passive, hysterical, emotional, and lacking in creative imagination as opposed to male artists' work, which was distinguished as strong, grand, forceful, powerful, creative, bold, intellectual, structured, and tough (Anderson 1992:15, Loeb 1979:161). However, feminist artists globally defied these stereotypes about female artists. Despite being historically invisible, there have always been female artists, who have thus continued to produce art, and they have grown in number (Anderson 1992:14).

2.2.4. Feminist art in South Africa

While feminist art emerged in the 1960s and 1970s in the USA and the United Kingdom (UK), feminist art in South Africa emerged in the late 1970s and 1980s during the political unrest of the apartheid era. The 1980s were marked by brutal political oppression and injustice (Schmahmann 2015:31). In the 1980s, feminist themes were evident, even though they were frequently absorbed into larger campaigns against racial injustice. Although they were involved in the anti-apartheid struggle, female artists' efforts were usually overlooked by South African male artists. Moreover, art with feminist underpinnings was used as resistance against apartheid. Nevertheless, feminism as an ideology, and the difficulties experienced by women were not given much attention (Schmahman 2015:29). Furthermore, there are only a few instances of South African female artists producing artwork in the 1970s that were centred around the gender consciousness, such as Nina Romm (Schmahmann 2015:28).

While the 1980s were characterised by a focus on apartheid, and a lack of attention to feminist art according to von Veh (2006:29), festivals and conferences were established as a form of resistance for marginalised individuals, including (black) women. These festivals served as a significant platform for self-expression and empowerment. A conference titled *The State of the Art in South Africa* was held at the University of Cape Town in 1979, and it was chaired by Neville Dubow (Schmahmann 2015:29). The purpose of this conference was to first“ demand that educational facilities be open to artists of all races” and then “boycott all state-sponsored exhibitions until the first the requirement was met” (Schmahmann 2015:31). However, there was no reference to any gender discrimination in the debates that had occurred at the conference. A similar action occurred when minimal artworks were produced by women at the Culture and Resistance Festival held in Gaborone, Botswana in 1982 (Schmahmann 2015:31). The festival was organised by the Medu Ensemble, a creative collective (Schmahmann 2015:31).

Among the female artists who produced artwork at the Culture and Resistance Festival South African artist is Sue Williamson who made an artwork relating to South Africa’s political climate along with some feminist underpinnings (Schmahmann 2015:31). In the series titled *A Few South Africans* (1980), Williamson produced portraits of women who were part of the struggle within South Africa during the 1980s, acknowledging the significant contribution to their country. The subjects in *A Few South Africans* (1980) were women she was acquainted with and read about according to Arnold (1996:135). Additionally, Arnold (1996:136) contends that these portraits from the series became popular as Williamson also made them into postcards that circulated worldwide, thus increasing women's visibility. Overall, Williamson produced work, which addressed social struggle for social change (Goodman Gallery [sa]). An example from the series is a portrait of *Miriam Makeba* (Figure 4), a photo etching of Makeba staring intensely at the camera and wearing a headdress. The purpose of this series was to place the women centrally in the frame, which gave them the status of heroines (Schmahmann 2015:30). Although produced mainly by white women, the feminist art that emerged in SA in the 1980s and 1990s showed the intersection of racial and gender inequalities, and it may be suggested that this reflected the intersectional emphasis of third-wave feminism.

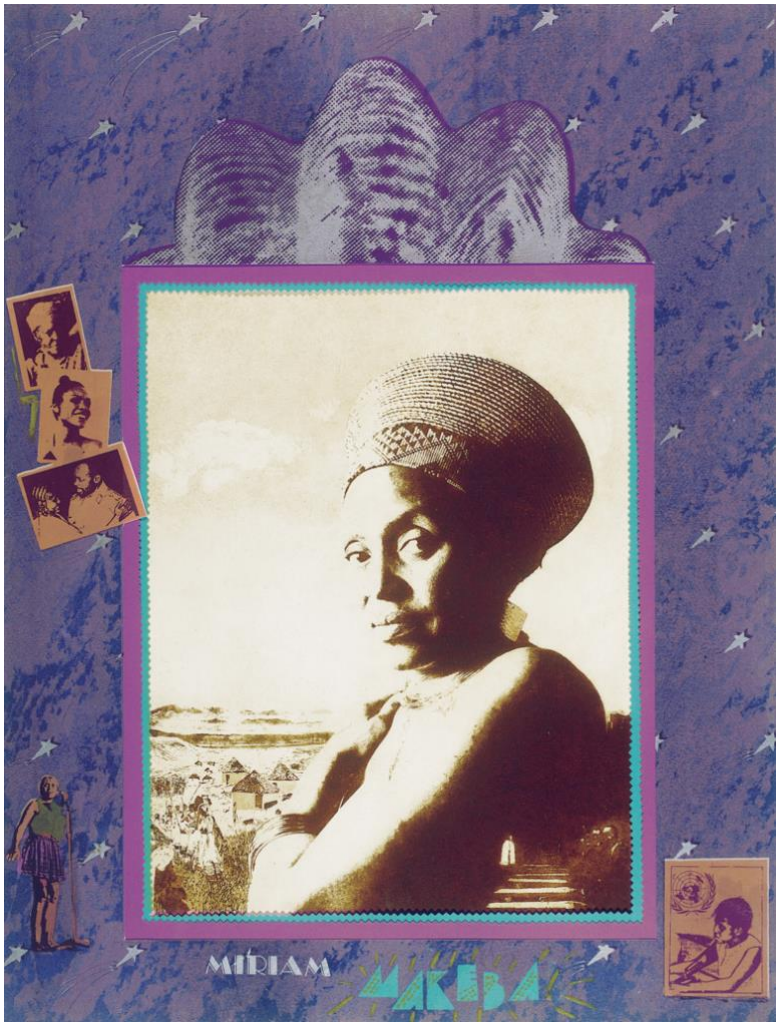

Figure 4: Sue Williamson, *Miriam Makeba*, 1987

Photoetching, screen collage, 100 x 70cm

Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg

(Goodman Gallery [sa])

Penny Siopis was another artist among the women who participated in the Medu Ensemble in 1982, but the artwork featured in this chapter came much later. Siopis has significantly shaped feminist art in South Africa. Siopis looks into her identity as a female artist concerning feminism, sexuality, representation and interpretation (1996:131). Arnold (1996:131) asserts that Siopis has produced several paintings that are influenced by South African history. In some of Siopis's artworks, she subverts anti-heroes in South Africa who are black women, turning them into primary protagonists (Arnold 1996:131). An example of an artwork where Siopis depicted a black woman as a protagonist is *Patience on a Monument: A History Painting* (Figure

5). *Patience on a Monument: 'A History Painting'* (1988) is a painting that depicts a black woman in a dress, deep in thought, and peeling a citrus fruit. The woman is seated on a mountain of various items and debris, which suggests a waste disposal site. The painting is symbolic of historical events, including scenes from colonial wars, as noted by Jennifer Law (2014:73). Sue Williamson (2004:20) likewise suggests that the black woman is "anti-heroic, an inversion of liberty leading the people". Therefore, it is possible to maintain that the act of sitting on top of a mountain of debris as a black woman could symbolise endurance in the face of oppression, since they have been misrepresented and mistreated, particularly during the apartheid. The painting's background is made up of copies of school history textbooks, overlaid in yellow paint (Williamson 2004:20). The painting also contains images of black warriors, slaves, missionaries, Voortrekkers and British redcoats that are reminiscent of South Africa's history.

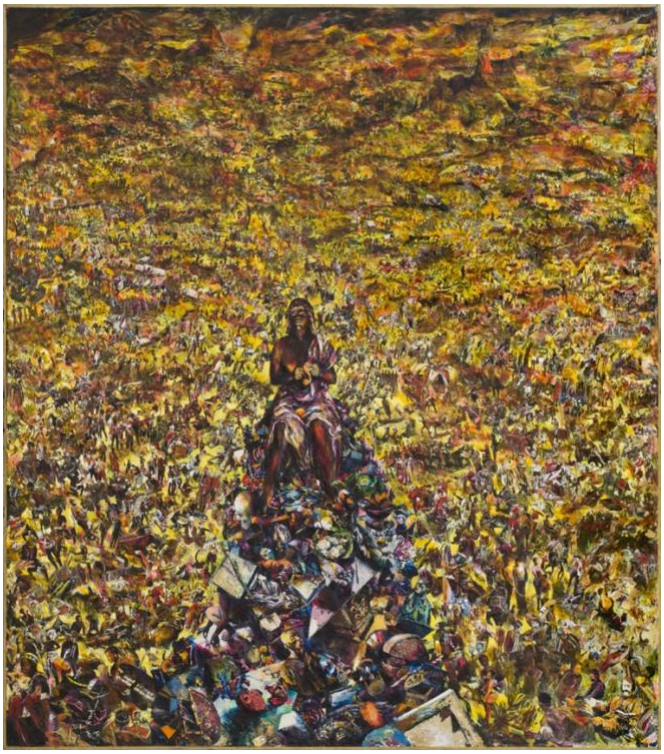

Figure 5: Penny Siopis, *Patience on a Monument: 'A History Painting*', 1988
Mixed Media on canvas, 198 x 176 cm
Javett UP, Pretoria
(Javett UP [sa])

While it is fundamental to appreciate the great contribution that South African female artists have made to South African culture, it is equally crucial to remember the

difficulties they faced during the 1980s and 1990s, considering the social and political climate in South Africa at the time. This can be accomplished by reflecting on the history of feminist art in South Africa, and examining different theorists. An important theorist who explores feminist art theory in South Africa is Marion Arnold originally from the United Kingdom, but raised in Zimbabwe. *Marion Arnold's Women and Art in South Africa* (1996) discusses the role female artists have played in South African art from the early colonial history to the middle of the 1980s and 1990s. One of Arnold's (1990) main objectives in her work was to show how female artists have resisted patriarchal structures through their art, expressing their identities in ways that question established gender roles, and apartheid oppression. Since art creation historically took place inside patriarchy, women's art had to be seen within the constraints that either accepted or challenged the imposed dictates of power (Arnold 1996:147). Arnold (1996:147) further raises a crucial point regarding women and art in South Africa by stating that, regardless of whether these women identify as feminists or female artists, they work as artists. This implies that these women learn new skills, create art, exhibit their art and make a living from it. This demonstrates how feminine and female creativity significantly contributes to the diversity of South African culture (Arnold 1996:147). The primary theme of *Women and Art in South Africa* (1996) is therefore the representation of different female artists in South Africa.

Brenda Schmahmann explores the beginning of feminist art in South Africa in *Shades of Discrimination: The Emergence of Feminist Art in Apartheid* (2015), by mostly highlighting the intersection between gender, race, and identity in the work of South African female artists. According to Schmahmann (2015:31), South African artworks by women that emerged at this time were situated around "feminist consciousness", and were without exception, made by white women. This had to do with the uneasy status of feminism within the liberation struggle, and an important additional factor was the minimal number of black female artists (Schmahmann 2015:31). The art institution in South Africa has historically been unwelcoming of feminist art practices and theory because it identified with conservative Western ideals (von Veh 2006:29). Another explanation for the unwelcoming attitude towards feminist art practices was how feminism in South Africa was overlooked and considered irrelevant in light of more urgent social inequalities; and it was identified as a Western phenomenon (von Veh 2019:69).

Furthermore, von Veh (2019:69) maintains that in post-apartheid South Africa, artistic content changed from activism, resistance, and liberation politics to the limitation society places on people as transitioned from the political to the personal. As a result, artists began to recognise themes such as gender, sexual orientation, and the construction of identity as valid subjects of investigation (von Veh 2019:69). For example, artists like Mary Sibande, Zanele Muholi, Billie Zangewa, and Zandile Tshabalala (discussed in Chapter Four) have interrogated and addressed issues relating to gender, race, sexual orientation, and the construction of identity in their artworks, which inherently gave them agency over the kind of art they produce.

2.3. Black feminism

It is now necessary to address black feminist art in South Africa. Examining Dhlomo's work and the history of black female artists' exclusion in the art institution would also require a discussion of black feminism in the USA. Making a reference to the USA is essential because black feminism emerged there. Therefore, the two countries above are referents given the study is about examining agency in self-portraits by Black female artists. As a result, it is crucial to understand the importance of highlighting black women's history and experiences. black feminism, which originated in the USA), is an extension of feminism that specifically emphasises the experiences of black women. Black feminism began in the nineteenth century, and rose to prominence in the 1940s, and more pronounced in the 1960s according to Elder and Tillery (2024). It enables black women to debate and emphasise the many aspects of their identity including racial and gender inequalities (Guy-Evans 2020). Black feminism differs from traditional feminism (i.e., first and second wave) because it acknowledges the intersection between race and gender. Thus, it does not exclude radical liberal and queer people.

Black feminism also finds itself pushing for the rights of all women, which are taken up by well-known critical thinkers and activists according to Feminista Jones (2019:9). These black critical thinkers in the USA include hooks, who speaks about the oppositional gaze in art, which is important when discussing black female subjectivity.

Lorde (1984, 1988) is another important theorist who discusses the wellness and self-love of black women, which is an important theme in the artworks produced by the South African artists I analyse in Chapter Four. In addition, Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) theorises the importance of intersectionality, and Patricia Hill Collins (1990, 2016) discusses black feminist theory and self-definition. A discussion of the theories of these black feminists allows me to set the foundation for the analysis of the artworks in the following chapter.

The phrase "black feminism" challenges racism in a political movement that is exclusive to white women (Collins 1996:13). Collins (1996:13) argues that adding the word "black" questions the presumed whiteness of feminism, and disrupts the false universality of this term for both black and white women. One of the reasons for the existence of black feminism is that black feminists were among the first theorists and activists to recognise that gender and race are mutually constitutive, and are interlinked forms of social creation (Smith 2011:401). Black feminism may call up the racist history of white women, but it must also relate to the wonderful legacy of female activists' eager determination to empower themselves to establish a humanistic community (Taylor 1998:251). Thus, black feminists rejected the assumption that focusing solely on gender discrimination would detract from the anti-racism campaign (Smith 2011:401). Employing the term "black feminism" agitates racism in presenting feminism as a "for Whites only" belief and political movement. According to another feminist author, Ula Taylor(1998:235), "free" and enslaved African-American women developed a variety of techniques and tactics to abolish slavery as a legal institution and oppose racially gendered sexual abuse.

In the nineteenth century, during slavery, black women were seen as creatures or animals, unworthy of the title women (hooks 1981:159). Moreover, hooks (1981) acknowledges the importance of feminists like Sojourner Truth, whose firsthand experiences supported the necessity of a movement like black feminism (Taylor 1998:250). More than one hundred years ago, historical feminist, former enslaved woman and abolitionist, Sojourner Truth gathered a group of white women and men at an anti-slavery rally in Indiana where she exposed her breasts affirming that she is certainly a woman (hooks 1981:159). She gave a second speech titled *"Ain't I a Woman"* at the Women's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio in 1852. The speech notes

that black women have been shamed and subjected to racial abuse, whereas White women have traditionally been treated as delicate and over-emotional. hooks (1981:159) claims that white women who attended the conference felt it was improper for a black to speak on a public platform. The white women repeatedly yelled “Don’t let her speak”, which inevitably robbed Truth of her voice. However, Truth became one of the first black feminists who was the embodiment of the truth that women could be the work equals of men (hooks 1981:159). Truth and many different feminists however endured harsh criticism during the protests. This event was monumental for black women because Truth paved the way for many other women to have a voice and stand up against racism and discrimination. The ultimate goal of black feminism according to Taylor (1998:18) is therefore to establish a political movement that fights against exploitative capitalism and what Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham (1992) refers to as the “racialised construction of sexuality”. Moreover, it also aims to establish institutions that will protect black women’s bodies and minds, which are undervalued and disrespected by the dominant culture (Taylor 1998:18).

The main objectives of black feminism are to establish a stronger movement for women’s liberation, and “gain equal human rights, racial equality, and social and economic justice for all people through activism” (Guy-Evans 2020). Other goals of black feminism include promoting sexual freedom and ending sexual violence. The issues that have been brought to light in black feminism were reproductive rights, equal access to abortion, health care, childcare, violence against women, lesbian and gay rights, and the rights of the differently abled (Smith 1983:xxxvii). These issues form part of what black feminists have worked on (Smith 1983:xxxvii). A variety of black feminist groups have also emerged with an overall aim to fight the systems of oppression, achieve the objectives of black feminism, and stand for black liberation in its entirety. An example of such a feminist group is the Combahee River Collective, a prolific feminist group that appeared in the 1970s.

The Combahee River Collective[2] was formed by Barbara Smith, Beverly Smith, and Demita Frazier in 1974 in Boston Massachusetts, USA and dissolved in 1980

[2]Combahee River Collective is named after a key historical event for black women that occurred on June 2, 1885, involving Harriet Tubman (Taylor 2017:4). This incident freed around 750 slaves, was the only planned military expedition, and was conducted by a woman according to Taylor (2017:4)

according to Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor (2017:4). The reason why this organisation was important is that it saw black feminism as a coherent political movement to eradicate the "manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of colour face" (Combahee River Collective 1977 [sa]). A significant statement outlining the Combahee River Collective's political dedication to dismantling interwoven systems of racial, sexual, and economic oppression was released in 1977 by this group of black feminists and lesbians (Taylor 1998:249). The Combahee River Collective (1974 [sp]) statement asserts that, due to their status in two controlled racial and sexual castes, black women have always had an exceptionally negative relationship with the American political system that is dominated by white men.

Another reason why The Combahee River Collective was a significant group is because it was the outgrowth of many generations of personal sacrifice, militancy and work by mothers and sisters. The Combahee River Collective recognised that black women are valuable, and that their independence is necessary because of their human rights to autonomy. Another important point to note is that the Collective believed that, because little value has been placed on their lives throughout four centuries of "bondage" in the Western hemisphere, the only people who care about them are themselves (Taylor 2017:18). This is attributed to the harmful stereotypes that were used in depictions of Black women such as the nurturing mammy, sexually irresponsible jezebel and angry sapphire, and bulldogger (Taylor 2017:18). Therefore, their politics stem from a healthy love for themselves and their community, which would enable them to continue their struggle and work (Taylor 2017:18).

Additionally, the Collective rejected queenhood and pedestals, and desire for black women to be acknowledged as human beings according to Taylor (2017:19). Other examples of black feminist groups include the National Association of Coloured Women, the National Black Feminist Organisation, and Salsa Soul Sisters. Essentially, black feminists in the USA have played a key role in the movements that are present in the 21st century (Kim 2021). For example, they are linked to the third-wave feminism, the #MeToo movement as well as the Black Lives Matter movement (Kim 2021). The relevance of these movements in recent decades as well as black feminist theorists underlined the goals of black feminism, which are intersectionality, and having the inclusion of different types of people.

In her anthology *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology,* Barbara Smith (1983:xxxvii) provides insight into how black feminism in the USA also sheds light on the essence of black women's experience, allowing for possible positive support from other black women, and encouraging political action that changes the system that oppresses them. Smith (1983:xxxvi) highlights the positive impact that black feminism has achieved, and which "made it a little easier to be black and female". This is profound, because, black feminist analysis has allowed black women to recognise that they are not disliked and abused because they are flawed, but rather, their status and treatment are dictated by the racist and sexist system in which they live (Smith 1983:xxxvi).

Smith (1983) further highlights several misconceptions regarding the need for Black feminism. The first misconception was that "black women are already liberated" (Smith 1983:xxvii). Smith (1983:xxviii) disputes this misconception, stating that black women have had to live with tough conditions such as poverty, racial discrimination, abuse, and unequal pay, and have had to build strength from these realities while suppressing their feelings. The second misconception raised was that racism remains the core oppression that black women have to confront, which means that the idea of struggling against or eradicating racism will completely alleviate black women's problems does not consider the way that sexual oppression cuts across all racial, nationality, age, ethnic and class groups (Smith 1983:xxvii). The third misconception was that women hate men. Smith, on the other hand, rejected this myth, claiming that women's desire for legitimacy and safety in their lives does not necessitate hating males (Smith 1983:xxx). The fourth and final myth discussed how "women's issues are narrow, apolitical concerns" (Smith 1983:xxx). This myth characterised women's oppressions as not particularly serious, and by no means a matter of life and death (Smith 1983:xxx). One of the misconceptions that exists today is the normalisation of black women repressing their feelings, needing to be strong in the face of chaos, and not being able to express their emotions because they would be shamed for doing so. Consequently, authors like Lorde (1988) and hooks (1993) emphasise the significance of black women embracing self-love, healing, and self-care to contest the dominant narrative that they must consistently display strength.

Intersectionality - a key aspect of black feminism is a term coined by African-American civil rights advocate, Kimberlé Crenshaw (1981); and this term was rearticulated by Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge (2020:12), who define it as an examination of how intersecting power relations manipulate social relations across diverse societies. The term has been understood as not so much as attentiveness to power, but as engaging with a confluence of identities (Baderoon & Lewis 2021:8). Intersectionality sees various groups of race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, and nationality "mutually shaping one another"(Collins & Bilge 2020:12). Intersectionality is an ideology that offers a complex framework of "useful knowledge", which carefully reveals the daily experiences of black and ethnicized women who are simultaneously positioned in multiple structures of dominance and power as gendered, raced, classed, colonised, and sexualised "others" (Mirza 2014:2). The aims of intersectionality within black feminism are by establishing a secure and stronger movement for women's liberation that is valuable for women (Guy-Evans 2020). Additionally, the third wave gave prominence to black feminism and black feminist thought due to their shared emphasis on intersectionality and the realisation that gender oppression cannot be properly understood or rectified without acknowledging other kinds of social injustices such as racism, classism, and homophobia.

2.3.1. Black feminism in art in the USA

The purpose of black feminism was to draw attention to the experiences of black women. As a result, black female artists have created art that defies negative perceptions of black women and found a means to communicate their everyday realities. During the feminist art movement in the USA in the 1960s and 1970s, the visibility of White women artists and artists of colour increased, which prompted the development of new approaches to mass communication, challenges to the old divisions between high and low art, and criticisms of the exhibiting practices of the past (Smith 2011:402). Moreover, a growing number of artists from historically marginalised populations started to appear in galleries and institutions as race and gender relations began to shift in the public eye (Smith 2011:402). Black female artists' constant misrepresentation was one of the driving forces behind their artistic output during the

feminist art movement (Cowan 2022). According to Cowan (2022), their artwork was marginalised by white women and frequently viewed as complementary to black men. This deemed their contribution to art as inferior (Cowan 2022). Black feminists likewise identified the concerns in their literary works and scholarship in attempts to fill the gaps (Springer 2015:169). They were also preoccupied with examining not only the oppressions and negations of black womanhood within white feminism, but also the sexism that was prolific within black communities (Springer 2015:169).

Issues that were important to black womanhood such as black women's sexual agency were either ignored or silenced within literature and art even as they challenged racist and sexist social structural systems. Lois Jones Peirre-Noel (1976:1) has previously stated that being black and a woman meant that they had to express creativity in frustrating obscurity. By that, Pierre-Noel (1976:1) implies that black female artists in the US were excluded from being mentioned in history books before the middle of the nineteenth century. The contributions of black female artists were only acknowledged when they travelled abroad since their work was often ignored in American society (Peirre-Noel 1976:1). The artists that Pierre-Noel is referring to are Edmonia Lewis who moved to Rome, Italy; and Selma Burke who moved to Austria and France. Another aspect to consider is that black women have found themselves in a problematic ideological position as artists, writers, and scholars both in the artistic and political scene (Smith 2011: 401).

According to Valerie Smith (2011:402), in the 1960s and 1970s, black feminist visual artists broke into a world that had historically been dominated by white men by working with a range of media such as installation, film, collage, painting, and photography. An artist who pioneered the black feminist art movement is Faith Ringgold (1939-2024) from New York City. Ringgold was a renowned painter, performance artist, and mixed-media sculptor. Kay Brown and Ringgold founded an organisation named "Where We At" Black Women Artists Inc. in 1971, which was affiliated with the Black Arts Movement in the 1960s and 1970s. This organisation provided black women a chance to exchange ideas and share concerns relating to art since they were marginalised by the predominantly male Black Arts Movement, and mostly by white feminist organisations (Smith 2011:402). The artist produced a colourful self-portrait titled *Early Works #25*: *Self-portrait* (Figure 6) in which the artist's gaze is determined, with her

head slightly facing the left (Brooklyn Museum [sa]). Her brown hair was swept up into a high bun, and her arms folded, all of which suggests that she is gentle yet guarded (Brooklyn Museum [sa]). When making this self-portrait, Ringgold has expressed that she was trying to find her voice and talk herself through her art (Brooklyn Museum [sa]). Ringgold's use of self-portraiture in this work is significant in the context of the development of black feminist strategies in art produced after the 1980s. I will, therefore, return to self-portraiture later in Chapter Three. For now, following this discussion of black feminism in the USA, I investigate black feminism in South Africa.

Figure 6: Faith Ringgold*, Early Works #25: Self-Portrait*, 1965
Oil on canvas, 127 x 101.6 cm
Brooklyn Museum, New York
(Brooklyn Museum [sa])

2.3.2. Black feminism in South Africa

Desiree Lewis unpacks feminism in South Africa in her article *Feminisms in South Africa* (1993). This article discusses how deeply ignored the intersections between race and gender were even amongst South African feminists. Like her black feminist sisters in the US, Lewis (1993:535) has previously stated that feminist theory in the present day has posed a challenge to male-dominated scholarship, yet a variety of feminists ignored the intersection of race, class, and gender. Feminism thus perpetuated oppressive racial, and class ideologies (Lewis 1993:535). This was blatantly evident at the Natal University Women and Gender Conference. The Natal University Women and Gender Conference was a monumental event in South African feminism that took place in 1991, and it was attended by three hundred delegates from Southern Africa, Europe, and the USA (Lewis 1993:536). The panel discussions were mostly based on proposals that were offered by “academically established” feminists and those proposals were mostly about gender, inherently ignoring issues of race, and class (Lewis 1993:537). Black women’s voices were denied at the conference due to the large number of white academics as well. Issues about race and class were deemed as “separate and disruptive grievances (Lewis 1993:537). According to Lewis (1993:537), the purpose of black women attending the conference was to watch a demonstration of hegemonic wisdom and to validate diagnoses and proposals that academically established feminists had to offer.

In South Africa, the ANC (African National Congress) tended not to involve feminism within their focal rhetoric (Schmahmann 2015:28). The reason for this is that political scientist, Shireen Hassim observed that feminism was seen as an ideology that was primarily articulated by white (academic) Western women, and its perceived intellectual roots in the Northern Hemisphere was seen to limit its applicability to the experiences of black women in the highly exceptional circumstances of apartheid (Schmahmann 2015:28). One of the numerous issues South African feminism has tried to overcome is the removal of racial norms and standards, where White women have occasionally been faced with overturning "the voice of black women in the name of gendered empowerment" (Frenkel 2008:3). Ronit Frenkel (2008:3) further explains that this happens when Western/ised women consider themselves to be the main referents when it came to feminism.

When discussing feminism in South Africa, it is appropriate to revisit the primary goals of feminism, which are to increase awareness of injustices and oppression based on gendered power systems in light of South Africa's political past and social climate (von Veh 2006:29). In light of South Africa's political past and social climate, these goals have to involve the recognition of diversity, constructed identities, racial, and social differences (von Veh 2006:29). In recent years, there have been more academic views on black feminism in South Africa. For example, the book *Surfacing: On Being Black and Feminist in Southern Africa* (2021) by authors Gabeba Baderoon and Desiree Lewis includes a compilation of essays by writers like Ingrid Masondo, Sisonke Msimang, and Panashe Chigumadzi.

According to Baderoon and Lewis (2021:4), black feminism in the global imaginary has been associated with African-American feminist thought. They go on to say that West African authors like Ama Ara Aidoo and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie are often canonised as the exemplars of black African feminist thought in diasporic anthologies (Baderoon & Lewis 2021:8). It is as if black South African feminists are worthy of being hailed as idols by other black feminists, but they are rarely regarded as essential intellectuals themselves (Baderoon & Lewis 2021:8). The book is relevant to this study as it adds to South African black feminism as well as feminist art. Although there have been theorists like Brenda Schmamann and Marion Arnold, who write about art about black female artists; the variety of black artists they discuss is at a minimum, which is why this anthology is important in feminist theory.

Surfacing: On Being Black and Feminist in Southern Africa (2021) essentially promotes essays on art by women of colour and gives them a platform to add to feminism in South Africa. For example, Ingrid Masondo's interviews with photographers (Keorapetse Mosimane, Thania Peterson, and Tshepiso Mazibuko) were the different voices who contributed significantly to the anthology. Other South African feminists of colour theorists include Pumla Dineo-Gqola, who argues that black female bodies have been depicted through repetitions of "hypervisibility" that have both subjected women to increased levels of scrutiny, and rendered them invisible by the systemic violence to which they have been subjected (Baderoon 2011:145, Dineo-

Gqola 2006:145). For this reason, I now take a closer look at their hypervisibility and invisibility in the history of feminist art in South Africa.

2.3.3 Black feminist art in South Africa

Black feminist art in South Africa emerged in the 1980s during apartheid. In 1985, the South African National Gallery hosted an exhibition titled *Women Artists in South Africa,* coinciding with a Women's Bureau conference titled *Women, Their Achievements and Opportunities* (Sooful 2018:95). Sixty-eight female painters displayed one hundred and two artworks. The exhibition featured Ndebele beading and woven tapestries by two black women (Sooful 2018:95). According to Avitha Sooful (2018:67), South African black female artists were historically the most invisible despite abundant artworks and crafts. Although there were not many black female artists in South Africa in the 1980s, they contributed significantly to the struggle (Soofal 2018:67). Moreover, it was widely believed that black female South African artists have been solely skilled in crafts, displays of ceramics, weaving and grass-woven baskets, crediting them as craftswomen (Sooful 2018:67). Sooful (2018:67) notes that when the artworks were exhibited, the names of the artists were rarely acknowledged and were a usually collective representation of women from rural areas. Some of the artists who made these artworks from the 1980s include Mary Tshabalala, Angela Khuzwayo, and many others who were not recognised.

It was only in the 1990s that black female artists were included more in the art institution and could engage with the politics of gender, and this mostly happened due to the abolishment of apartheid (Schmahmann 2015:34). Bongi Dhlomo (1956) from Vryheid, Kwazulu-Natal is a printmaker and activist who is significant in South African feminist art history because she is an exception to a rule where black women who studied Fine Art oftentimes did not pursue a career as professional artists (Schmahmann 2015:31). The reason for this is that the jobs that were normally chosen for black women were teaching, nursing and secretarial work (Schmahmann 2015:31). A black woman pursuing an art degree was usually unheard of during the apartheid era (Schmahmann 2015:31). Although Dhlomo did not intend on including feminist underpinnings in her work, she highlighted the hardships that many black communities

were subjected to under the “laws and actions of the apartheid state” (Schmahmann 2015:32). In *Women at At Work* (Figure 7), she highlighted the portrayals of working black South African women in her woodcuts and linocut prints. This allowed Dhlomo to give black South African women a voice to tell stories about living in South Africa during the Soweto uprising in 1976. Thus, Dhlomo’s feminist work takes cognisance of both racial and gender inequalities. Moreover, by presenting clothed black women at work, *Women at Work* (1983) disrupts the traditional representation of women in Western art as passive objects of the male gaze.

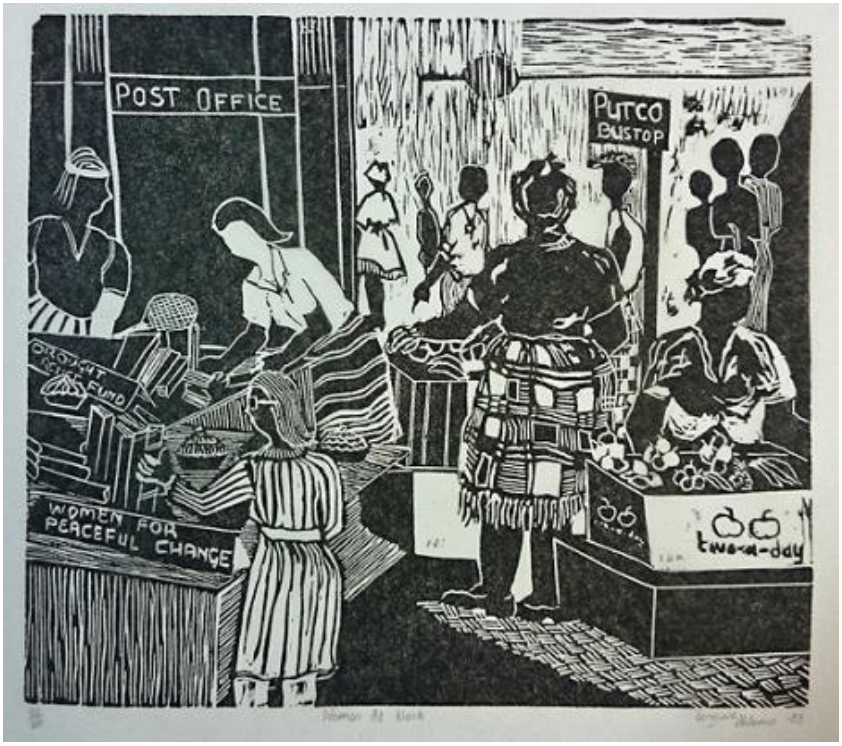

Figure 7: Bongi Dhlomo, *Women at Work*, 1983
Linocut print, 48 x 47 cm
(Mutual Art [sa])

2.4. The historical representation of (black) women in art and popular culture

To discuss the representation of black women in fine art, it is necessary to consider how women were historically portrayed in the Western canon of art. It is imperative to talk about the misrepresentations of black women in art, particularly in light of their current reclamation of agency through art. Most representations of women in art were created by men (Brand 2006:166), and women who produced art continued to struggle for legitimacy within conventional art contexts. However, in a capitalist society where women are the main subject of art meant that their presence in art was explicitly expressed more than men's (Vogel 1974:4).

Charmaine Nelson (2010:105) contends that within the field of art historical discourse, the female body depicted as nude or naked has served as a historical representation of patriarchal and Eurocentric notions of womanhood, attractiveness, femininity, and female sexuality in Western culture. The aesthetics of the female nude in art is socially charged as explicated by Lisa Farrington (2004:15). Farrington (2004:15) notes that, the development of the nude serves as a story in many respects, exposing the roles that women in Western culture are expected to play and are therefore culturally produced. According to Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock (1981:115), until the late eighteenth century, most paintings made in the West included the male figure, but as time passed, there was an increase in the painting of the female nude. Historical representations of the female nude model in Western art mostly aimed at the male viewer (Bernheimer 1989:258).

Charles Bernheimer (1989:259) goes on to say that the terms of that offering in the European creative tradition are subject to conventions intended to flatter the male audience, and arouse his fantasies of sexual power. Furthermore, similar to a prostitute, the nude model was seen as a desirable commodity. Considering what Berhneimer (1989) and Parker and Pollock (1981) have argued, it is noticeable that the models historically lacked agency in the sense that their bodies were portrayed by male painters in accordance with their own desires. In the nineteenth century, there were more portrayals of the female nude asleep in paintings that were often portrayed as asleep, unconscious (Parker & Pollock 1981:119).

The history of the black female nude has been deemed a more complex subject due to the cultural implications it carries because it is sexual and racial, according to Farrington (2004:15). I provide an in-depth discussion of the black female nude in Chapter Three in my analysis of Renee Cox's work, and the South African artists discussed in Chapter Four. After all, she opposes the conventional way a female nude model is portrayed in art.

Traditionally, the female nude would typically recline or pose on a divan, their poses were often passive, and receptive and they were usually depicted as a sexual spectacle in a domestic setting (Farrington 2004:15). Additionally, the female nude's eyes are usually modestly averted or shyly welcoming. She sometimes offers herself up as a feast for the male gaze (Farrington 2004:15). However, the male nude was portrayed as energetic and active illustrating vigorous pursuits such as athleticism, heroism, and violence (Farrington 2004:15). Farrington (2004:15) contends further that male artists believed that women should not have as much social, economic, or political mobility as men did. This attitude is shown in the continuation of male action, and female inaction in much of Western art. According to Farrington (2004:15), the white female nude traditionally conformed to the "ideal" so-called Western standard of beauty. The physical attributes of the white female nudes included porcelain skin, long silky hair, and tapered features. In comparison, the physical features of women of colour have been disparaged in visual culture over the centuries and considered unattractive. Nelson (2010:111-112) argues that depictions of black and white women in the same artwork have historically suggested the projection of "black" sexuality onto the presumed purity of white women. To develop this argument further, Western artists have used contrasting depictions of black and white women in the same artwork to define the limits between self, and the "other" (Nelson 2010:121). These boundaries are clearly seen in *Mademoiselle de Clermont en Sultane* (Figure 8) and *Olympia* (1863).

Figure 8: Jean-Marc Nattier, *Mademoiselle de Clermont en Sultane*, 1733
Oil on canvas, 109 x 104.5 cm
The Wallace Collection, France
(The Wallace Collection [sa])

In *Mademoiselle de Clermont en sultane* (1733), about five unidentified black female servants of different skin tones surround the model named Anne Marie de Bourbon, positioning them in a manner where it looks as though they are admiring her, yet somehow blend into the background. Anne Marie de Bourbon is seated on a blue chair, and is dressed in a white dress, revealing her crossed legs, and she is holding a beige cloth tightly, and her gaze is direct. On top of the dress is a large red gown that reaches the carpet. The woman next to Anne Marie de Bourbon on the far right has a dark skin complexion. She is wearing a red top, an earring and glares adoringly at the model with her head tilted sideways. The lady with a lighter skin complexion directly on de Bourbon's right is holding a white cloth, and she is staring at the cloth with a slight smile.

On the bottom right of this painting, water is being poured in what looks like a bath by a figure who is not visible in the painting and whose hands with bracelets have a darker

complexion. According to Adrienne Childs (2013:196), the odd depiction of a woman surrounded by numerous black servants was unusual in the era of the abolition of slavery in France when the painting was produced. Moreover, their skin appears faded and untouched by the glow which in contrast, illuminates the main female figure (Walls 2020). Childs (2013:196) observes that the "emotive entourage" of the "adoring" black servants creates a sense of exoticism in the private female sphere. Overall, it is apparent that in *Mademoiselle de Clermont en Sultane* (1733), the purpose of the black servants is to focus the presumably white male viewer's attention on the sensuality of the white woman. Moreover, the exotic nuances of the richly textured carpet, sumptuous material, and Eastern clothing enhance the sexual undertones of the scene.

Figure 9: Edouard Manet, *Olympia*, 1863
Oil on Canvas, 130.5 x 190cm
Musée d'Orsay, Paris
(Musée d'orsay [sa])

Black women have historically been represented as sexual objects, or as embellishments to give prominence to white femininity in art as clearly seen in *Olympia* (Figure 9) by French modernist painter Edouard Manet. The painting was produced and exhibited in the salon of 1865 after the French Revolution, and after slavery in

France had been abolished, and at the time when Paris seemed to be an integrated society to live in even though racism was still prevalent (Delistraty 2019). This also means that black women in France did indeed own their bodies after 1848 when slavery was abolished (Grisby 2015:433).

Laure, the black servant who is depicted giving flowers to the main female figure in Manet's *Olympia* (1863) has often been swept in and out of visibility in art history (Grisby 2015:431). Art historians have different ways of analysing Laure's significance. For example, Sander Gilman (1985) provides insight into how the black female subject is sexualised. Noticeably, Denise Murrell (2014) mostly discusses how the representation of the black female subject (with Manet's painting as an example) has developed over the centuries. In her article *Still Thinking About Olympia's Maid*, Grisby (2015) discusses the black woman and how she is portrayed in *Olympia* (1863), which has oftentimes been overlooked.

The salon is where the majority of the artworks that portrayed black servants were exhibited (Pound 2019). It is also where artworks that were deemed scandalous were exhibited. *Olympia* (1863) was marked as scandalous due to the provocative nature of the painting as well as the portrayal of a prostitute (Bernheimer 1989:255). The name 'Olympia' was historically associated with prostitutes and the painting itself contains two figures: a white female prostitute, and her servant, Laure. The prostitute is modelled by Victorine-Louise Meurant whose gaze is strong and directed towards the viewer. She looks confident and reclines on an unmade bed with cream-coloured sheets that look dishevelled. Her confident and confrontational gaze is what also shocked viewers (Hellenica World [sa]). Laure, the black servant, is placed in a much darker background, which almost absorbs her, and renders her presence almost invisible. She is seen handing a bouquet to Olympia while a black cat stands nearby (Grisby 2015:434). Laure is wearing a bright off-white dress that emphasises her dark complexion, yet, she still blends into the background and her face is barely seen. The brushwork used to depict Laure is described as "uncharacteristically clumsy" and "uncertain" (Grisby 2015:434). Grisby (2015:434) suggests further that Laure's face is easily overlooked because it disappears into the surroundings. How he painted Laure's portrait is also seen in *La Négresse* (Figure 10) by Manet. *La Négresse* (1863)

was a preparatory study for *Olympia* (Pound 2019). In *La Négresse* (1863), her facial features are slightly more visible, and she is dressed in an off-shoulder shirt with a colourful headscarf.

Figure 10: Edouard Manet, *Le Négresse*, 1863
Oil on canvas, 61 x 50 cm
Pinacoteca Giovanni e Marella Agnelli, Turin
(BBC 2019)

In his article, *Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine and Literature*, Gilman (1985:432) an American cultural and literary historian has carefully analysed how the iconography of *Olympia* (Figure 7) demonstrates that black women's alleged aberrant sexuality raised concerns about the abnormal sexuality of white prostitutes. Gilman (2015:432) explicates that "It is the black female as the emblem of illness who haunts the background of Manet's *Olympia*". Denise Murrell unpacks how the representation of Laure and the presentation of black female subjects in paintings has developed over time in her prolific dissertation titled *Race and Modernity from Manet's Olympia to Matisse, Bearden and Beyond (*2014). Murrell (2014:42) asserts that Manet employed the tradition dating back to the Renaissance of depicting bourgeois subjects with black servants to emphasise that their wealth was extensive enough to import costly exotic

help. Manet's portrayal of Laure is therefore in keeping with the prevalent view of black women as negative and suspect.

Mademoiselle de Clermont en Sultene (1733), *Olympia* (1863) and *Lé Negresse* (1863) are telling examples of the demeaning ways in which black women have been featured in Western art. One of the causes for the misrepresentation of black women in art is that "everyone has spoken for black women, making it difficult for them to speak for themselves" (Collins 1990:123, Hammond 1997:171). Another explanation for the misrepresentation of Black women in art is that their bodies were the subject of repetitive sexual medicalisation and were also reduced to sexual abnormality such as the display of Saartije Baartman who is exemplary of this trend[3] (Nead 2001:74). To develop Lynda Nead's (2001:74) argument further, the reason why they were reduced to sexual abnormality is because of the heightened fixation on the appearance of buttocks and genitalia that then "transformed the body of a black woman into a heightened sign of sexual difference". Artist Claudette Johnson (cited in Nead 2001:75) also notes that many artists, particularly painters have used black women to examine their obscure fantasies of "purity vs impurity", which is especially seen in *Olympia* (1863). The strange portrayal of the servant is strategically placed in the painting to emphasise the whiteness of the reclining woman, and the otherness of her black servant.

Another reason for the underrepresentation and misrepresentation of black women in art is because of the Western beauty standards that were assumed to signify "true womanhood" (Nelson 2010:2). Skin colour has played a major role in these misrepresentations because it acted as a visible marker for social difference in paintings (Walls 2020). Europeans' perception of black people was frequently influenced by their skin tone. According to Walls (2020), Europeans were fixated on "colour" as the characteristic that set African otherness apart, and they paid far less attention to racial subtleties or debates surrounding race. Dark complexions, when

[3] According to Janell Hobson (2003:89-90), Saartjie Baartman was a Khoisan woman from South Africa who appeared in numerous amounts of exhibits where she was made a spectacle during the 19th century in Europe, under the name Hottentot Venus. This name was then given to another woman who was displayed similarly. Baartman's body was stigmatised due to protruding buttocks and large thighs. Historically Baartman's body was seen as "ugly" and "freakish" in London and Paris whereas her body was considered beautiful in Africa (Hobson 2003:90).

contrasted with the standard of whiteness, acted as an obvious social distinction marker in Western paintings as expressed by Walls (2020). When analysing *Olympia* (1863), it is clear that it was a norm for royal nobles or wealthy individuals to dress their servants both male and female in bright colours like white and pink to highlight the darkness of their complexion while displaying them to visitors (Walls 2020).

From a historical standpoint, the reason why some of society would deem black women as unworthy is due to the sexual exploitation perpetrated by many white men during slavery. bell hooks (1981) discusses the devaluation of black womanhood by talking about how most of American society was conditioned to see black women as "creatures of little worth". hooks (1981:154) also reiterates that, even during the years of post-slavery reparations, black women found it difficult in changing negative stereotypical images of black womanhood perpetuated by White people. They tried to change the notion that black women were "sexually loose" (hooks 1981:154) as revealed in Manet's *Olympia* (1863) and Jean-Marc Nattier's painting *Mademoiselle de Clermont en Sultane*(Figure 3) produced in 1733 where the black women are seen as submissive figures, fading into the background and are sometimes unidentified in the artworks (Jean-Phillipe [sa]). Given the evident power dynamics between the subjects in the painting, and the reference to slavery in France dating back to the eighteenth century; the placement of the black female figures in *Mademoiselle de Clermont en Sultane* (1733) could upset a viewer of art from the twenty-first century (The Wallace Collection [sa]). Considering the power dynamics between the figures in the painting, it is necessary to analyse *Mademoiselle de Clermont en Sultane* (1733).

One of the main reasons why the depiction of the maid in the *Mademoiselle de Clermont en Sultane* (1733) and *Olympia* (1863) is spoken about in this study is to show the relevant tropes that black women have been subjected to. These tropes include pain, suffering and submission, and these tropes are often seen through stereotypes such as the strong black woman (Ricks 2018:344). The strong black woman is the archetype of how the ideal Black woman should act. They should stereotypically not be affected by psychological stress or trauma and should put another individual's needs above their own.

Another stereotype relevant to this study is the mammy. This term derived from the USA is a historical stereotype depicting black women who were enslaved and performed domestic work in white households. According to Christopher Sewell (2013:310), mammy was considered a non-threatening figure, and caring. In terms of physical attributes, the mammy has large arms, dark complexion, a large body structure, and often wears unfashionable clothing including a headscarf to hide her kinky hair (Sewell 2013:311, Christian 1980:12-13). These attributes contrasted with the Western standards of beauty, which are a woman who has more petite stature is fashionable, and has a lighter skin complexion (Sewell 2013:311, Christian 1980:12-13).

Mammies were often tending and connecting with the children of the house, and relieving her madam of these duties (Sewell 2013:310). Shawn Ricks (2018:348), asserts that the role of black women as a self-sacrificing caretaker and nurturers of others dates back from slavery into academia to contemporary life. Aspects similar to the mammy stereotype are seen in Nattier and Manet's paintings above, due to how the black figures adore and submit to the subjects. Centuries later, more black female artists have resisted these stereotypes by depicting themselves as powerful, beautiful, sensual, and empowering beings by challenging the mostly demeaning historical representations of black women in the Western canon of art. It is essential to understand the self-portraiture of women has evolved over centuries and how the agency in their self-portraits becomes noticeable.

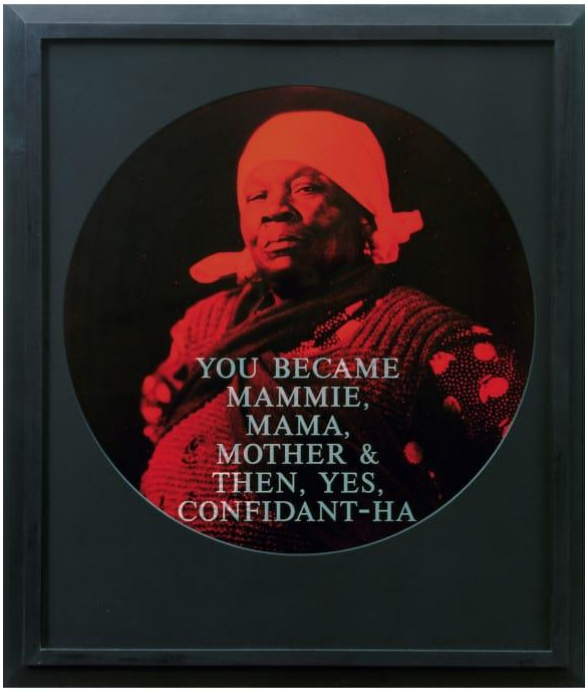

Figure 11: Carrie Mae Weems, *You Became, Mammy, Mama, Mother & Then, Yes, Confidant-ha,* 1995-1996
Chromogenic print with sand-blasted on glass, 60.7 x 50.7cm
Museum of Modern Art, New York
(Museum of Modern Art [sa])

Fictional mammies were usually portrayed in commercials, and were used to sell household foods like flour, oatmeal and other foods (Pilgrim 2024). A well-known mammy caricature was Nancy Green who portrayed Aunt Jemima on an American breakfast brand for pancakes (West 2008:289). Actress Hattie McDaniel also played the role of the mammy in the 1939 film *Gone With the Wind.* Carrie Mae Weems produced a bright red chromogenic print titled *You Became Mammie, Mama, Mother & Then, Yes Confidant-ha* (Figure 11) from the *Series From Here I Saw What Happened And I Cried* that features a black woman shot at a low angle. The text on the print "*You Became Mammie, Mama, Mother & then Yes Confidant-ha*" highlights the characteristics of the mammy that Sewell (2013) discussed which is being a motherly figure, and a confidant.

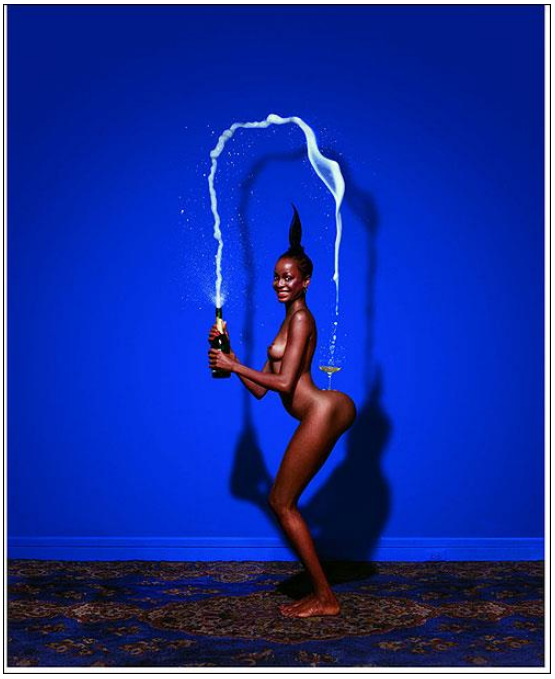

Figure 12: Jean-Paul Goude, *Carolina*, 1976
New York
(Eckardt 2016)

While this chapter primarily focuses on the representation of (black) women in fine art, addressing their portrayal in popular culture is crucial. In the context of the 20th century, print technology and popular culture continued to exoticize black women's bodies (Lewis 2005:12). The body of the black female is seen as the "wild savage". It elicits only "complex interstices of desire and repulsion that conveyed sexual grotesquerie" (Morgan 1997). For example, Janell Hobson (2003:9) discusses photographer American Jean-Paul Goude who took photographs of black women, and depicted their rear ends. Their rear ends function as fetish objects. In 1978, Goude took a photograph titled *Carolina* (Figure 12) of a woman named Toukie Smith. Smith is posed like a miniature horse, and her rear end balances a champagne glass, whilst she holds a bottle of champagne as it pours into the glass on her rear end. She wears an exotic hairstyle and smiles for the camera in a pose of "happy savage pleased to serve". The meaning of "happy savage pleased to serve" is intended to provide pornographic pleasure and intoxication presumably for a white male spectator according to Hobson (2003:95). However, in recent decades there has been a change in how black women portrayed their self-portraits which has happened through different social media

platforms, and it has given them a platform to exhibit their work that challenge the problematic historical and mainstream representations discussed above.

2.5. Conclusion

This chapter has addressed global feminisms, including the first, second, and third waves by showing how women have challenged and interrogated gender inequality and stereotypes. Feminist art in the USA was also discussed by highlighting Judy Chicago's contribution to feminist art as a movement and to feminist art history. A discussion on black feminist art in the USA was also included in this chapter, focusing on the marginalisation of black female artists within the art industry and how they have created artworks that address the exclusion. Black feminism was important in this chapter as it made a foundation to call attention to black women's daily experiences. The representation of (black) women was discussed thoroughly by analysing *Mademoiselle de Clermont en Sultane* (1733) by Nattier, *Olympia* (1863) and *La Négresse* (1863) by Manet. The theory examined in this chapter is crucial to the analysis of South African black female artists' artwork in Chapters Three and Four.

CHAPTER 3
SELF-PORTRAITURE AS A (BLACK) FEMINIST STRATEGY

3.1. Introduction

In the previous chapter, I examined the foundation of agency among feminists within global feminism and global black feminism while also exploring female artists' autonomy in feminist art. The emphasis was also on the historical representation of (black) women in the Western art canon in Chapter Two. In this chapter, I explore self-portraiture as a feminist strategy, and particularly as the Renaissance, by looking at artists like Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528). Shearer West explores self-portraiture in depth in her book *Portraiture* (2004) by analysing how women went from being nude models to being accepted into art academies. It is therefore necessary to investigate how these women's self-portraits have portrayed the historical development of female autonomy. These artistic depictions of female artists agency and challenges of dominant of gender stereotypes are seen in the works of Amrita Sher-Gil (1913-1941), Frida Kahlo (1907-1954), and Cindy Sherman (1953-present). For example, there was a prevalent idea among men that women were only meant to be models for their artworks for their (white male artists) artworks, and, therefore should not produce self-portraits. This chapter also allows me to explore how black female artists claimed agency over their identity through self-portraiture. When discussing the self-portraits of black female artists, the topic of the oppositional gaze is investigated through hook's (1992) theories on the topic. This leads to the discussion of self-definition. The self-representation of black women by artists like Carrie Mae Weems and Renee Cox.

In the context of self-representation and the oppositional gaze, I briefly analyse Cox's controversial photograph *Yo Mama's Last Supper* (1996) from the standpoint of Nicole Fleetwood (2011). This is necessary as Cox does not only insert herself in much revered historical painting boldly and powerfully, but she also reclaims her agency by portraying herself, as a black woman as a superhero. Likewise, American artist Carrie Mae Weem's self-portrait self-representation is analysed . The reason why I chose Weems for this part was because she "upends racist and sexist constructions of subjectivity" (Shane 2018:501). Considering that the study is about examining how

black female artists place themselves at the centre of their work, and challenging negative historical images and beauty standards, it is imperative to examine self-love after the discussion of self-representation. Therefore, I investigate Lorde and hook's perspectives on self-love.

3.2. Self-portraiture as a feminist strategy

Since the primary focus of the study is situated around how black female artists depict themselves in self-portraits, it is important to discuss the nature and purpose of self-portraiture in terms of identity. Self-portraiture has been a popular genre since the start of the Renaissance period in art (Chadha 2016:72). The Renaissance is a cultural period in history that started in Florence, Italy; and the dates can be traced back to the fourteenth century (Lesso 2022). Rome, Italy is where the High Renaissance started, and the period boasted of artists like Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, and Raphael whose works promoted and made contributions to religion, science, and art (Lesso 2022). The reason the Renaissance began in Florence is because Italy was already a prosperous and wealthy nation due to successful trade deals with other countries (Lesso 2022). Florence, in particular, boasted a highly sophisticated intellectual culture. The Renaissance has been described as a period that promoted self-discovery, and individualism (Smith 2001:354).

One of the "technical and autonomous" reasons why self-portraiture evolved in Europe when it did was that there was an increase in self-awareness and growth in the creation of autobiography and other types of self-narrative (West 2004:164). Another reason is that the status of the artist changed, and this was prompted by the beginning of academies or art theory that highlighted the intellectual qualities of artistic production (West 2004:164). Another explanation of why self-portraiture emerged specifically during the High Renaissance is because artists who could not afford models, painted, or drew themselves.

Self-portraits are artworks that artists produce for themselves, and it is how they portray their physical appearance (Mao 2021:147). Self-portraiture came with the rise

of people's self-awareness. Increasing self-awareness led to art becoming a medium for communicating human emotions, emphasising personal dignity, and celebrating mundane life (rather than only religious themes) (Mao 2021: 147). Also, society began to recognise the growing importance of artists (Mao 2021:147). Before the sixteenth century, artists had started to produce portraits of themselves as footnotes or signatures (West 2004:164). Moreover, the main profession of artists before the Renaissance were craftspeople and mechanics. According to Liping Mao (2021:147), German painter Albrecht Dürer was recognised as the first artists who produced the first self-portrait in 1500 during the Renaissance period when he portrayed himself to be Christ. For Durer to depict himself as Christ sets the tone for how he views himself. Mao (2021:147) further argues that the image that Durer created for himself was of a high-end "creator" within the artistic domain. Dürer establishing himself in this manner means that he sees himself as perfect. Dürer was considered a canonised art according to Ace Lehner (2021:4)since he met the expectations of self-portraiture that are still present today.

The earliest self-portraits of female artists emphasised their professional role where the artist was able to create a reputation for themselves as people and artists (West 2004:171). Examples of the first female self-portrait artists include Flemish painter Catherina van Hemmeson (1528-1565), and Italian painter Sofonisba Anguissola (1532-1625) who both made art during the Renaissance period and portrayed themselves as confident and assertive (Christy Slobogin 2015). These artists painted themselves when women possessed no political agency, and were prohibited from academies and apprenticeships (Higgie 2023). However, they persisted in their artistic endeavours, and turned themselves into subjects (Higgie 2023).

Self-portraits give insight into the artist's personality, and can often tell an intimate story about their lives, and how they think (West 2004:163). Self-portraits serve as reminders of an artist's occupation, and others have used them to communicate their artistic position in society (West 2004:165). Moreover, artists use self-portraits to sustain a view of themselves as wealthy, less fortunate, or iconic (West 2004:173). Therefore, when a viewer looks at the self-portrait, they place themselves in the artist's shoes, which then makes the self-portrait both compelling and elusive (West 2004:165).

Self-portraiture is associated with identity because it merges the artist and sitter into one almost making it into a personal diary and is a visual manifestation of how they view themselves (West 2004:163). It is significant because the artist can choose the narrative of how they want to be portrayed in an artwork, which can also reflect their reality. Self-portraits also affirm an artist's identity, and for women, it had assisted in validating them in a male-dominated industry (Christy Slobogin 2015). More so, before the end of the nineteenth century, women occupied the role of nude models in art academies for centuries before they were admitted to these academies as artists. (West 2004:1710). As the twentieth century began, female self-portraiture shifted, and became more liberated; therefore, artists began to explore topics like sexuality and pregnancy since these topics were historically considered taboo (Scherker 2019). Later, female artists used self-portraiture in much the same way. I discuss three significant self-portraitists, namely the Hungarian-Indian painter Amrita Sher-Gil, Mexican painter Frida Kahlo, and American artist Cindy Sherman.

Sher-Gil (1913-1941) was an academically accomplished painter heavily influenced by the post-impressionist who produced self-portraits because she wanted to address her position in society as a modern woman as she transitioned from an adolescent child to a woman (Kiran Nadar Museum of Art [sa]). Sher-Gil's self-portraits are deeply personal and introspective,which conveys a gloomy facial expression, and in some portraits, she seemed happier (Chadha 2016:76; Chandiramani 2023). The reason why Sher-Gil painted herself nude was because nudity was a non-issue to her since she was comfortable in her body, and believed that nudity reflects a woman's true being (Chadha 2016:76). Apart from her self-portraits, Sher-Gil was considered a feminist artist because she utilised her platform as an artist to speak out against the injustices she saw in the world; she supported the rights of women and minorities; and believed that art could influence social change (Sunny Chandiramani 2023). Furthermore, Sher-Gil captured the different women's emotions such as happiness, sadness, and pride and captured them as self-assured individuals (Chandiramani 2023). As a self-portrait artist, she explored her identity as a woman of mixed heritage, and often grappled with her dual cultural identity, and feelings of displacement

(Chandiramani 2023). An example of Sher-Gil's [4]prolific self-portrait is *Self-portrait as a Tahitian* (Figure 6) painted in 1934.

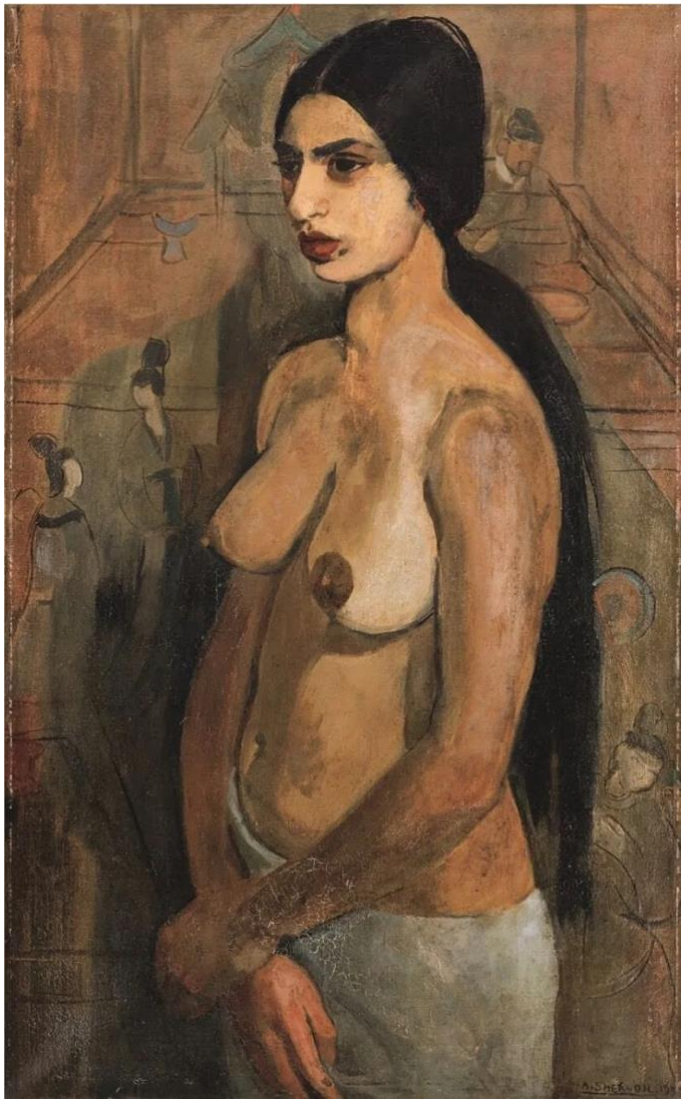

Figure 13: Amrita Sher-Gil, *Self-portrait as a Tahitian*, 1934
Oil on canvas, 90 x 56cm
Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, Dehli
(Zahra [sa])

Self-portrait as a Tahitian (Figure 13) shows Sher-Gil standing partially nude, wearing a white cloth from her waist down. She is looking downwards to the left with her wrists crossed in an X-shape. Her long black hair is tied up, emphasising her facial features and a facial expression that suggests that she is gazing pensively into the distance.

[4] For a more detailed account for Sher-Gil's art practice see *A Painter of Concern: Critical Writings on Amrita Sher-Gil (1997)* by G.H.R Tillotson

With this painting, she overthrows historical artists like Paul Gauguin[5] and Vincent van Gogh's representation and stylisation of non-European cultures and women. Sher-Gil's skin is painted with shades of various earthy colours, including nutmeg, ochre, and cinnamon (Zahra [sa]). The background includes Sher-Gil's shadow, and a wall with several faint artworks that depict Japanese drawings, which were popular among Post-impressionists. When it comes to agency in this painting, and as an artist overall; Sher-Gil challenges the masculine paradigm of modern art and explores the concept of female nudity through the colonial perspective as observed by Saloni Mathur (2011:516). She has achieved this in *Self-portrait as a Tahitian* (1934) because she overthrows historical artists like Paul Gauguin's[6] representation and stylisation of non-European cultures and women.

Her sexuality is not depicted through the lens of a male painter's preoccupation with the ripe fertility of Tahitian women, which Gaugin expressed as symbolising the "freshness of a flower-its ready, if you like, ready to be plucked" (Mathur 2011:516). Mathur (2011:516) asserts that Sher-Gil's body is not depicted as fearful as the reclining nudes seen in Gauguin's paintings of Tahitian women. This claim points out "the crisis of white heterosexual masculinity at the heart" of Gauguin's primitivist encounter. Instead, Sher-Gil paints herself as a strong, real woman, and not as an object for the male sexual imagination.

Like Sher-Gil, Frida Kahlo (1907-1954) was also a prolific self-portraitist known for the 55 self-portraits she produced. The portraits represent her own pain, joy, and sexuality. She drew inspiration from her Mexican culture, and established a distinctive style incorporating elements of traditional Mexican folk art, pre-Columbian art, and the art of the European Renaissance (Bell 2023). In Kahlo's self-portraits, elements of realism are mixed with dreamlike and fantastical scenes in vibrant and bold colours. Also included in her paintings are animals, plants, and everyday items used as symbols to imply deeper meanings (Bell 2023). Kahlo's distinctive facial features such as her dark eyes, light moustache, and monobrow give off an intense gaze that would seem to

[5] See *Gauguin's Tahitian Body* (1990) by Peter Brooks on how Paul Gauguin depicts Tahitian women's bodies in paintings.

penetrate any viewer that is looking at her. Her gaze is sometimes fierce, and other times seems like she is in pain according to Latimer (2009:47). Her self-portraits are more about her journey of self-discovery (Chadha 2016:77). Joanna Latimer (2009:47) investigates Kahlo's self-portraits, and observes that Kahlo utilises her disabled body (due to a polio wound, and an accident in her youth) as the focal point of her paintings.

Figure 14: Frida Kahlo, *Self-portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird*, 1940
Oil on canvas on masonite, 61.1x 47cm
Harry Ransom Center, Austin
(Yaeger 2015)

During the Mexican Revolution in 1910, there was an increase in feminist ideology since women were allowed to join the workforce by taking up jobs that were traditionally for men (Collier Dobson Art [sa]). Women were allowed to divorce their spouses after entering the workforce, which strengthened their social standing. Thus,

they delved further into their artistic practices. Following the Mexican Revolution, Kahlo began using her likeness in self-portraits. These self-portraits she produced were a liberation from the pain and suffering she had experienced in her life (Collier Dobson Art [sa]). Kahlo's self-portraits were notable for her intense gaze and were often bright and bold; yet, the artist was in chronic pain due to an accident (Courtney et al 2017:90).

According to Jacob Anderson (2023), Kahlo's painting *Self-portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird* (Figure 14) is a noteworthy portrayal of the artist's complex identity and her continual fight against physical and emotional distress. The painting includes Kahlo whose gaze is direct with a stern facial expression. Around her neck and chest is a thorn necklace with a small hummingbird hanging from the necklace, and she is dressed in a white shirt or dress. On top of her right shoulder is a black cat, and on the left is a monkey. It is noticeable that foliage is abundant in the background of this painting. Anderson's (2023) investigation of the painting reveals that Kahlo's inclusion of the hummingbird could reflect vitality and resilience; yet, represent a sense of her capacity to find beauty and peace amidst hardship. Nevertheless, the thorn necklace is symbolic of pain and hardship. These two significant objects represent Kahlo's life by embracing the duality of pain and suffering.

Like Sher-Gil and Kahlo, Cindy Sherman's self-portraits challenge the way women have been represented by male artists. Her self-portraits radiate "feminine passivity", but also assert control over her form by challenging expectations of what it means to be "an object of an audience's gaze" (Scherker 2019). Sherman is an American contemporary artist who mostly creates photographic self-portraits of herself in various settings and personas. Sherman assumes the role of photographer, makeup artist, fashion stylist, and hairdresser, thus creating endless possibilities to portray herself in the various characters. One of Sherman's most famous series *Untitled Film Stills* (1977-1980) consists of over seventy black and white photographs which evoke classic Hollywood film stills (Lehner 2021:7). Anna Kérchy (2003:182) mentions that the title *Untitled Film Stills* (1977-1980) has its connotations. For example *Untitled* highlights the inconsistent aspect of the series. It escapes the idea of a prescribed title. *Film* signifies constant movement and ever-changing scenes in each photograph, whereas *Still* refers to how each character that Sherman plays is frozen in the

photographs (Kérchy 2003:182). These photographs are taken from a hypothetical black and white B-grade film of the 1950s, which frames heroines into frozen images of the myth of femininity into projections of patriarchal imagination (Kérchy 2003:181).

Figure 15: Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Stills #21*, 1978
Gelatin silver print, 18.7 x 23.9cm
The Metropolitan Museum of Contemporary Art, New York
(The Met [sa])

Throughout most of her work, she uses photography as a tool to evade her personality by taking on different identities (Artlead [sa]). She thereby depicts different kinds of stereotypes by representing cliches like a school girl, a career-driven woman and a fashionista (Artlead [sa]). For example, in *Untitled Film Still #21* (Figure 15), she portrays herself as a television character who is a protagonist wearing vintage clothing from the 1950s. She depicts a woman where the camera is at a low angle with tall buildings surrounding the character. Sherman is included in this study because of the agency she shows by deconstructing negative stereotypes of gender, race, and class by how she creates fictional characters for her self-portraits. Sher-Gil and Kahlo assert agency by giving a viewer an intimate look into their life experiences, and this shows how self-portraiture involves a process of self-introspection, seeing oneself, and then co-relating the visual and psychological perception into articulate expression (Chadha 2016:72). Agency is shown again some decades later with a contemporary artist like

Sherman who can craft different identities in different photographs, which challenge gender stereotypes by exposing them.

Most importantly, self-portraiture is a useful strategy for black feminist artists because it enables them to depict themselves. They however choose since they were historically portrayed as slaves or servants. A marginalised group of people who are able to see themselves in a gallery space or institution where they previously did not belong is empowering (Robinson 2022). Self-portraiture encompasses various themes such as the oppositional gaze, self-definition, and self-love. These themes are utilised as strategies by black feminists, and are therefore discussed in more detail below.

3.2.1. The oppositional gaze

In this study of self-portraits by black women, the oppositional gaze is evident in the work of artists like Renee Cox and Carrie Mae Weems as well as the black female South African artists dealt with in Chapter Four. This is because they resist negative portrayals of black women. hooks (1992) introduced the concept of “the oppositional gaze”, defining it as a means for persons in inferior positions to oppose dominant images and messages that signal their devalued status (Jacobs 2016:216). Relatedly, the term oppositional gaze was coined by hooks in her 1992 essay *The Oppositional Gaze Black Female Spectators,* and it refers to the power dynamics in looking. Moreover, hooks (1992) regards the gaze as a tool of resistance, particularly against the historical and present marginalisation of black women in media and culture. According to Snider (2018:15), the oppositional gaze happens when one is curious, consciously aware and deeply concerned with issues of race and racism. The oppositional gaze challenges traditional identity barriers by viewing the world through an unconventional lens.

In addition, the oppositional gaze occurs when the viewer (in an inferior position exposed to negative imagery) of any artwork or film rejects the domineering, white male gaze and becomes a self-determined subject (Oppositional Gaze Cinema [sa]). hook’s (1992) exploration of the oppositional gaze encouraged individuals to reject societal beauty standards as well as imagery that excluded and misrepresented black

women (Barlow 2016:207). The oppositional gaze is also crucial in black feminism as it enables black women to critique and resist harmful portrayals, which then allows them to define themselves (Jacobs 2016:235). The concept of the oppositional gaze originates from a historical context in which intense looking at someone was seen as confrontational, and a challenge to authority (hooks 1992:115) Moreover, hooks (1992:115) notes that during slavery, black people were denied the right to gaze at their slave masters. This restriction led to a rebellious desire to look, forming what is known as the oppositional gaze (hooks 1992:115).

According to hooks (1992), the oppositional gaze is a form of recognition among black women that acknowledges the impact of traumatic life experiences. It reflects the degree to which black women are devalued, objectified, and dehumanised by society. hooks (1992) argues that the tendency to develop an oppositional gaze is greatest among those whose identities are constructed as inferior according to the dominant order (Barlow 2018:2007). Black women who have been the focus of direction attention have had limited freedom to define themselves and interact with the world (Smith 2020). hooks (1992:117) explains that black women have traditionally employed the “gaze” as a form of resistance to colonialism and the historical representation of black women in the Western art canon. In power dynamics, subordinates recognise the presence of the oppositional gaze that strives to document and fight oppression. This gaze politicises the act of looking as a site of resistance, and demands for the cultivation of a critical and empowered viewpoint (hooks 1992:117). It is therefore possible to argue that black women can use the oppositional gaze in a self-portrait as a strategy for agency because they produce works in which they place themselves in front and centre, and portray themselves as powerful and attractive; therefore, eradicating dehumanising historical representations in the Western canon of art.

3.2.2. Self-definition as a strategy for agency

Using the oppositional gaze as a starting point for self-representation in this study highlights self-definition as a black feminist strategy. Self-definition refers to how black

women actively shape their own identities rather than having them imposed on them by others. According to Collins (1986:16), self-definition is defined as challenging political knowledge; and it is a validation process that has resulted in externally defined stereotypical images of Afro-American womanhood. Collins (1986:17) refers to Mae King (1973) and Cheryl Gilkes's (1981) insights on self-definition as a strategy for overthrowing harmful stereotypes. In other words, self-definition can be a vehicle to implement the oppositional gaze. Gilkes (1981) emphasises that black women's assertiveness in resisting the multifaceted oppression they experience has been a consistent threat to the status quo (cited byCollins 1986:17). As a consequence of their assertiveness, black women have been bombarded with different types of negative images designed to control confident black female behaviour (Collins 1986:17). The reason is to show how Black women have created their own identities, and are telling their own stories through self-portraiture as a response to controlling images, historical representations in art and stereotypes.

Patricia Hill Collins offers another insight into self-definition in her book *Black Feminist Thought* (2000) where she explains that self-definition is the evaluation by oneself of one's worth as an individual in distinction from one's interpersonal or social roles. To Shannon Snelgrove and Laura Gardner (2016:51), self-definition is essential for black women since the coexisting oppressions of racism and sexism contribute to developing and maintaining oppressive images of black womanhood. Collins (2000:98) notes that the importance of self-definition is the resistance to doing something unexpected, and could not have occurred without longstanding rejections of misrepresentation and underrepresentation.

Yolanda Hood (2001) also contends that there has been a long-standing tradition of black women who have used visual art to express self-definition. Black women have "crafted identities to empower themselves" as opposed to accepting the demeaning images (such as those found in print and broadcast media), which are the stereotypes (Collins 2000:97-98). By black women's own crafting identities, they can resist the stereotypes by which they are depicted in the media and in art, as I have argued above (Collins 2000:98). Idrissa Snider (2018:15) states that the goals and objectives of self-defining are being able to change views about black women from the exploitation of controlling images. The objectives aim not about trying to convince individuals to view

black women from an optimistic perspective, but it is to encourage black women to express themselves authentically and realistically (Snider 2018:15). Artists like Weems and Cox discussed below develop artworks that defy Western notions of beauty, and that put these artists at the heart of their work. Therefore, these artists choose how they want to be depicted, and this is achieved through self-representation in their art.

Self-representation allows artists to implement the oppositional gaze through self-definition. It is the act of representing oneself through an artistic likeness of oneself (Merriam Webster [sa]). Self-representation is a fundamental concept when discussing the empowerment of black women because it allows them to have a choice in how they are represented. For example, social media and visual art are platforms for self-representation that can be divided into three subgroups concerned with depicting oneself to oneself, also known as self-concept. Self-concept includes ideas about oneself, and self-awareness of one's beliefs, cultural background, and addressing them (Thagard & Wood 2015:4). According to Paul Thagard and Joanne V Wood (2015:6), the second subcategory is representing oneself to others also known as self-presentation that refers to one's impression of oneself. However, self-image and identity can also include one's desired perception by others. The third subcategory involves judging oneself under one's standards, which is known as self-evaluation; and it includes self-appraisal, and self-love (Thagard & Wood 2015:7). Another reason for self-representation in this study is because "everyone has spoken for black women making it difficult for us to speak for ourselves" (Collins 2000:124).

In recent decades, black female artists have been challenging marginalisation in various ways, and reclaiming their agency over how they are represented. Concerning representing black women courageously with agency, African American artists like Mickalene Thomas, Amy Sherald and Lorna Simpson have produced artworks that have upended gendered and racialised stereotypes (Hannah Traore [sa]). Furthermore, American black female artists such as Xaviera Simmons and Nona Faustine are two examples of self-portrait artists. Pioneering photographer Carrie Mae Weems has also produced self-portraits that affirm black female subjectivity, and oppose negative historical depictions of black women in the historical canon of Western art. In the last three decades, an artist like Weems was able to establish

herself as an artist who uses self-representation to reclaim agency in her prolific photographic series, *The Kitchen Table* (1990).

3.2.3. Carrie Mae Weems: Kitchen Table

Carrie Mae Weems (1953-present) is an African-American visual activist and artist born in Portland, Oregon; and she has reclaimed agency in her self-portraits. When examining Weems's artwork, Deborah Willis (2012:992) contends that the artist skillfully reflects the political, cultural and historical periods through socio-psychological representations. What is evident in Weems's work is how the black female body has taken up space and makes use of her own body to locate the social ideal discovered in history (Palumbo 2022). Weems has conveyed agency in her intimate greyscale photographic series *The Kitchen Table* (1990). Roxana Marcoci (2022) also maintains that the series seeks to address female beauty and desire and considers how the black female subject has been marginalised in the Western art canon.

Figure 16: Carrie Mae Weems, *Untitled (Woman and Daughter with Makeup)*, 1990
Silver Gelatin Print

Jack Shainman Gallery, New York
(Lesso 2023)

In 1989, Weems put up a camera in her kitchen in front of a basic wooden table that was accentuated by a single overhead light (Palumbo 2020). From the basic wooden table, Weem's became the lead role in a monumental series. Jacqui Palumbo (2020) contends that Weems commands the stage, she plays a woman aware of the viewer, sometimes stealing a glance while the secondary subjects remain oblivious and glare directly into the camera at different times. In *The Kitchen Table* (1990) series, Weems constantly changes roles. For example, she goes from the role of a mother to a lover, and to a friend to herself (Palumbo 2020). The photographs being shot in greyscale suggest timelessness and freedom from place and time-based constraints (Anderson 2023).

In the picture *Untitled (Woman and Daughter with Makeup)* (Figure 16), Weems occupies the role of a mother and as a protagonist in this series alongside her young daughter who both stare at their mirrors applying makeup. To Robert R Shane (2018:500), the mirrors in this photograph as well as her additional works in the series play a significant role, as they have been considered foundational to Western ideas of subjectivity and debates about beauty. Moreover, Weems challenges the deeply ingrained cultural views of African-American womanhood by overthrowing racist and sexist concepts of subjectivity (Shane 2018:501). One could argue that by showing the mother and daughter partaking in a routine activity like applying makeup and focussing on themselves, this photograph subverts the racist and sexist ideas of subjectivity. This contrasts with how black women are typically portrayed in art, for example Laure in *Olympia* (1863) and Toukie Smith in *Carolina* (1976).

Moreover, Shane (2018:501) references psychoanalyst Helen Block Lewis's description of the "doubleness of experience of shame" that is visually depicted by mirrors in Weems's photograph. However, in *Untitled (Women and Daughter with Makeup)* (1990), the placement of the mirrors could be read differently because feminist activist and writer, Salamisha Tillet (2016) notes that looking into the mirror and applying the makeup is a gesture of care, reparation, and a statement of black

womanhood, visibility, and beauty. Tillet (2016) also expresses that despite the mother and daughter's racial and gendered invisibility, the lesson of this photograph is: how to see one another as a black woman and a black girl.

Usually looking into a mirror continuously could suggest a lack of confidence, egocentrism, and shame; but, Weems conveys that by looking again the subject can utilise the mirror to demonstrate black female subjectivity, self-love, and beauty (Shane 2018:501). *Untitled (Women and Daughter with Makeup)* (1990) challenges racist and sexist concepts of subjectivity by critiquing beauty standards, challenging objectification and reclaiming the gaze. One could argue that the act of applying makeup in this photograph could symbolise having to conform to certain beauty standards since black women's natural facial features have been rejected by mainstream beauty industries and deemed masculine. However, Weems expresses self-definition, which encourages black women to express themselves authentically (Snider 2018:15). Weems has achieved this by creating an intimate environment in the photograph by focusing on an ordinary moment between mother and daughter, emphasising their humanity and individuality as black females. Thus, it offers an alternative view of black female subjectivity as opposed to the negative imagery that black women were historically subjected to.

Another significant object in this photograph is the overhead light that provides direct lighting, and it signifies an atmosphere of intimacy and stillness while simultaneously redirecting the viewer's gaze (Jesse Anderson 2023). The subject matter of Weem's *Kitchen Table* (1990) series is black female agency because she is in complete control of her poses and how she depicts herself, freeing herself from the confines of the white male gaze. Anderson (2023) points out that Weems makes herself the muse, which universalizes her persona in a way that makes her artwork relatable to viewers and pulls those viewers to her art in terms of the roles she takes on (i.e., mother, daughter, lover, and friend) in the series.

3.2.4. Renee Cox: Yo Mama

Another way in which black female artists have challenged their problematic representation by powerful *others* is by provocatively inserting themselves into

historical canonical artwork. Jamaican-American photographer and political activist Reneé Cox's (1960-present) work is an apt example of this strategy. According to her feminist artist statement, Cox affirms her work is about empowering women and that images of women in the media are distorted (Brooklyn Museum [sa]). Cox further states that "women are imprisoned by those unrealistic representations of the female body" and she is interested in overthrowing stereotypical representations of women (Brooklyn Museum [sa]). She uses her own nude body in her photographs because "working with herself is the most honest representation of being", and she is working toward regaining"self-love" not narcissism[7] (Farrington 2004:15, Princeton University Art Museum [sa]). Cox has considered and referred to hook's *Sisters of the Yam* (1993) in her art practice by also mentioning how black men and women were stripped of their dignity and identity, and that such action still has an adverse effect on black people today (Brooklyn Museum [sa]).

Cox represented herself in one of her earliest self-portraits, a black-and-white photograph titled *Young Yo Mama* (Figure 17), and it consists of Cox facing the camera, and attempting to remove a white shirt from her body. *Young Yo Mama* (1980) conveys self-love as a black woman since she portrays black beauty according to the Princeton University Art Museum. From *Young Yo Mama* (1980), there is a transition in how Cox represents herself, and she provocatively depicts herself as Christ-like in a more controversial photograph titled *Yo Mama's Last Supper* (Figure 18) produced in 1996. *Yo Mama's Last Supper* (from the *Yo Mama series*) reimagines Italian artist Leonardo da Vinci's historical painting *The Last Supper* (Figure 19). According to Canossi and Lopez-Diago (2022:18-19), the photograph challenges "Western religious iconography" by embodying a "black mother goddess".

[7] Narcissism other known as Narcissistic Personality disorder is a mental health disorder which involve individuals who have an exaggerated sense of their own importance (Mayo Clinic [sa]).

Figure 17: Renee Cox, *Young Yo Mama,* 1980
Inkjet print mounted on aluminium, 101.6 x 76.2cm

Figure 18: Renee Cox, *Yo Mama's Last Supper*, 1996
Cibachrome prints, 76.2 x 76.2cm
Brooklyn Museum of Art, New York
(Cox [sa])

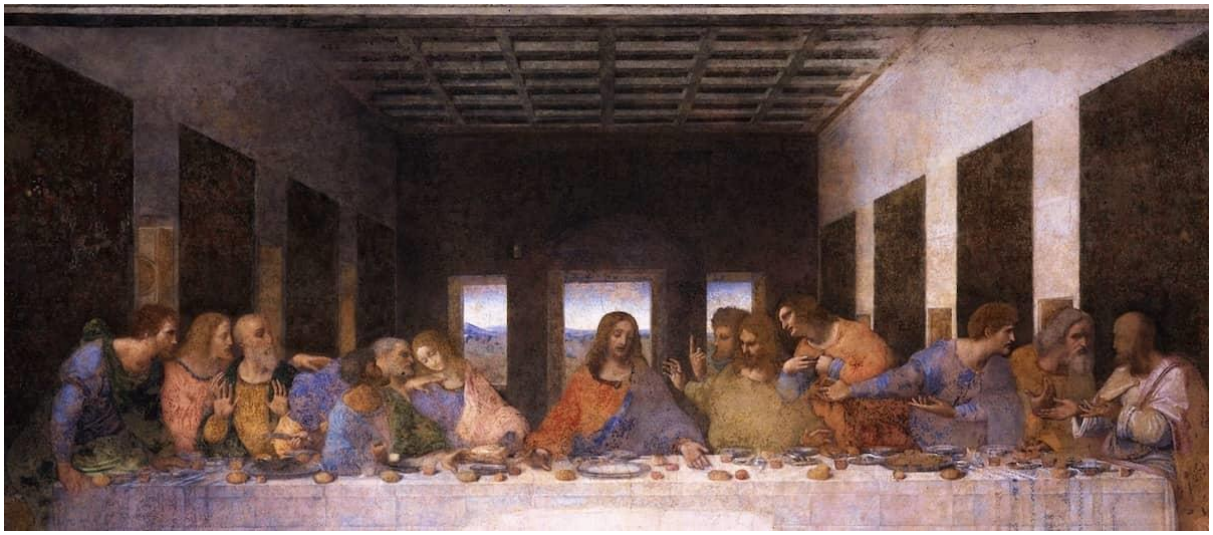

Figure 19: Leonardo da Vinci, *The Last Supper*, 1495-1498
Tempera on gesso pitch and mastic
Santa Maria delle Grazie, Milan
(La Selle University Digital Commons [sa])

One of the issues with this photograph and Cox's overall body of work was that the black female body was visible, and that the sight of it presented artistic debates and visual narratives. Another reason why it is considered controversial is because Cox inherently replaces Jesus Christ along with his twelve disciples who were also replaced by black men in what was the Last Supper before Jesus Christ was crucified. Cox's arms are stretched out suggesting that she is giving out a blessing with a white cloth draped over her arms. Consequently, the photograph became sensationalised negatively, sparking many debates about the sight of a naked black female body replacing the figure of Christ (Fleetwood 2011:4). For example, Cox's portrayal of Christ as a woman goes against the traditional male-only priesthood in the Catholic doctrine according to Deidre Lyneice Wheaton (2008:98). Therefore, Wheaton (2008:98) expresses that Cox rejects gender stereotypes in this photograph.

When posing herself nude in her self-portrait, Nicole Fleetwood (2011:8) highlights Renee Cox's remarks about black women's invisibility as creators of art, and the imagery of the black female body in creative traditions, which at times is seen as disturbing. Cox has used self-portraiture as a means to present social justice issues to the public, and to promote remembrance (Barness 2020). Fleetwood (2011) mentions the notion of excess flesh, which means black women's bodies going beyond

the limit, and doing too much, making them hypervisible. Hypervisibility is the sensation of feeling overly noticeable because of an individual's race and ethnicity, sometimes to the point of overpowering one's abilities and personality (Bloomberg 2021). In Fleetwood's (2011:6) words, hypervisibility also refers to the "historic and contemporary conceptualisations of blackness as simultaneously invisible and always visible as underexposed and always exposed". The reason for this is that the Black female body on its own "functions as the site of excess" in visual culture, and in the public sphere at large (Fleetwood 2011:4). This also means that the black female body typically poses a problem within a range of vision defined by racialised and gendered markings (Fleetwood 2011:4). The photograph was condemned by the Rudolph Giuliani Mayor of New York City at the time when it was exhibited, and he referred to it as "anti-catholic" and "disgusting" (Fleetwood 2011:3).

Meanwhile, Julie Crenn (2016:7) discusses the black female body and how it has been deemed as "uncomfortable". The reason why the black female is viewed as uncomfortable is that it carries a long history of abuse, and it has been the object of multiple projections (Koyo 2015:2015). Cox's agency is evident in her ability to elevate herself, portraying herself as an icon, and the part of self-love is apparent due to her posing naked, and appreciating her body. La Ronda Denise Barnes (2020) also mentions that Cox's images are powerful because they inspire women to take control of their destinies. Therefore, it is plausible to contend that Cox placing herself at the centre of the iconic *Yo Mama's Last Supper* (1996) defies existing religious and artistic traditions that have marginalised or excluded black women, and instead establishes an alternative vision. This is known as the oppositional gaze as argued by hooks (1992). The oppositional gaze encouraged individuals to reject societal beauty standards as well as imagery that excluded and misrepresented black women (Barlow 2016:207). Cox invites the viewers to consider the black female body as a sign of authority, strength, and divinity rather than an object of oppression; and this act of self-representation can be regarded as a gesture of both rebellion and self-love.

Self-love is an important theme in this study because some aspects of it are present in the artworks, and they are discussed through Audre Lorde's perspective. Self-love is therefore apparent in the artworks presented in this study. Self-love is the act of

developing a profound, unconditional esteem for oneself and body according to Sharon Martin (2019). Self-love is also the cornerstone of self-care[8], self-compassion, and self-acceptance. This involves nurturing and treating oneself with kindness as well as having a positive relationship with oneself and their body (Martin 2019). Examples of what self-love includes are: being assertive, challenging oneself, and admiring one's own body according to Martin (2019). Self-love also entails acting bravely in public, disregarding what others think of an individual, and keeping in mind that one's worth is not derived from the way one looks (Stewart 2023).

Maushmi Patel and Alastair Pipkin (2022:2) state that a substantial amount of research has examined self-love concerning narcissism seeing it as an unhealthy over-investment in oneself. However, psychological studies have begun to acknowledge the positive aspects of self-love. There have been other critiques concerning self-love as a feminist strategy. For instance, Gil (2016) believes that this strategy is over-represented in the media today particularly due to its emphasis on feminine self-love, confidence, and self-esteem instead of collaboration to address injustices, according to Priya Raghavan (2022:3). By encouraging positive affirmations, social ties, and self-acceptance, Patel and Pipkin (2022:2) contend that self-love can reduce self-stigma, and internalised negative ideas about one's identity such as gender, sexuality, or culture. Furthermore, self-love can lessen the effects of bad experiences, and reduce the internalisation of damaging messages from society (Patel & Pipkin 2022:2).

Self-love has been seen as a feminist issue because "women who love themselves are threatening" as they challenge a structure that wants them to be, and look a certain way according to society's standards (Wolf 1991:143). American feminist author, Naomi Wolf (1991:145) further explains that women who have broken free from gender roles have demonstrated independence. Therefore, one of the repercussions of female self-love is that women are more convinced of their social worth (Wolf 1991:145). Donna J Nicol and Angela Yee (2017:133) identify that the politics of self-love and self-care within communities of colour is used as a means of surviving and

[8] Additional information about the self-care of black women is *The only way out': how self-care is conceptualized by Black Women* (2023) written by Paris B. Adkins-Jackson, Portia A. Jackson Preston & Teah Hairston.

resisting the tyranny of violence, objectification, exploitation, and abjection that arise from the intersection of multiple forms of oppression which include racism (Raghavan 2022:3). Raghavan (2022:3) continues from Nicol and Yee's (2017) assertion and note that acts of self-love within communities of colour are a long cry from the atomised acts of consumerist pleasure condemned above since they take seriously the question of what it means to love oneself, and experience joy within mechanisms meant to deprive them of both (Barlow 2016).

Similarly, self-love is seen as a healing process, and for black feminist ideologies; it can be used to educate black women about a deeper love and understanding of themselves (Ricks 2018:347). This can happen through empowerment. Self-love is important since black women are often overlooked and overworked in a society that brings them down (Ricks 2018:348). Black women can start learning to love and trust themselves (Ricks 2018:347). Therefore, it can be contended that black female artists can develop an oppositional gaze and self-definition by portraying themselves as powerful and desirable in their self-portraits. They also ultimately resist historical representations of black women, and reject the male gaze, thus enabling them to love themselves.

Audre Lorde is a key theorist in the discussion of self-care and self-love. Lorde's health journey is important to speak about as her collection of essays was made into a book *A Burst of Light* (1988). The book discusses how she took agency in her taking care of herself when her health began to decline. Her deteriorating health shaped her daily life, and it was in the face of an ongoing struggle for survival and self-determination that black women battled every day (Lorde 1988:49). Nevertheless, Lorde (1988:130) made it a point to live her life to the fullest by sharing her experiences, raising awareness of issues that she felt were vital, and carrying out duties that she felt strongly about. Lorde's literature is crucial to this study as it discusses what it means to take one's well-being seriously, especially when analysing the artwork as it will assist in applying the themes of wellness. In her collection of essays, *A Burst of Light,* Lorde (1988:131) describes self-care as "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare". It can mean that caring for oneself can become a method of survival in a world that is hostile to marginalised identities, communities, and lifestyles (Spicer, 2023). In her book, *Sister Outsider*

(1984), Lorde explains that black women need to exercise self-love, owing to their experiences of oppression, which include ageism, racism, heterosexism, classism, and homophobia.

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An important point that Lorde makes in *Sister Outsider* (1984) about self-love is that black women learning to love themselves goes beyond a superficial insistence that "Black is beautiful". Lorde (1984:174) explains further that self-love "goes beyond and deeper than a surface appreciation of black beauty, although that it is a certainly good beginning". The part of self-love that is empowering is the notion of women strengthening their inner *selves* for their work and future (Lorde 1984:174). Ricks (2018:348) also affirms that it is time for a paradigm shift that will allow black women to understand the importance of rewriting their narrative in a narrative filled with self-love, and courage to do as much for themselves as they do for others. After all, self-love is usually not an easy task as hooks[9] (2000:54) expressed, but it is about working through certain issues, and growing from those issues is how self-love can happen.

According to Nicol and Yee (2017:135), hooks (1993) urges black women to strive for self-actualisation, and she also contends that black women who pursue personal fulfilment through their creative endeavours are better suited to stay involved in the broader fight for social justice, and equality throughout their lives. The artworks of Sher-Gil, Kahlo, Sherman, Weems, and Cox convey self-love and self-care because they took time to reflect on their own lives, understanding their place in society, reclaiming their bodies, beautifully portraying themselves and challenging the problematic historical representations of women in Western art. Therefore, it is possible to argue that the artists examined in Chapter Four incorporate self-love into their works by seeing themselves as worthy and desirable. These actions are depicted in their self-portraits, and can be shown vividly through the interpretation of those self-portraits.

[9] *All About Love: New Visions* (2000) by bell hooks provides a more in-depth philosophy on self-love and love.

3.3. Conclusion

Self-portraiture as a genre was important to investigate in this study since the study was about black female artists examining agency within self-portraits. Analysing Amrita Sher-Gil, Frida Kahlo, and Cindy Sherman's self-portraits offered a fruitful insight into how they advocated for themselves by challenging social norms and gender stereotypes. For instance, Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* (1977-1980) questioned several 1950s gender tropes, while Sher-Gil challenged Paul Gauguin's portrayal of Tahitian women in *Self-portrait as a Tahitian Woman* (1934). Playing the parts of a mother, lover, and friend, Carrie Mae Weems has shown a unique way of presenting herself. She turned herself into a muse. Renee Cox was also examined in terms of how she defied the traditional ways of portraying the female nude in her *Yo Mama's Last Supper* (1997). The themes that were attached to self-portraiture as a (black) feminist strategy were self-definition; i.e., how controlling images are rejected by black women; the oppositional gaze; i.e., how they assert and challenge their position in society; and self-love; i.e., fostering a positive and loving relationship with oneself. These themes are investigated further in Chapter Four in terms of the analysis of the selected South African female artists.

CHAPTER 4
THE OPPOSITIONAL GAZE OF SELECTED SOUTH AFRICAN FEMALE ARTISTS THROUGH SELF-LOVE AND SELF-DEFINITION

4.1. Introduction

As I argued in the previous chapter, the use of self-portraiture is one of the strategies employed by black feminist artists in a global context to redefine their identity amidst the reductive tropes of blackness previously used in art and visual culture. This chapter analyses artwork by South African artists, namely Mary Sibande, Zanele Muholi, Billie Zangewa, and Zandile Tshabalala. The artworks by these artists are examined through the lenses of self-love, self-definition, and the oppositional gaze; thus linking their self-portraits back to feminism and black feminism.

The first South African artist discussed in this chapter is Mary Sibande who has shared her experiences while living under apartheid and incorporates elements of those experiences into her work. Her creative style investigates gender stereotypes, and concepts of beauty by making life-size sculptures and engaging in self-portraiture. I selected Sibande for this study because of her proficiency in creating sculptures that depict the human form and photographic performances in which she engages in self-representation by employing black feminist strategies such as self-definition, the oppositional gaze and self-love. Sibande engages with these topics by elegantly portraying a domestic servant named "Sophie," who doubles as Sibande's alter ego. She is dressed extravagantly, and voluminously rejecting gender stereotypes and historical representations of black women in the Western art canon. Furthermore, Sibande's work provides a meaningful counter-reference to the colonial slave and master archetype (Bidouzo-Coudray 2014).

I also chose Zanele Muholi for this study because of their ability to portray themselves so boldly and unapologetically black in their photographs. Therefore, their prominent photographic series *Somnyama Ngonyama* (2012-present) is examined thoroughly. Alexandra Poulain provides an in-depth analysis of Muholi's practice including *Somnyama Ngonyama* (2012-present). After the analysis of Muholi's photographs, I then discuss Billie Zangewa's bold and striking tapestries. The reason I selected

Zangewa for this study is that her self-portraits represent a free woman at ease in her environment, conscious of her status, history, and role in society (Crenn 2016:6). Thus, the *Rebirth of Black Venus* (2010) is carefully analysed as a starting point in Zangewa's part of the study. From the *Rebirth of Black Venus* (2010), the artworks from her series *Soldier of Love* are examined. Moreover, she portrays women who are confident and distinguished, and those qualities oppose all stereotypes (Crenn 2016:5).

In her self-portraits, Zandile Tshabalala painted herself with a highly pigmented skin tone. Moreover, these paintings' backgrounds depict the intimate settings of her home and are sometimes within constructed backgrounds that include foliage, showing a black woman being relaxed, and at ease in her environment. Tshabalala has also noted that the reason why she produces art is because she questions the reasons why when a black and white woman are both present in a painting, the black woman is placed in a position where she fades into a much darker background, and thereby enhancing the white woman presences in the painting (Hart 2020).

The black South African female artists that I analyse in this chapter work towards a new perspective and reclamation of their bodies (Crenn 2016:6). Moreover, many previous representations of black women's bodies followed some established patterns, confirming the supposed evolutionary categorisations of beings, with black women figuring as the least developed in juxtaposition to men (Lewis 2005:13). The arguments I present in Chapter Four centre on how these artists upend the notion of fading into the background, and how they possess agency over their bodies, which is why themes of self-love, sensuality, self-definition, the oppositional gaze, and self-representation are important. In this chapter, I apply an iconographic, iconological, and hermeneutic method of analysis since this study is based on understanding how the selected self-portraits express black female subjectivity.

The focus of the analysis of the artworks is to understand how these artists reclaim agency by decentring the White female subject, and by placing themselves at the forefront of their artworks (Harrison 2002:163). Their work significantly contributes to an attempt to change "derogatory racial representations about black people", particularly representations of black women (Harrison 2002:164, Tesfagiorgis 1993). The artists do this by producing "affirming" images of themselves in self-portraits

(Harrison 2002:164). While there is a growing volume of research on the artworks of Sibande, Muholi, and Zangewa; my argument focuses on how the selected artworks express black feminist ideas by mobilising the oppositional gaze through self-portraiture. In my analysis, I also show how self-love becomes a significant theme in the artist's definition of themselves.

4.2. The dreams and aspirations of "Sophie"

Sibande's art practice centres around the topic of South African domestic workers. Sharlene Khan (2021:29) attests that since Dutch and British colonisation, domestic work by black women has long been performed in South African homes. Khan (2021:29) further notes that domestic work is one of the staples of formal and informal employment for black women in middle-class households in South Africa. The lives of domestic workers under colonialism and apartheid were characterised by contradictions. These contradictions included black domestic workers attending to the needs of White families at the expense of attending to their own. Moreover, they were expected to be physically available to their employers when necessary, yet forced to remain invisible and absent in their individualism (Khan 2021:29). The domestic workers traditionally disappear into the background, are silent, and doing a clean up of their employers (Dodd 2010:469).

Contemporary South African artist Mary Sibande[10] has produced a body of work that is situated around deconstructing the stereotypical depictions of black women in South African as domestic workers through hyperrealistic photographs and sculptures, which take centre stage in public spaces, defying the depiction of the domestic who of traditionally disappeared into the background (Dodd 2010:469, Frist Art Museum [sa]). The likeness of the sculptures Sibande produced demonstrates her engagement in self-representation. Through the lens of Thagard and Wood[11] (2015:2), Sibande's use of self-representation is divided into subgroups: the creation of Sophie, which she uses to honour her mother figures and black women in South Africa is known as self-presentation. By Sibande creating work for herself and drawing from her own

[10] Now based in Johannesburg, Mary was born in Barberton Mpumalanga.
[11] Refer to Chapter Three for Thagard and Wood's (2015) theory of self-representation.

experiences as a black woman living in South Africa post-apartheid is known as self-concept.

Sibande also deconstructs the stereotypical depiction of the domestic worker in a series of sculptural self-portraits. The artist accomplished the deconstruction of stereotypical depiction of the domestic worker by constructing an alter ego named 'Sophie'[12] (derived from the English, French, and Greek language). Sophie's fibreglass body is moulded from Sibande herself, identifying the figure as the artist's alter-ego according to Bidouzo-Coudray (cited by Scheffer, Du-Preez & Stevens 2017:5). When walking into a public space like a gallery, one feels 'Sophie's' presence due to her large and dominant scale and the overflowing number of fabrics used to highlight her occupation (Dodd 2010:469).

'Sophie' was created to "play out the fantasies of the maternal women" in her family, particularly her mother (Nair 2020). Sophie represents an "accumulated wealth of stories" that she brings to the surface from what her mother and grandmother have endured during their lives but have managed to succeed despite the blockages imposed on their lives (Khan 2021:30). Sibande felt the need to celebrate the women, and the significant role they have played in her life because they were "limited as black bodies, as black female bodies" (Rizzato [sa]). Even the name 'Sophie carries so much historical significance as it is a reminder of the colonial period, slavery, and apartheid where black children were given names white people could easily pronounce (Scala [sa]). Sibande's grandmother told her that her great-grandmother's name was Tsheledi Fanedi in Sesotho, but that her master had renamed her Elsie since they could not pronounce or remember (Khan 2021:29, Sibande 2013). Historically, renaming grown men or women was seen as an act of ownership over marginalised bodies by those who were in power which reduced the men and women to property (Khan 2021:30). Thus, Sibande was also the first in her family to achieve academically, therefore, furthering her chances for "true freedom as opposed to her mother and grandmother who worked and lived in much different circumstances and freed her from "being next in line" (Bidouzo-Coudray 2014). Above all, Sophie becomes the embodiment of

[12] See *Hysterical representation in the art of Mary Sibande* (2017) by Anne Scheffer and Amanda du Preez for a detailed analysis of Sibande's art practice through interpretation of hysteria.

countless narratives that came before. She likewise represents the hopes, dreams, and aspirations of black women beyond their actual lives (Khan 2021:30).

Figure 20: Mary Sibande, *I'm a Lady*, 2009
Archival Digital Print, 90 x 60 x 3cm
Kavi Gupta Gallery, Chicago
(Kavi Gupta Gallery [sa])

Sophie is depicted in *I'm a Lady* (Figure 20) with Sibande in a royal blue dress that is made with large amounts of tulle. A white apron is placed on top of the dress and Sibande wears a white headscarf on her head. In her hand, she holds a transparent white lace umbrella. Sophie's skin tone is dark in contrast to the bright backdrop and

dress, and her eyes are closed not gazing at the viewer, which could signify that she is dreaming and imagining better for her life. In the analysis of *I'm a Lady* (2009), Dodd (2010:469) argues that when Sophie finally opens her eyes, she returns to her normal duties like dusting and cleaning. Khan (2021:30) notes that how' Sophie' is dressed is deemed a colonial fetish due to the clean white apron and headscarf, which is influenced by the African Zionist Church and Victorian-inspired attire. The characteristics of the domestic worker's attire are exaggerated in *I'm a Lady* (2009) as shown by the length of the apron, the huge size of the sleeves and the multiple layers of tulle on the dress (Corrigall 2015:150). The exaggerated nature of Sophie's attire is an indication of a luxurious lifestyle according to Mary Corrigall (2015:150). This artwork alludes to the Victorian[13] ideal of what it means to be a lady, which could be a woman who is pure, refined, and modest (Aspire Art [sa]). This idea is supported by Western etiquette and manners. Sibande conveys this in the way she is posed and how she holds the parasol. A possible explanation for the size of her dress would be that Sophie would not be able to move freely due to the extravagant costume weighing her down, which would prevent her from performing the duties of a "maid[14]". Ironically, the inability to accomplish physical chores becomes a status symbol. Henderson (2018:18) expresses that Sibande posed in a decorous (a dignified appearance) manner mirroring a woman who is at leisure, and her lack of activity is supported by the provision of services by other women who as domestic workers are rendered invisible. Sophie's pose suggests that she is mimicking the "leisurely pose of her

[13] The Victorian era, according to Alexandra Dodd (2010:469) was referred to as the epicentre of the colonial moment, the pinnacle of imperialism, during which Britain not only consolidated but also expanded its pre-existing empire and increased the size of its colonial in a manner never seen before in the context of South Africa. Victorian history has been tainted by colonialism's violence, the securing of social systems and power structures, the servitude of people and the colonial era's construct of the "other", which was based on the racial sciences and their control over knowledge production. This relates to Sibande's work since Sophie dresses in a Victorian-style maid's costume, whereas Sibande makes outfits that resemble ball gowns.

[14] The term, maid is used to describe an individual who works in a household often performed by women (Vocabulary [sa]). They clean and perform other duties within the household. In South Africa, calling a black woman a maid and domestic is considered insulting, according to Tanja Bosch and Caitlin McLeod (2015:148). Different terms like nanny, helper or housekeeper are what domestic workers prefer to be called (Bosch & McLeod 2015:148).

madam", or it could signify wanting to imagine herself wearing the latest fashion and aspiring to be like her 'madam[15]' (Khan 2021:32).

Figure 21: Mary Sibande, *Her Majesty, Queen Sophie*, 2010
Colour digital print, 104 x 69cm
Kavi Gupta Gallery, Chicago
(Kavi Gupta [sa])

In *Her Majesty, The Queen* (Figure 21), Sibande once again depicts herself as Sophie. This time, she is wearing a multi-layered royal blue Victorian-inspired ballgown with puffed sleeves, and on top of the dress is a crisp white apron and headscarf, which

[15] The term, Madam refers to a woman (traditionally white) who is an employer or superior in the workplace (Dictionary of South African English [sa]). According to Lorato Mokwena (2022) being called madam has some negative connotations such as laziness (an inability to execute women-like duties) as well as a controlling nature.

includes multiple layers of different colours like red, blue, green, and pink under the ruffles of her dress. Her eyes are closed once again, suggesting that she is dreaming. Her palms are faced in an upward position in a gesture of compassion and offering peace; yet, holds a pose like a goddess (Henderson 2018:180). Furthermore, the hand gestures provide a sense of Sophie's wishes to occupy the world and belong (Henderson 2018:180).

Her skin is painted flat black making her dress stand out and the tones on her eyes and lips are brightly coloured, which could suggest that she is wearing makeup. The artwork and her attire, which includes the vibrant beaded necklace with strands that spill along her feet and wearing a Victorian-style collar could be connected to the upper class (Corrigall 2017). In this artwork, she asserts for her ancestor a rank and position of authority that would have been unavailable to her in real life (Corrigall 2017). It is an act of redress and reclamation for what her ancestors have gone through during the apartheid era.

One could argue that the act of taking up the role of a queen in *Her Majesty, Queen Sophie* (2010) indicates the development of an oppositional gaze. As Snider (2018:15) contended, the oppositional gaze breaks down traditional identification barriers by viewing the world through an unorthodox lens. Sibande breaks down traditional identity barriers by depicting herself as a queen, raising the domestic worker to a position of power as a self-determined subject, capable of leadership who is dressed beautifully in an extravagant colourful ballgown. This contrasts with the conventional mammy trope, which has been historically disregarded as well as challenging power relations imposed from the Victorian era to the present.

Figure 22: Mary Sibande, *Silent Symphony*, 2010
Archival Digital Print, 110 x 80cm
Kavi Gupta Gallery, Chicago
(Aspire Art [sa])

This alter ego is depicted again in *Silent Symphony* (Figure 22). The artist is dressed in a blue domestic worker's uniform redesigned as an elegant Victorian ballroom gown with red hemming, a white headscarf, and a white apron, just like Sibande's other artworks seen above. In the photograph, she portrays herself as a conductor of an orchestra seen by the hand gesture, and her holding a conductor's baton. The agency of the artist becomes apparent in *Silent Symphony* (2010) in the way that the outstanding dress that Sophie wears confidently enables her to establish her own space and rightfully claim a space that was previously denied to black South Africans (Walters 2021:79). Tracy Walters (2021:78) asserts that Sophie holds a position available to a few women, particularly black women, who had limited access to concert halls before the end of apartheid, and could not expect entrance into the male-dominated orchestra pit. Having said that, one could argue that Sibande adopts an oppositional gaze because she occupies a position that was historically not accessible to black women. Similarly, Snider (2018:15) believes that the oppositional gaze occurs when one is curious, consciously aware and deeply concerned with issues of race and

racism, which is what *Silent Symphony* (2010) does. That is, by challenging historical representations of black domestic workers in the Western art canon through reimagining them in a regal position like a conductor.

In all of the artworks discussed above, Sibande disrupts the harmful stereotype that black women are meant to struggle, and to be submissive by embodying an assertive character dressed beautifully and posed elegantly. In essence, Sibande's overall characterisation of Sophie is not to lament about what happened during apartheid. It is not also an invitation to feel sorry for the maternal figures in her life. Instead, it is about celebrating South African women (Liam 2020). To celebrate, one would need to go back to historical roots to see why it is important, and that is why Sibande created 'Sophie' (Liam 2020).

In terms of agency, Sibande creates an identity in her artwork that honours the maternal figures in her life and the black women who pursue their aspirations in whatever manner they see fit. Regarding the mammy stereotype (previously discussed in Chapter Two), the visible physical attributes of dark skin complexion and bigger weight, as expressed by Sewell (2013:310), are noticeable in Sibande's work. The mammy is a non-threatening figure who always disappears into the background of the family they work for; who is overlooked, overworked, and wears non-fashionable clothing (Sewell 2013:310). Another way that Sibande asserts agency is by defying the mammy stereotype by placing themselves as larger than life in public spaces like galleries, taking up space, performing activities that were historically limited to mammies and black women such as conducting an orchestra and simply relaxing in the garden holding a parasol. Sibande also defied the mammy trope by transforming the dress traditionally worn by domestic workers into a stylish ball gown.

Notably, Sibande contributes to black feminism by representing women who are marginalised by reclaiming the contribution that women in her life made and also the agency that was previously denied to them. To Sibande, self-definition and the oppositional gaze are seen through the creation of her alter-ego Sophie rejecting gender stereotypes, showing what is expected of black women, and addressing the legacy of apartheid. Therefore, she invites the viewer to reconsider how identity is crafted and shaped in the context of race, gender, and historical oppression. Self-

definition is significant in Sibande's work because it can empower black women to imagine themselves beyond imposed limitations and stereotypes. Considering self-love, Sibande's art practice celebrates and embraces identities that are overlooked and marginalised, and she uses Sophie as a means of empowerment by transforming a domestic worker who was often in the background into a monumental figure.

4.3. Unapologetic blackness in *Somnyama Ngonyama*

Whereas Sibande portrays herself as the powerful and graceful domestic worker, visual artist and activist Zanele Muholi turns the camera on themselves in a series that unapologetically displays blackness. Muholi is an artist and visual activist in photography, videography, and installation. Muholi utilises their camera to explore gender identity, representation, and race (Yancey Richardson [sa]). Their work has documented black lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people's lives for over a decade, and documented in their series *Faces and Phases* (2006-2014) as a response to the continuing discrimination and violence that the LGBTI+ community are subjected to (Yancey Richardson [sa]). In *Faces and Phases* (2006-2014), Muholi witnessed and captured individuals represent themselves according to their own self-image (Stevenson [sa]). From representing different individuals, Muholi then turns the camera on to themselves by producing the newer photographic series *Somnyama Ngonyama* (2012-present). In other words, Muholi uses self-portraiture and self-representation to challenge and resist accepted representations of black female bodies.

Somnyama Ngonyama (2012-present), which means Hail the Dark Lioness in isiZulu is a series of 200 black and white silver gelatin self-portraits. When composing each portrait, the hair, the makeup, the lighting and the setting are all done by Muholi. This arrangement is similar to how Cindy Sherman[16] produces her self-portraits. The self-portraits were captured in different cities around the world. Some cities include New

[16]Cindy Sherman's self-portrait was previously investigated in Chapter Two. For additional information about Cindy Sherman and Zanele Muholi's similarities in terms of constructing self-portraits see *Dressing up the Self: Feminism and the Anomalous Art of Zanele Muholi and Cindy Sherman* (2024) by Stella Viljoen.

York City, Johannesburg, London, Oslo and so forth. The purpose of Muholi documenting themselves in various cities was to make memories and connect with different individuals. Another reason was to collect different everyday objects like electrical cords, combs, shells and other props (Steveson [sa]). Mbali Khoza (2021:274) examines *Somnyama Ngonyama* (2012-present), particularly how the props in the portraits act as cultural signifiers. Khoza (2021:274) asserts that these everyday objects are intended to represent Muholi's personal experience with racial profiling and black life.

The objects also act as "visible cultural signifiers of blackness or black ethnicities". Muholi's accentuated dark complexion, penetrating white eyes, and the fact that they are hardly ever clothed are focal points of the series. When analysing Muholi's self-portraits, the gaze should be investigated because their eyes are typically pointed at the viewer with power, especially given how white Muholi's eyes (known as the sclera) contrast with the rest of the image. The subject's gaze is occasionally vulnerable, dazed, disturbed, accusatory, hostile, and puzzled. Ashleigh Smith (2020) confirms that by looking straight at the viewer, Muholi positions themselves as the subject and the producer, constructing the narrative as they see fit and serving as a voice for themselves and others. Muholi has created an identity in their self-portraits using various objects and locations through visual art as opposed to accepting demeaning depictions of the black female body, to empower themself and others. This reflects Collins' (2000:97–98) argument that the black feminist strategy is self-definition.

When discussing Muholi's accentuated skin in the photographs, it is important to note that they do not physically darken their skin, but it is darkened by the post-photographic process in Photoshop that heightens contrast within the photographs (Khoza 2021:275). Additionally, Muholi's darkening of the skin can be read as "the reproduction of anti-black tropes" such as blackface, however, it does the opposite (Khoza 2021:276). In this artist's statement, Muholi explains the reason why they exaggerate the darkness of their skin tone in each photograph, which is to reclaim their blackness, and they feel it is "continuously performed by the privileged other" (Makhubu 2017:110). Moreover, Muholi selected the darkest skin tone because they insisted that viewers could acknowledge both its beauty and its suffering (Makhubu 2017:110).

Each photograph in *Somnyama Ngonyama* (2012-present) stages a different version of Muholi, which uses a variety of poses, materials, and backgrounds so that each new shot destabilises and revises previous ones. Alexandra Poulin (2020:2) argues that Muholi's work decolonises the representation of black bodies, particularly black female bodies. One may agree that Muholi decolonises the representation of black bodies in their series since it is about black bodies being visible as subjects in Western portraiture(Poulain 2020:2). To further elaborate on Poulain's argument (2020:2) in *Somnyama Ngonyama* (2012-present), Muholi conveys their repeated experience of being caught in " a hegemonic system of representation" that provides false oppressive knowledge about black female bodies.

Poulain (2020:2) also reads, the project as a sophisticated act of "epistemic disobedience" that deliberately questions the forms of knowledge rooted in accepted representations of black female bodies and creates a new vocabulary to produce alternative pictures. black feminist artists discussed in Chapter Two have accomplished similar goals. For instance, Carrie Mae Weems offers a different perspective on black female subjectivity in *Untitled (Woman and Daughter with Makeup)* (1990) than demeaning historical representations of black women in the Western canon of art. Weems portrayed the relatable role of a mother in a photograph taken in an intimate home environment. In addition to rejecting degrading historical depictions of black women, Renee Cox, a black woman who asserted herself as a Christlike figure in *Yo Mama's Last Supper* (1996) created a new vocabulary to produce alternative images.

Julile I, Parktown, Johannesburg (Figure 23) consists of Muholi who is lying nude on their stomach, and holding what seems to be dozens of clear-tied plastic bags, which cover their breasts and genitalia on a white carpet. The reason why Muholi titled this photograph *Julile I, Parktown, Johannesburg (*2016) was that the image was taken in Parktown, Johanessburg, and the word Julile means deep in isiZulu (Poulain 2020:5). They hold and hug these plastic bags as though they are pillowcases in a foetal position, and Muholi seems like they are in distress (Poulain 2020:5). The worry in Muholi's facial expression is quite evident, especially in their eyes, their vulnerability to the viewer. Behind Muholi are newspapers stacked up on a shelf. These

newspapers represent how women's bodies are portrayed in the media (Poulain 2020:5).

In a conversation between Muholi and curator Reneé Mussai, Muholi makes a significant and intense statement when commenting on this photograph. They describe it as a stressful time in their lives since this photograph was taken three days before a major medical procedure (Poulain 2020:5). Muholi was in a reflective and anxious position as well as in a deep thought then. Even the inflated plastic bags hold a significant position in this photograph. After all, it represents the fibroids that were removed from their uterus (Poulain 2020:5). Although Muholi's pose suggests distress, they are captured beautifully in this photograph, conveying themselves as both bold yet vulnerable. An artist's choice to depict themselves in various life stages is courageous and powerful because it displays their agency and control over their bodies, and the things they choose to display at each stage. Muholi's choice to share this is linked to one of the aims and ideals of black feminism, which include reproductive rights, and having control over what procedures are done to their body, and advocating for their health (Smith 1983:xxxvii). This is, in turn, an assertion of control over their body and self-love as argued by Barbara Smith (1983:xxxvii). Lorde (1988:130) likewise submits that self-care and love are acts of self-preservation, and in the same way that Lorde (1988) prioritised her health when it began to deteriorate, one could argue that Muholi did the same thing as Lorde by opting for a procedure that could save their life while also having the agency to express themselves in art and portray themselves in a vulnerable manner. Their vulnerability and love for themselves can arguably be seen in the way that they hold, or the embrace the fibroids (plastics).

Figure 23: Zanele Muholi, *Julile I, Parktown, Johannesburg,* 2016
Silver gelatin print, 65.8 x 100cm
Stevenson, Johannesburg
(Stevenson [sa])

Figure 24: Zanele Muholi, *Bona Charlottesville*, 2015
Silver Gelatin Print, 89.9 × 60.3 cm
Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia
(Philadelphia Museum of Art [sa])

In *Somnyama Ngonyama* (2012-present), Muholi has stated they set off on an uncomfortable journey of self-definition[17] and self-discovery (Steveson Gallery [sa]). Considering part of Muholi's artist statement, Hannah Abel-Hirsh (2021) also states that the photographs empower its participants and Muholi. In *Bona, Charlottesville* (Figure 24), the photograph from the *Somnyama Ngonyama* (2012-present) series; Muholi is shown lying on their back on a bed unclothed, and holding on to a large circular mirror that is covering most of their body parts. The background of this photograph is rather cosy, including pillows and patterned curtains that could suggest

[17] For a detailed look at self-definition see *Black Feminist Thought* (1990) by Patricia Hill Collins

that Muholi is in a comfortable environment where they feel free. Muholi conveys that they are holding and staring at their reflection in a mirror, which is an everyday object since using different props is part of Muholi's creative process for this series. In terms of the title, *bona* directly translates to look in isiZulu, and see in Southern Sotho, which is what Muholi is inherently conveying in the photograph.

The use of the mirror could signify the reflection of self, and it represents the concept of duality. Muholi's skin tone is exaggerated less in this photograph than in other works. When analysing *Bona, Charlottesville* (2015), Stephanie Sparling Williams (2016:200) suggests that there are reasons why Muholi is looking into the mirror. One of the reasons could be that it is uncertain what Muholi is looking at. They could be gazing at their different body parts, their styled dreadlocks, or their face. Unlike their other images from the series, Muholi's intense gaze is toward themselves, and examining themselves critically is done, rather than focusing on the camera and viewer. Dean Daderko (2020:94) offers a different perspective when looking at the photograph by saying that Muholi staring into the mirror could be a moment of introspection. Daderko (2020:94) provides another fruitful thought in affirming that this photograph leaves it to the viewer to create his or her narrative.

One might go beyond these interpretations, and suggest that Muholi's introspective gaze is an act of black feminist resistance. Muholi's introspective in *Bona, Charlottesville* (2015) could be a reflection of hook's (1992) oppositional gaze, which explains how black women can use their gaze to subvert and resist oppressive systems of representation. Therefore, the photograph's introspective gaze symbolises a journey of self-acceptance, and empowerment that is unique to Muholi (Barlow 2018:207). Another argument for *Bona, Charlottesville* (2015) is that it reflects the interpretation by Tillets and Shane (2016; 2018:591) about Carrie Mae Weems' use of the mirror in terms of how looking into one is an act of reparation, a gesture of care, a visibility and beauty. It also demonstrates black female subjectivity, self-love, and beauty, which is arguably seen in the way Muholi looks at themselves in the mirror.

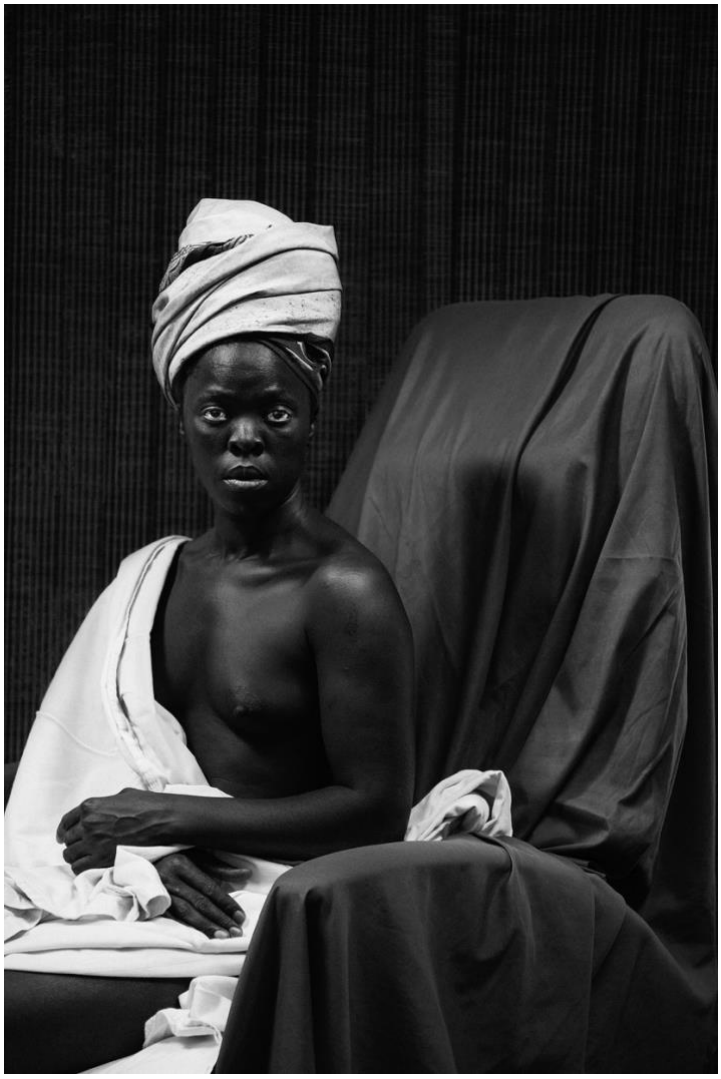

Figure 25: Zanele Muholi, *MaID, Delaware*, 2015
Silver Gelatin Print, 60 x 40cm
Stevenson Gallery, Johannesburg
(Stevenson [sa])

Figure 26: Marie-Guillemine Benoist, *Portrait of Madeline (formely Portrait of Negress)*,1800
Oil on canvas, 81 x 65cm
Museé de Louvre, Paris
(Waller [sa])

In *MaID, Delaware* (Figure 25), Muholi's gaze returns to the camera in a three-quarter pose that was seen in *Bona, Charlottesville* (2015). The subject is seated in a three-quarter position to the left, and they are partially nude. The contrasting white cloth is covering their left breast and exposing the right breast while gazing intensely at the viewer through their sitting position on a chair draped with a darker cloth. On top of the head is a bright-tied headscarf. The backdrop is plain with barely stripes enhancing the main subject. The photograph is a reimagination of the French Neoclassical painter, Marie-Guillemine Benoist's painting *Portrait of Madeleine (formerly Portrait of a Negress)* (Figure 26) exhibited at the Paris Salon. (Richardson 2020:5). The painting depicts a young dark-skinned Black woman seated on an armchair covered that is covered in a silky blue cloth, with one breast exposed, and the other draped by a white

cloth, which is held in place by a red cord; and wearing a headscarf enhancing her skin tone, with her one hand is on her lap, and the other is laid flatly on her stomach (Richardson 2020:5). Llyleila Richardson (2020:6) asserts that the sitter's exposed breast was not intended for sexualisation, but it was used to represent a goddess or other female deity. The pose as well as her half-nakedness may suggest a level of agency considering her new stature in society. It may also suggest that she opted to pose for the artist because the painting was deemed a celebration of the termination of slavery in the post-revolution of France in 1794, and finally abolished again in 1848 according to Poulain (2020:2). To elaborate further, Madeleine, the model in *Portrait of Madeleine* (1800) was a former slave. Her her half-nakedness signifies her status in society, symbolising her transition to becoming a maid (Poulain 2020:2). Relatedly, James Smalls (2004:4) suggests that the painting is unique as it deviates from traditional representation of black women in the Western art canon, which depicts them as colourful additions to a portrait or setting with a White subject as the intended major focus as demonstrated in Nattier's painting *Mademoiselle de Clermont en Sultane* (1733).

MaID, Delaware (2017) and *Portrait of Madeleine* (1800) are similar due to how the cloth drapes over the subjects' bodies, and how the cloths are contrasted with their dark skin. The differences between the two paintings are the facial expressions and gaze. In *Portrait of Madeleine* (1800), the subject's gaze is passive and sober according to Susan Waller (2024), whereas Muholi's gaze is stern and confident. According to hooks (1992:115), black people were denied the right to look during slavery, which sparked a rebellious desire to gaze. Muholi adopts an oppositional gaze in this regard. hooks (1992:115) affirms further that strong glaring would be interpreted as a challenge to authority, and this is the case with Muholi's stern gaze in *MaID, Delaware* (2017), which also defies the passivity of the *Madeleine in Portrait of Madeleine* (1800).

The title of this artwork, *MaID, Delaware* (2017) is important because the series relates to the concept of 'maid" (My Identity), which refers to the demeaning name that is given to subservient black women in South Africa. Poulin (2020:3) explains that the term 'My Identity' indicates how Muholi's identity is self-made, and that they can represent themselves on their terms, and they have the right to creative freedom. The agency

and freedom in *MaID, Delaware* (2017) are apparent as Muholi recreated Benoist's painting by "reversing" parodies of the trope of the "self-portrait in the mirror", which is often seen in Western painting and photography as one with the role of the "the maid" and "the master" of representation (Poulain 2020:4). Muholi displays agency in this series by actively engaging with themselves as a queer individual, travelling and interacting with new people, interacting with different props that enhance their practice, and allowing themselves to be photographed. All these actions are depicting an assertive, confident, yet vulnerable and relaxed image of themselves. Muholi has used self-portraits to oppose mainstream systems of representation and harmful stereotypes in *Somnyama Ngonyama* (2012-present) (Modiano 2022). This series – reflects black feminist ideas about self-representation, as articulated by Thagard and Wood (2015:6), notably in terms of self-presentation – how one displays oneself to others. In *Somnyama Ngonyama* (2012-present), Muholi darkens their skin tone to challenge colourism, and Western standards of beauty; and reclaim blackness as a source of power and pride, emphasising the desired idea of black identity. These photographs are intended to raise awareness of social issues, increase the visibility of black people, and empower them by presenting them as powerful and desirable.

The systems of representation that Muholi opposes are the lack of images of the black people in the queer community. They also reclaim their blackness by exaggerating the black skin tone, which is then a celebration of their identity. Muholi includes themselves in this series marked by self-representation and a self-defining journey where they question who they are assumed to be by hegemonic culture. In conclusion, Muholi's reasoning for producing *Somnyama Ngonyama* (2012-present) was to reckon with the past "to address politics of race, racism and colonialism -and it is also a way of addressing a past that still informs the present" (Isabella Gardner Museum [sa]). The notion of self-definition is seen in Muholi's self-portraits through their ability to capture themselves with a defiant, yet confrontational gaze, expressing themselves authentically, which remains an important objective in self-defining (Snider 2018:15), and reclaiming their identity through exaggerated dark complexion.

Self-definition is expressed when Muholi crafts an identity[18] (using different objects incorporated in the photographs) to empower themselves instead of accepting the historical representations of the black female body. When it comes to black feminist ideals and representation, Muholi's self-portraits in *Somnyama Ngonyama* (2012-present) and portraits of individuals in *Faces and Phases* (2006-2014) present others the freedom to select how they want to be portrayed in photographs. Such present allows them (i.e., others) to express themselves in any way they see fit. Another reason why Muholi's art practice is consistent with black feminist ideas is that it acknowledges the diverse lives of black people from various backgrounds. One of the aims of black feminism is to promote sexual freedom and end sexual violence as previously expressed by Guy-Evans (2020), and Muholi has achieved this by owning their sexual orientation, reclaiming their body and representing different identities in their portraits highlighting complexities within the LGBTQ+ communities. What Muholi has done with their art practice is based on intersectionality[19], meaning acknowledging that groups race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, and nationality "mutually shaping one another" as argued by Collins and Bilge (2020:12), and by highlighting the experiences of black lesbians.

4.4. Billie Zangewa conveying self-love.

Following Muholi's self-portrait series and their displays of confidence and vulnerability, Billie Zangewa portrays images of herself in vibrantly coloured silk embroideries (Crenn 2016:6). Here, she depicts herself as free and at ease in her environment and her main themes are self-love[20], domesticity, and femininity (Crenn 2016:6). Billie Zangewa's politics of self-love is rooted in a long tradition of work and practice among feminists of colour including Audre Lorde, and many others who view and defend self-love and self-care by black women and their communities as a ground-breaking and transformative form of execution (Raghavan 2022:3). Furthermore, these authors emphasise the importance of self-love practices for women of colour to

[18] Refer to Chapter Three where it points out that Black women have "crafted identities to empower themselves" as opposed to accepting stereotypes (Collins 2000:97-98). By crafting identities, black women can resist the stereotypes placed on them (Collins 2000:98).
[19] Refer to Chapter Two under the Black feminism component.
[20] Refer to Chapter Three where self-love is discussed in depth.

survive and sustain themselves in the face of the daily onslaught of racism, sexism, and class oppression (Raghavan 2022:3). Considering Raghavan's point, author and feminist theorist, Audre Lorde (1984:174) affirms that black women should learn to love themselves beyond a superficial insistence that "black is beautiful". Lorde (1984:174) explains further that self-love "goes beyond and deeper than a surface appreciation of black beauty, although that it is a certainly good beginning". The part of self-love that is empowering is the notion of women strengthening their inner selves for their work and future (Lorde 1984:174). For black women who are subjected to societal pressures that tell them how to act, talk, feel, and think; it is difficult to gain self-awareness (Dornelly 2023). Billie Zangewa also believes that self-love is the "ultimate resistance of representing black women's strength and femininity and elevating domesticity" (Raghavan 2022:2).

Zangewa produces intricate handstitched silk tapestries, which portray "daily feminism" as expressed by Zangewa (Artsty [sa]). She documents black life and her experiences of racial injustice, gender performance, and domestic labour (Artsy [sa]). Julie Crenn (2016:5) asserts that Zangewa's tapestries express her will to represent her conception of contemporary African women as free, unapologetic, independent, and modern. From clothing to linen and curtains, Zangewa uses fabric, thread, and stitching because it is a part of everyday life (Okoro 2020, Valentine 2020). Zangewa has taken on a traditionally female pursuit and has made it into a source of creative expression (Kouoh 2017:60). Moreover, Zangewa's brand of feminism can be seen as an act of love for women as well (Kouoh 2017:60). Silk is often the main piece of fabric she uses in her tapestries and is often associated with transformation, which is a key element of the progress of individual's life (Valentine 2020). Zangewa also notes that the work she does elevates the place of black women globally because they are the most marginalised group in society (Valentine 2020). She also claims that black women need support, and that making the tapestries centred around her personal life aims to guide people to understand, feel, and acknowledge the challenges that black women encounter daily; and make them feel seen (Valentine 2020).

Zangewa's act of self-love is heavily articulated in her art practice through the mundane activities she carries out in her home. The activities include nurturing her body by showering, and quietly reading a book, and she has demonstrated self-love

by saying “I’m going to have a romantic affair with myself. Society teaches us as women to be ashamed of ourselves, to feed self-loathing. I’m reclaiming my identity, my feminine power, and my significance in society at large” (Raghavan 2022:3). The self-portraits she produces are based on images of her own body “occupying a space that is poetical and political” (Crenn 2016:5). For example, *The Rebirth of Black Venus* (Figure 27) produced in 2020 is a reimagined version of Italian Renaissance painter Sandro Botticelli’s painting *The Birth of Venus* (Figure 28). According to Charles Dempsey (2012:79), *The Birth of Venus* (1485-1486) depicts the ancient goddess of love and beauty, drawing inspiration from a classical figure of Venus known as *Venus Pudica* (modest or shamefaced Venus).

Botticelli and Zangewa’s artworks are similar in the sense that Zangewa is partially nude with a ribbon, which reads “Surrender to your complexity wholeheartedly”. The ribbon is covering her breasts and genital area. Art curator Koyo Kuoho (2017:60) explains that Zangewa’s grace, poise, and sexual demeanour suggest a gesture of love, which could suggest that she is confident and embraces her body. This reimagining of the self-portrait places the artist at the intersection of the collective history of body representations and the affirmation of her narrative (Guily 2015). The subjects in *The Birth of Venus* (1485-1486) and *The Rebirth of Black Venus* (2010) pose differently. Venus is passive and reserved in *The Birth of Venus* (1485-1486), with her hands covering up her breasts, and intimate parts as well as the women on the right attempting to clothe her. In contrast, Zangewa is much more free-spirited with her arms spread out as if dancing in *The Rebirth of Black Venus* (2010). The oppositional gaze as argued by hooks (1992) is visible in the way that Zangewa reclaims and reimagines *The Birth of Venus* (1485-1486) normally portrayed employing the Eurocentric male gaze, by highlighting a black woman as a subject.

Zangewa also overthrows the traditional ways of rendering a female nude model by towering over a city and having the agency to pose however she sees fit. This tapestry also pays homage to Sara Baartman’s traumatic history, hence the name “Black Venus”. The Black Venus is another name for Hottentot Venus, or her colonial name Sara Baartman (Raghavan 2022:2). As discussed in Chapter Two, Baartman was paraded, and made a spectacle due to the fascination of her large body features

according to Janell Hobson (2003:89-90). In *The Rebirth of Black Venus* (2010), Zangewa attempts to redress Baartman's display and black women broadly by carefully developing an oppositional gaze (Raghavan 2022:3), and rejecting the passivity of black women as the object of male, colonial voyeurism (Mulvey 1988).

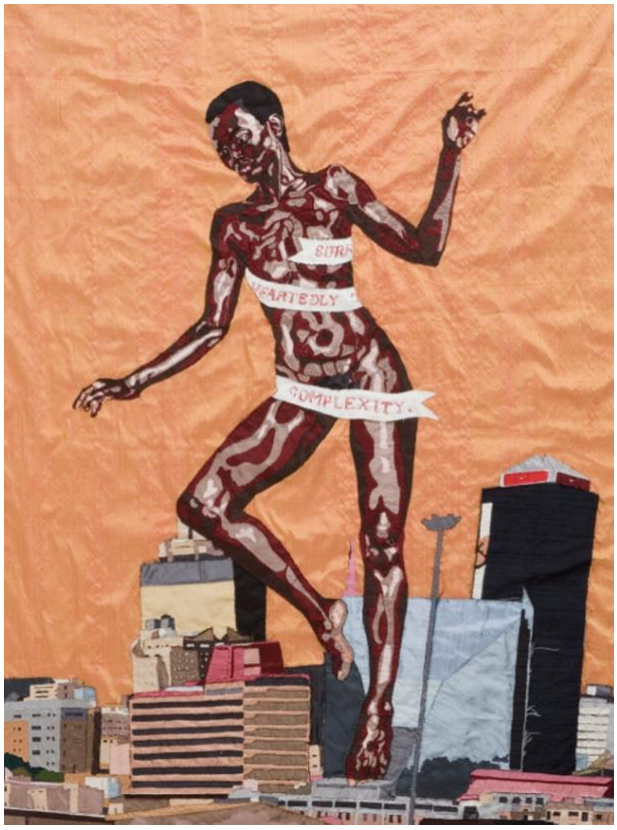

Figure 27: Billie Zangewa, *The Rebirth of Black Venus*, 2010
Embroidered silk, 129 x 130cm
Lehmann Maupin, New York City
(Guily 2015)

Figure 28: Sandro Botticelli, *The Birth of Venus*, 1485-1486
Tempera on Canvas, 172.5 x 278.5 cm
The Uffizi, Florence
(The Uffizi [sa])

Priya Raghavan (2022) investigates Billie Zangewa's textiles through a feminist visual activist lens. As a result of this analysis, Raghavan (2022) recognises the political potential of Zangewa's work, and questions the conceptual barriers of visual activism. Raghavan (2022:2) contends that the *Rebirth of Black Venus* (2010) should not only be seen as commenting on the history of the sexualisation and objectification of black women, but also as how Baartman's body has been objectified by colonial Europeans. Raghavan (2022:2) observes that Zangewa appears larger than life, facing down, towering over the city, which appears to be Johannesburg where she balances her toe on one foot, making it seem like she is dancing on pointe (Okoro 2020). The black feminist strategies employed in *The Rebirth of Black Venus* (2010) are visible in Zangewa's pose: she stands partially nude, towering over a cityscape, which may represent self-love through her public act of bravery, as Stewart (2023) expressed. Ricks (2018:347) contends that self-love can be used to educate black women about a deeper love and understanding of themselves, as seen by the text on the ribbon wrapped around Zangewa's body: "Surrender to your complexity wholeheartedly". This statement could mean that one should embrace and appreciate their individuality without apology.

Zangewa's art practice is also situated around the act of self-love, particularly in the series *Soldier of Love* (2020). The exhibition *Soldier of Love* (2020) by Zangewa took place from March to June 2020. The series and exhibition is titled *Soldier of Love* because "in the history that we live in, universal and personal love is something that we have to fight for" (Valentine 2020). Zangewa also states that some of society is living in difficult times where individuals inflict pain on one another and most have forgotten how to love themselves and others (Valentine 2020). In this series, she also portrays different female figures who are seemingly engaged in daily activities and others are caught up in moments of suspended concentration (Siliwinska & Domor 2022:18). Authors Basia Silwinska and Catherine Domor (2022:18) state that Zangewa's art practice explains marginalisation as shown through the sharing of her daily routines, her intimate space, and with the hope that someone might see and acknowledge her.

Zangewa produced this series because she considers herself a "soldier of love" (Jordan 2020). Zangewa stated that this could refer to the historical invisibility of black women as producers of art. *Cold Shower* (Figure 29), which is an embroidered silk self-portrait consists of Zangewa who is nude, and it shows her breast positioned in a shimmering background of different shades of blue. The blue is meant to represent water. The colours of the water thus enhance her red, brown, and pink skin tone. Putting her hands on her head also suggests that she may be washing her hair. During an interview with Jareh Das (2020), Zangewa points out that the theme of *Cold Shower* (2019) is about the difficulties of romantic love, and that no matter the challenges she faces, she is never giving up on herself. Another analysis of *Cold Shower* (2019) by Raghavan (2022:3) is that the artwork is a celebration of the black female form, portraying the artist in a startingly open pose –"inviting recognition of beauty and power and its stance rather than an objectifying or sexualising gaze".

Cold Shower (2016) marks Zangewa's development of the oppositional gaze. I argue that Zangewa shows herself taking a shower, which is a private moment while she is at her most vulnerable. Also, I believe that *Cold Shower* (2016) shows Zangewa's oppositional gaze based on how her body is shown in a non-sexual way. According to Jacobs (2016:235), Zangewa's rejection of the male and sexualised representations

of black women, which enables her to define herself, is an example of the oppositional gaze. Patel and Pipkin (2022:2) state that self-love and positive affirmations lessen internalised self-stigma (which could be caused by racial injustice and stereotypes). It might be argued that in *Cold Shower* (2016), Zangewa reduces self-stigma by posing openly, and appreciating her body, which serves as a positive affirmation (Patel & Pipkin 2016:235; Stewart 2023). This is shown by acting bravely in public, capturing herself naked, and taking care of her body. Zangewa additionally shows her bravery and act of care in the way she holds her head, and face, which could signify her state of relaxation, thus challenging the notion that black women should be viewed through the lens of labour, oppression, and struggle.

Figure 29: Billie Zangewa, *Cold Shower*, 2019
Embroidered silk, 107 x 101cm.
Galerie Templon, Paris
(Das 2020)

In My Solitude (Figure 30) consists of Zangewa seated in a relaxed pose on a couch reading a book, wearing a floral top with a grey gown covering her. She is in a more intimate setting, possibly her home as depicted in her seating as well as the presence of the coffee mug, the coffee station on the pedestal, and the black potted plant. The reason why this artwork was selected for this study was to provide an intimate view at how Zangewa portrays herself in portraits, how she invites the viewer into her world, to show her colour palette, and how comfortable she feels in her skin. Zangewa's agency is evident in these self-portraits because of how free she looks in her environment. She can go nude as much as she pleases, and love herself amid her daily experiences as a black woman.

Raghavan (2022:3) provides more insight into the analysis of *In My Solitude* (2018) by suggesting that the artist is in a scene that conveys leisure, and at ease with herself due to how is she draped over the couch and reading a book. Scenes of a black woman in leisure in their own right are disruptive against a history of the hypervisibility of labouring black bodies and the invisibility of black women at rest (Raghavan 2022:3). Zangewa's artistic approach is in line with black feminist theories, particularly those that come from the Combahee River Collective. These theories portray black women as those learning to love themselves, an ideal expressed by Lorde (1984), as Zangewa does in the above artworks.

Nkgopoleng Moloi (2018) also expresses that the independence that Zangewa claims for herself is a liberating force for concepts that remind individuals to embrace pleasure in their narratives as they navigate their inner world, private and shared. This is an act of agency because Zangewa controls what she shares and keeps private. Her choice of material, particularly silk, and her meticulous craftsmanship are fundamental to her self-definition as an artist. Each tapestry in this chapter serves as a visual narrative, which captures her in moments of peace, joy, and solitude. Therefore, Zangewa's self-definition and oppositional gaze happen through offering a glimpse into her journey of self-love, her experience as a black woman in a global context, and her femininity. Zangewa also portrays herself authentically, performing mundane activities in these

tapestries, which is one of the objectives of self-definition according to Snider (2018:15).

Since Zangewa's tapestries are autobiographical, viewing her *Soldier of Love* (2020) series requires analysing when focusing on self-representation. Zangewa addresses the difficulties of her feminine identity, examines her femininity in the tapestries, and reflects on her cultural history by fusing elements of her South African and Malawian culture into the works, all in line with Thagard and Wood's (2015:3) theory of portraying oneself for oneself. This theory offers the series deeper meaning, since in keeping with the spirit of black feminism, Zangewa produces artworks to acknowledge her own singular experiences.

Figure 30: Billie Zangewa, *In my Solitude*, 2018
Embroidered Silk, 150 x 111 cm
Blank Projects, Cape Town
(Blank Projects [sa])

4.5. Sensuality and self-love shown through Zandile Tshabalala

According to Gina Shaw (2024), sensuality is defined as how one would experience their body, different bodies, and the world around them. In this study, it means women who are aware of what feels good to them, what stimulates their senses (not just their sexual ones), and what exudes femininity (Cavender 2017). It is also an indication of confidence in oneself (Cavender 2017). Zandile Tshabalala is an example of a figurative painter who portrays herself as a sensual, beautiful, and desirable being in self-portraits. Tshabalala who is originally from Soweto, Gauteng challenges the Western art canon by increasing the visibility of the black female subject through traditional forms and moving away from perceptions that the black female subject is an undesirable and inferior symbol (Contemporary And [sa]). In an interview with Amber Nicole Aston of the Nataal Gallery (2021), Tshabalala notes that black artists should have agency and reclaim their bodies particularly when painting as they are ones who have first-hand experience of their identity. Tshabalala accomplishes this by painting self-portraits.

One of her exhibitions *Enter Paradise* (2020-2021), which took place in Accra, Ghana in 2021 is significant for the arguments I make in this study. In the works that form part of this exhibition, Tshabalala places herself in a "sensual dreamscape", which then revisits the representation of black women (ADA Contemporary [sa]. *Enter Paradise* is about a black woman in an intimate setting that she idealises as "paradise" (Estiler 2021). However, Tshabalala (2024) best defines the title *Enter Paradise* (2020-2021) as "inviting someone into your paradise" and her paradise as an "intimate, personal and mundane space". It is not necessarily a distant beach or jungle that one yearns for as paradise is a place of rest and where one can exhale. *Enter Paradise* (2020-2021) is also an invitation for viewers to think about what paradise is to them. Departing from the conventional idea of what paradise is – for instance, a remote beach or jungle - Tshabalala's interpretation of paradise has enabled her to "apply not only full attention to her thoughts and emotions but also an awareness to the moments she overlooks" (ADA Contemporary [sa]).

Figure 31 shows an installation view of the *Enter Paradise* exhibition. The exhibition space includes objects from the background of the paintings, which can be seen by

the placement of the dining tables and chairs that depict an intimate setting like a home. There are also some leaves on the wall that reflect her paintings in a jungle-like setting. The vibrant colours used in the paintings are contrasted with the props in the exhibition, and thereby drawing the viewer's attention to the paintings themselves. Considered in its entirety, the exhibition emits a luxurious and leisurely aura, and the added objects in the room immerse the audience, making them feel as if they were inside of the paintings.

Figure 31: Zandile Tshabalala "*Enter Paradise*" Installation View
ADA\ Contemporary Gallery, Accra
(ADA Contemporary Gallery [sa])

In her interview with me (2024), Tshabalala explained that she always wants to contribute to the representation of black women in art as has had the desire to see the artistic portrayal of a confident, assertive and relaxed woman in her paintings. Dark pigmentation is a recurring theme in her paintings. The reason why she paints herself in this tone is mainly to appreciate how bold and inescapable the blackness is, and to show she embraces the blackness (Hart 2020). Her love for blackness is similar to that of Sibande and Muholi who also exaggerates skin tones in their self-portraits I

discussed earlier. Colourism[21] is a form of prejudice that can exist both within and between racialised groups. Colourism is the practice of favouring lighter skin over darker skin (Grant 2023). Some individuals from different racialised groups have been conditioned not to see black women particularly dark-skinned women as credible, fully human, or desirable. Sometimes, black women are not seen at all (Reid 2022). Thus, Tshabalala draws attention to the most discriminated body of all – the dark-skinned black woman as the legacy of colonialism still ripples through society in forms of colourism (Hart 2020). Tshabalala repeatedly uses striking red lips and nails in her paintings. On this formalist level, this is likely due to the way the red is contrasted with the black skin at first, but it is also possible that she is expressing the idea that red is frequently "associated with femininity". She also recalls older films where black women had red lips and nails. Tshabalala could be referring to the 1986 film, *Vamp,* in which Grace Jones' character, Katrina, frequently wears red lipstick. Similarly, Pam Grier's portrayal of Jackie Brown in *Jackie Brown* (1997) uses red lipstick to emphasise power and authority. The use of the red lips, nails, confident pose and gaze in the paintings could be interpreted as a sign of the *femme fatale* archetype seen in films.

According to Farrington (2004:15), the *femme fatale* figure is an attractive woman who uses her sexuality as a weapon, and thereby being a special danger to men. The femme fatale figure is portrayed as powerful, erotic lethal, stereotypically evil, and usually assertive (Farrington 2004:15). Yuko Minowa et al (2019:1) contend that it is evident that the *femme fatale* figure subverts an ideal of femininity and expresses patriarchal anxiety about female empowerment in general, or female empowerment via sexual dominance. Moreover, the *femme fatale* figures oppose the traditional ideals of femininity. For example, their actions involve nurturing others, being agreeable, and maintaining an attractive appearance as stated by Minowa et al and Curtin et al (2019:1, 2011). In fine art, when women were not seen reclining on a divan in landscapes, posed in a passive manner as well as having thoughts of their own, they were deemed potentially dangerous or abstract (Farrington 2004:15). Examples of femme fatale figures in fine art and literature were Medusa, Judith and Salome, who were prolific between 1860 and 1932 (Bertsch 2023).

[21] It is also characterised by the belief that persons with darker skin tones face more discrimination than those with lighter skin tones from the same ethnic group (Frontiers [sa]).

Paradise IIII (Figure 32) derived from the *Enter Paradise* (2020-2021) series is an acrylic painting done canvas. The painting includes a bald woman whose gaze is confrontational and directed toward the viewer. She holds a black and white striped cloth on her that covers part of her genitals, one breast, and the other breast hanging loosely. Her lips and nails are painted a bold red that is associated with femininity and is contrasted with her black skin as Tshabalala expressed. In this painting, Tshabalala has portrayed herself as bold and confident, especially in the way she has posed with one hand on; that is, on her hip, and the other caressing her breast. The background of the painting includes an empty jungle-like space with large leaves surrounding the subject. Tshabalala (2024) expresses that she likes foliage (greenery), and she enjoys constructing different environments in her paintings since painting allows one to do so.

Figure 32: Zandile Tshabalala, *Paradise IIII*, 2020
Acrylic on canvas, 120 x 90 cm
Philips, London

(Mutual Art [sa])

This work is clearly inspired by French impressionist painter Henri Rousseau (1844-1910) since he produced a variety of constructed landscapes and jungles. Zuzanna Stańska (2024) contends that Rousseau drew inspiration from the illustrations in children's books, the botanical gardens in Paris, and wild animal taxidermy. *The Dream* (Figure 33), a prominent painting by Rousseau shows a woman, named Yadwigha who is lying on a divan placed on the left side of the canvas (Temkin 2012:5). Her presence is forceful in a jungle that takes centre stage, and which consists of a variety of wild animals (Temkin 2012:5). The background of *The Dream* (1910) includes foliage that is painted in a variety of different greens, blue, and pink lotus flowers. A dark-skinned figure playing an instrument dressed in a colourful skirt is also incorporated into the background (Temkin 2012:5). Moreover, Ann Temkin (2012:5) contends that the foliage's vivid colouration indicates that light and shade from the outside are not visible.

Figure 33: Henri Rosseau, *The Dream*, 1910
Oil on canvas, 204.5 x 298.5 cm
Museum of Modern Art, New York
(Museum of Modern Art [sa])

Rousseau influenced a variety of Tshabalala's paintings, and this allowed her "mind to travel without her body moving an inch"(Aiworo [sa]). Another way that Rousseau has

impacted Tshabalala's paintings is apparent in *Paradise IIII* (2020) and *Enter Paradise* (Figure 34) where there is no light present from the background. On the other hand, the noticeable difference between Tshabalala's and Rousseau's paintings is that, while Tshabalala places herself at the front and centre of her paintings, Rousseau portrayed the women in the background. Although a lot of Rosseau's work influences Tshabalala, she also challenges it, particularly *The Dream* (1910). One could argue that the black figure in the background, who is a snake charmer, is brought to the front in Tshabalala's painting *Paradise IIII (2020)*. Since the figures in Tshabalala's paintings reflect her likeness, she engages in self-representation. When Tshabalala started painting herself, she embarked on journeys concerning how she views herself, which involved a lot of confrontation and introspection (Aiworo [sa]). The artist has also experienced a lot of unravelling, growth, and phases of awareness when it comes to her identity and position as a black woman who is an artist (Aiworo [sa]). The growth and unravelling aspect of self-representation is known as changing self, according to Thagard and Wood (2015:10-11). This phenomenon involves self-development seen in her gaze changes over time and self-expansion, which consists of being influenced by different artists.

As I discussed in Chapter Two, Farrington (2004:15) argues that the female nude model would typically recline on a divan in a passive stance with modestly averted eyes in a domestic setting, occasionally offering herself up for the male gaze, as portrayed in *The Dream* (1910). Tshabalala defies the traditional representation of the female nude in *Paradise IIII* (2020) by proudly standing in the centre of the painting where her stare is fierce inherently developing an oppositional gaze by rejecting the male gaze. In addition, Tshabalala's choice of painting black skin, her baldness, and large breasts in *Paradise IIII* (2020) contrasts with the traditional female nude model's porcelain skin, long silky hair, and smaller features – all of which are considered attributes of Western beauty.

Figure 34: Zandile Tshabalala*, Enter Paradise I*, 2020
Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 70cm
Nagel Draxler Gallerie, Berlin
(Nagel Draxler Gallerie [sa])

The painting, *Enter Paradise I* (2020) depicts Tshabalala painted in dark grey and black tones with bold red lips and nails that stand out against her black complexion. The subject's skin is painted black with highlights that accentuate her facial features and the eyes are slightly downturned with an introspective gaze. This time around, the subject is dressed in a champagne fur coat and underneath, she is wearing a nude-coloured dress or shirt. In this painting, her arm gestures show that she is hugging and embracing herself warmly in her fur coat. Five large green leaves are draped around the woman, and the background is dark cloudy. In Tshabalala's art, the fur—a luxury fabric that becomes a tool for self-expression and empowerment, connecting her characters with ideas of agency and wealth. Jacobs (2016:216) asserts that the oppositional gaze empowers marginalised people to resist dominant images and discourses that devalue them. As a result, one may claim that Tshabalala wearing the fur could represent the oppositional gaze because it can relate to luxury; therefore,

she rejects the concept that black women cannot live an opulent lifestyle. Similar to Muholi's *Bona, Charlottesville* (2015), Tshabalala's gaze in *Enter Paradise* (2020) is introspective, as she appears occupied with her thoughts. This introspective gaze gives her a sense of autonomy and depth.

From *Paradise IIII* (2020) *and Enter Paradise I* (2020*),* there is a shift to a setting where Tshabalala is more relaxed and comfortable in her *Untitled* (2021) (Figure 16) painting. *Untitled* (2021) shows Tshabalala seated on a white chair, wearing a red and white heart-patterned gown. She is sitting comfortably with her legs crossed, her arms resting on the chair's armrest, and her blush pink headphones resting on her ears. By putting on the headphones, the subject can escape reality and destress. The painting's background features elements that reference a household environment such as a green bucket filled with water, a mop, and a chest of drawers with a book on top. According to Tshabalala (2024), the painting depicts a woman finding a small corner in her space, and putting her feet up after a long day of hard work. Tshabalala (2024) explains how she would get up first thing in the morning to clean at her grandmother's house (her daily routine), and decided to take a picture of herself unwinding after a long day of work. She used this picture as a reference for this painting, and it inspired the title *Enter Paradise.*

Figure 35: Zandile Tshabalala, *Untitled*, 2021
Acrylic on canvas, 90 x 120cm
ADA Contemporary, Accra
(Takac 2011)

In Figure 35, the painting *Study of a Nude (Self*) shows Tshabalala attempting to remove furry, open-toed pink slippers; dressed in a gown in what looks like a studio due to the paint marks on the floor. The background setting consists of a bouquet of differently coloured flowers in a glass jar, and above the flowers is an artwork of the subject stuck to the wall. In the nude depiction of Tshabalala, she is staring confrontationally at the viewer, while the seated woman in the background is focused on what she is doing and seems removed and distant from what a viewer might be thinking. The gaze is a prominent theme in this work as it is in some artists. Tshabalala initiates an exchange of looks between the subject and the viewer. Tshabalala (2024)

asserts that when she started engaging with the idea of the gaze, she wanted to speak on black women taking agency of their bodies, and that if a viewer is looking at their body, then she is looking back.

At first, the gaze in her paintings was aggressive in the sense of being seen, but the more she grew in her practice; the softer the subject's gaze became according to Tshabalala (2024). This means that the subject in her paintings became less aware of the viewer looking at them, and how they were perceived. An instance is her gaze in *Paradise IIII* (2020), and how she is not aware of a viewer looking in *Study of a Nude (Self)* (2021). Tshabalala (2024) contends that in all her paintings, regardless of whether the subject is gazing at the viewer, they have agency and control of their bodies, and do not need to make it known that they love and exist in these bodies. It is no longer just about the viewer or who is looking at the body; rather, it concerns how individuals interact with their space and their bodies, as one cannot control how others perceive them. The figures in Tshabalala's paintings are maturing as shown in *Study of a Nude (Self)* (2021). As I discussed in Chapter Two, Barbara Smith (1983:xxvii) pointed out a misconception about black feminism, i.e., black women must cope with difficult conditions such as being overworked and being strong. This notion of black women being overworked and overlooked as Ricks (2018:348) argued is rejected byTshabalala in *Untitled* (2021) by portraying herself as resting, taking a break in her chair, and putting on her headphones after working hard inherently advocating for herself, and taking agency by resting.

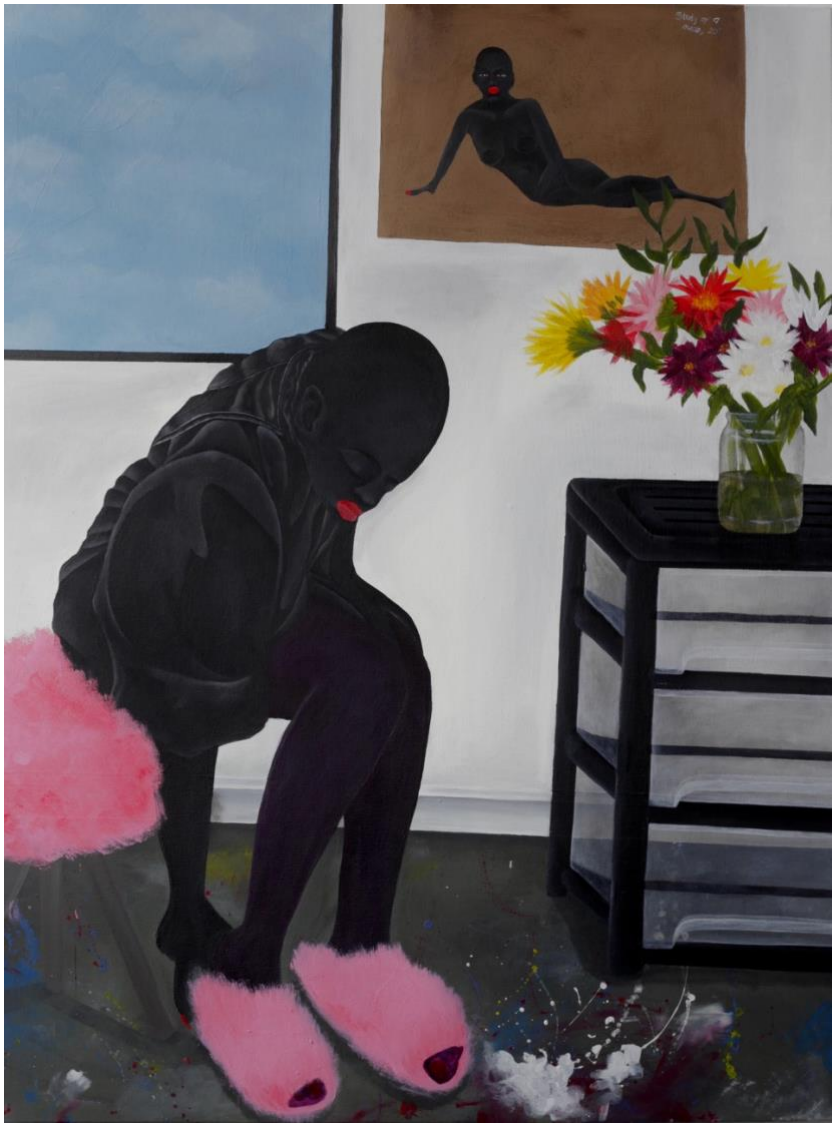

Figure 36: Zandile Tshabalala, *Study of a Nude (Self)*, 2021
Acrylic on canvas, 90 x 120cm
Nagrel Draxler Galerie, Berlin
(Nagrel Draxler Galerie [sa])

According to Tshabalala (2024), it is empowering to paint herself sensually because she feels comfortable in her skin, and such a feeling affirms her confidence in her body, which then upends the Western standards of beauty. This is done by painting herself in a darker skin tone, which was historically not the preferred skin complexion, and painting herself nude beautifully since black women's physical features were deemed masculine, excessive, and grotesque. Kezia Ouomoye (2021) affirms that Tshabalala has no problems in revealing her position in society as a black woman, and she is not ignorant about the struggles of minorities since self-portraits are her current

subject matter. Tshabalala's contribution to black feminism traditionally portrayed women as visible, due to how she represents black women in her paintings. She vividly places herself as the focus, which can act as resistance against invisibility as opposed to black female subjects who would fade into the background in the Western canon of art as I argued in Chapter Two. Tshabalala (2024) contends that the black female subjects seen in the backgrounds of paintings like Manet's *Olympia* (1863) seem to lack agency or control over their bodies. Tshabalala (2024) asserts that her contribution to black feminism, and feminism in general is that her work allows the strong black woman to relax, and escape the stereotype of putting other's needs above their own. Meanwhile, this notion as expressed by Tshabalala is strictly relating to self-love.

Considering self-love Tshabalala (2024) says that true self-love entails giving oneself permission to fall apart, and wallow in sorrow aside from performing practical things like taking care of one's body and skin. It also has to do with not always feeling beautiful. According to Tshabalala (2024), it is up to individual to determine what self-love means to them. Tshabalala's idea of self-love goes back to Lorde (1984:174) who affirmed that the part of self-love that is empowering is the notion of women strengthening their inner selves for their work and future. To elaborate further on Lorde's idea of self-love is that it is about advocating for self-care, embracing their authentic self, which includes race, gender, and sexuality. The black feminist ideal in Tshabalala's work is being recognised as a human and existing according to the Combahee River Collective Statement (1977) and Keanga Taylor (2017:18). This implies that the black feminist ideal is not being placed on a pedestal. Another black feminist ideal is making art that centres around her experience as a black woman, and depicting the different ways in which black women exist freely. Since one of the purposes of self-definition is modifying the perceptions of black women, as contended by Snider (2018:15); Tshabalala changes these beliefs by depicting herself performing mundane activities seen in *Untitled* (2021) and *Study of a Nude (Self) (2021)* and simply resting rather than what black women are stereotypically supposed to do, i.e. to serve others.

In summary, Tshabalala's paintings opposes the idea of black women as objects of submission (Govender 2022). Tshabalala (2024) also draws attention to how the black

servants story is frequently disregarded by questioning whether the Laure in *Olympia* (1863) has her own lovers, anxieties, and conflicts. Moreover, Tshabalala (2024) contends that the representation of women has been complex over the centuries, and she seeks to depict them as human beings simply existing. Tshabalala (2024) further claims that the black female subject in *Olympia* (1863) has a life and aspirations besides working for Olympia, and that there is a lack of representation of who they are outside of their occupation [recorded]. In an interview with Rita Pike (2021), Tshabalala explicated that serving is something that has a great connection to black women. Tshabalala also notes that when black women are mentioned, they are looked at as natural servers, which is why they continuously see this image of that narrative (Pike 2021). In her questioning of the black female subject in *Olympia* (1863), Tshabalala has managed to beautifully represent black women and herself in such a way that they stand out through the use of vibrant colours, and engaging in mundane activities in works like *Study of a Nude* (2021) and *Untitled* (2021).

The portrayal of a black South African woman who creates self-portraits, and exhibits in galleries would be Tshabalala's contribution to black feminist art. As noted by Bongi Dhlomo (in Schmahmann 2015:31), black female South African artists were historically marginalised and restricted to certain professions such as domestic workers, teachers, or nurses. Notably, Tshabalala's agency is shown through her inability to care about how individuals perceive her, being clothed, and unclothed whenever she feels like it in her space; and being unapologetic about her growth. The artist further asserts that it is essential to "stop trying to conceal things within, be free, and be in touch with your truest self" (Hart 2020).

4.6. Conclusion

Many artists have rejected the idea that black women's physical characteristics are unattractive, hypersexual, masculine, and undeserving of good things by producing self-portraits that do the opposite such as portraying themselves as desirable and empowered human beings. Feminists like Truth had proved otherwise to a hegemonic society by exposing her breasts at an anti-slavery rally to assert her identity as a woman. The beliefs attributed to black women in the nineteenth century contributed to

the devaluation of black womanhood. According to hooks (1981:159), it was also considered improper for black women to speak on public platforms, especially in the nineteenth century. Through their artistic creations that subvert racist and sexist ideologies, Sibande, Muholi, Zangewa, Tshabalala, and several other prominent black female artists have subverted the assumption that they are not allowed to express themselves on public platforms. They also challenge the notion that black women are unworthy by producing self-portraits that portray them as desirable, and beautiful. This means asserting their identities and acknowledging their position in society as black women who have control over their bodies.

CHAPTER FIVE
CONCLUSION

5.1. Summary of chapters

Through an iconographic, iconological, and hermeneutical analysis of self-portraits of black female artists; I have attempted to argue how the artists challenge the historical representations of black women in the Western art canon. The artworks were analysed within the broader theoretical framework of feminism. Chapter One aimed to outline the objectives of the study, establish its background and highlight the significance of the research within the field of visual culture studies.

Chapter Two investigated global feminism, which included the second and third waves of feminism which were examined thoroughly. The theorists I examined in this section were Charlotte Krolokke and Anne Scott-Sorenson (2005). They were particularly helpful in examining first and second-wave feminism, emphasising the goals and aspirations as well as the ways in which black women were marginalised within it. Following the second wave of feminism, the third wave was a monumental moment in feminism because of the inclusion of different races, genders, and sexual orientations. Moreover, Claire Snyder-Hall (2010:258) provided insight into the third wave by discussing how it reintroduced sexual liberation into a feminist discourse. Norma Broude and Mary D Garrard (2005) have argued the importance of feminist art history and highlighted the historical gender inequities in the art institution. Judy Chicago was a prolific figure during the feminist art movement, and I showed that she significantly impacted feminist art and feminist art history. The feminist art movement in South Africa followed shortly after the movement in the USA during the 1980s. I investigated Penny Siopis and Sue Williamson's artworks where they placed black women as the protagonists. The history of feminist art in South Africa was looked into with particular attention paid to Brenda Schmahmann (2015) who discussed the emergence of feminist art in the country, Marion Arnold (1996) and Karen von Veh (2006, 2019) who addressed how the apartheid-era racial tensions overshadowed feminist art.

The following part of this paper described in greater detail black feminism as well as its aim and objectives. Theorists like bell hooks (1981) discussed the devaluation of black womanhood by discussing Sojourner Truth's speech *Ain't I Woman* delivered in 1851 at the Women's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio. Barbara Smith highlighted the objectives, and the misconceptions of black feminism. Desiree Lewis mainly spoke about black feminism in South Africa, foregrounding the 1991 Women and Gender Conference in Southern Africa. Examining black feminist art in South Africa was found essential, particularly in light of Avitha Sooful's analysis of how black female artists' artwork was perceived as crafts because of their appearance. A brief analysis of Bongi Dhlomo's print was conducted due to its feminist underpinnings. When it comes to the historical representation of black women in Art, I first investigated Jean-Marc Nattier's painting *Mademoiselle de Clermont en Sultane* (1733) in terms of the placement of the black servants, and how they were painted. I then discussed the *Olympia* (1863) by Edouard Manet in terms of how the black servant Laure was painted in the background, submitting to Olympia. The analysis of *Mademoiselle de Clermont en Sultane* (1733) and *Olympia* (1863) led to the discussion of the mammy stereotypes regarding their physical and character traits.

Chapter Three, highlighted Shearer West's writing about self-portraiture as a genre, and I explored how it has changed over the centuries. Self-portraiture as a feminist strategy was an important component in this study because it conveyed the progression of the agency of female artists. For example, female self-portraitists like Amrita Sher-Gil, Frida Kahlo and Cindy Sherman assisted in demonstrating how they asserted agency in their paintings by challenging gender stereotypes and life experiences. In terms of self-representation, I briefly examined the works of Carrie Mae Weems and Renee Cox. In *Untitled (Woman and Daughter with Makeup)* (1990), Weems invites viewers into her intimate environment, where she plays several roles such as a mother, lover, and friend. Renee Cox's self-portraits were examined in terms of how she provocatively portrays herself confidently *in Young Yo Mama* (1985) and *Yo Mama's Last Supper* (1996). In this study, I showed that self-portraiture is used as a black feminist strategy through various themes such as self-representation through Thagard and Wood's perspective, Patricia Collins's notion of self-definition, the oppositional gaze through bell hooks, and self-love using Audre Lorde's theory. These

themes were used as analytical tools to delve deeper into the self-portraits in examined Chapter Four.

Chapter Four thoroughly analysed the self-portraits of black female South African artists: Mary Sibande, Zanele Muholi, Billie Zangewa, and Zandile Tshabalala, who all engaged with self-representation. Sibande's renowned sculptures and installations challenged the historical representations of black women in art by creating the alter-ego, Sophie who was elegantly dressed in a stereotypical domestic worker's uniform yet styled as a Victorian gown. Thus, I have examined Sibande's agency by showing how she developed an oppositional gaze in *Silent Symphony* (2010) *and Her Majesty, Queen Sophie* (2010). The agency was shown as occupying a role that black women had historically been denied. Zanele Muholi's series *Somnyama Ngonyama* (2012-present), known for their exaggerated skin complexion was also investigated, and the series expressed how Muholi depicts themself in black and white photographs in different cities around the world, using diverse props to express Muholi's various moods and feelings. I have attempted to demonstrate how Muholi has shown acts of self-love in *Julile, Parktown, Johannesburg* (2016) and how they developed an oppositional gaze in *MaID, Delaware* (2017). It was argued that *MaID, Delaware* (2017) *and Portrait of Madeleine* (1800) by Benoist are similar in terms of how both subjects are posed and the clothing, but Muholi challenged the passivity of the black female subject in *Portrait of Madeleine* (1800), also analysed through Poulain (2020) and Richardson's (2020) perspective.

Zangewa's tapestries mostly communicated self-love, femininity, her home life and domesticity. Zangewa has demonstrated acts of self-love in *In My Solitude* (2018), and observed by the mundane activities she undertook in her home. In *The Rebirth of Black Venus* (2010), I asserted that Zangewa developed an oppositional gaze by challenging the model's passivity in Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus* (1485-1486), and by posing openly, and towering over a city. Tshabalala's intimate self-portraits exhibit similarities to Zangewa's artworks concerning the performance of ordinary tasks within their homes. Nevertheless, her work also conveys growth through her gaze and poses, transitioning from being assertive and confident to appearing relaxed. I have contended that Tshabalala's *Paradise IIII* (2020) contrasts with Rosseau's *The Dream* (1910) because she draws attention to the dark figure (the snake charmer) that was

previously in the background of the painting, transforming the figure into an assertive person who has agency

To conclude this study, I have attempted to establish that black female artists have portrayed themselves and exhibited agency in their self-portraits and questioned Western depictions of black women in art. I approached this by first discussing feminism, namely black feminism, feminist art both in the USA and South Africa as well as selected historical portrayals of black women. These theoretical frameworks helped me understand why black female artists' agency is important in art history.

5.2. Contribution to study

This study makes an important addition to the growing literature of black feminist discourse, and visual culture studies in South Africa. The study contributes to the representation of black women, particularly South African black female artists who produce self-portraits. To the best of my knowledge, little or no research has examined agency in self-portraits by black South African female artists that employ black feminist strategies such as self-love, self-definition, and the oppositional gaze. One exception is Ama Josephine Johnstone's analysis of how Zanele Muholi develops an oppositional gaze in *Imaging Assisted Evolution: The Environmental Futurity of Zanele Muholi's Somnyama Ngonyama* (2019). Despite the lack of research on this topic in South Africa, there has been a substantial amount of research conducted on self-love, self-definition, and black female representation outside of South Africa. Denise Murrell's in *Posing Modernity: The Black Model from Manet and Matisse to Today* (2018) remains an excellent example.

5.3. Limitations to study

Tony Gum was one of the initial artists selected for the study, but she was not included due to a lack of relevant information about her. Such information could have supported my arguments, therefore, I explored different artists, including Sibande and Muholi.

Analysing Sibande and Muholi's artworks was an enjoyable experience because of how powerful their self-portraits are as well as the profound meaning behind those self-portraits Although there was copious academic literature on Sibande and Muholi, it was much easier to research them. For Zangewa, there was some scholarly material based on her work, especially *The Rebirth of Black Venus* (2010). Although I attempted to set up an interview with her to acquire further insight into artworks like *Cold Shower* (2019) and *In My Solitude* (2019). She, unfortunately did not respond. Moreover, I had hoped to find more readings on the exploration of self-love of black women shown in visual art. I struggled to find that information, but it taught me to apply myself in terms of researching more into self-love regarding the actions that pertain to self-love, and demonstrating how they are shown in artwork.

5.4. Suggestions for further research

There is room for additional research when it comes to the self-representation of black women in visual art, for example, acts of self-love illustrated in visual art by black women. Self-love as explored in visual art by black women is a topic I would like to conduct further research on. The qualitative methodologies used in the study, including a hermeneutical analysis, iconographical, and iconological analysis were effective in this study; however, the interview with Tshabalala fueled my determination to conduct additional research because interviews allow me to get a better sense of what certain artworks entail directly from the artist's mouth. More research can be undertaken by having expansive conversations with different artists in Africa. An example of an artist who is of interest to me is Cinthia Sifa Mulanga from the Democratic Republic of Congo, whose work is centred around questioning the portrayal of black women by exploring the relationship they have with space. Mulanga grew intrigued by the radical self-acceptance and assurance that black women exhibit in the face of white patriarchal structures that place significant constraints on black women's ability to achieve visibility, success, and confidence (Latitudes [sa]). Therefore, there is much room for further research on the topics I have explored in this dissertation.

APPENDICES

Ethics Protocol Number: HUM016/0624

Interview schedule for Zandile Tshabalala

1. Do you mind if I record the interview?

2. Explain what the interview is going to be about.

• There is going to be an ice-breaker to set the tone of the interview.
• The interview is going to be about the *Enter Paradise* series.
• Also asking what her body of work is situated around.
• Ask about one or two paintings.
• How the body of work contributes to black feminism.
• Miss Tshabalala is welcome to share additional information about her art practice.

3. Ice-breaker (ask a personal question): what made you decide to be a painter? Why do you create self-portraits? Who do you draw your inspiration from?

3. When did you notice the underrepresentation of black women in art?

4. What does *Enter Paradise* mean, and why that title?

5. How did you feel after making the first painting from *Enter Paradise*?

7. I have noticed that the background of your paintings in this series is often of a jungle or a forest-like environment. Why do you choose to place yourself in that setting especially *Ode to Rosseau* and *Paradise* 7?

8. I have noticed that you paint your lips and nails red in most of your paintings, which I found captivating. Is there a particular reason why you chose that colour?

9. In what ways do you think that your body of work contributes to black feminism and feminism art in South Africa?

10. I think that it is incredibly beautiful that you portray yourself in your personal space and your “paradise”. It almost lets the viewer know that you love yourself. What does self-love mean to you and why is it important for women?

11. You paint yourself in a highly pigmented tone, why did you choose that specific tone?

12. The gaze is quite evident in your portraits almost confrontational. Why is that so?

13. How has your style of painting changed over time?

14. Please describe how your art is important to society

UNIVERSITEIT VAN PRETORIA
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Visual Arts

Letter of Informed Consent: Interview Zandile Tshabalala

Title of the study: Examining agency in self-portraits of black female artists

Short description of the interview

The purpose of the interview is to:

- Understand the context and development of the *Enter Paradise* series
- Understand Zandile Tshabalala's art practice.
- Understand how her body of work contributes to Black feminism and South African feminist art.

By signing this form, you agree:

- That Nandipha Yanta may record you on her cellphone;
- That the answers you give during the interview may be published in a dissertation;
- Your participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw from the project at any time without explaining why;
- You have the right to access and review the answers you have given
- Your anonymity cannot be assured as Nandipha Yanta will record your name alongside data gathered in the interview;
- Your personal information (contact number) will remain confidential;
- All the recordings and transcripts of the recordings will be stored securely at the University of Pretoria and will only be used for research purposes. The data will be destroyed in 10 years after the commencement of the study.

Name of participant: Zandile Tshabalala Signature: 

Contact number: 0817133925 Date: 11 October 2024

Lead researcher: Nandipha Yanta Date: 11 October 2024
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INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT BETWEEN NANDIPHA YANTA AND ZANDILE TSHABALALA

RECORDED: 2024

Yanta: Ice-breaker (ask a personal question): what made you decide to be a painter? Why do you create self-portraits? Who do you draw your inspiration from?

Tshabalala: I knew that I could draw basic stuff, I knew that I knew how to draw back in primary and high school and I used to do it a lot. I drew a lot of pretty pictures of paper dolls because I was very much into that, very girly and childlike things. It was only in high school visual art that I learnt about professional artists. I learnt that art was a thing and that artists were producing art professionally. And because that was new to me, I became curious about art as a profession and I thought to myself that I wanted to do make art my career. I gravitated more towards painting and in university, I learnt about the different mediums for example printmaking and performance.

Yanta: Why do you create self-portraits

Tshabalala: Self-portraiture came naturally when I was in university. Because I did second and third years at once in university, I had difficulty fitting in the two years. I had one foot in one year and the other in the second year. I spent a lot of time in the studio back at Wits and because I was with myself so much, I made my first image. Although I was not adamant about having the exact likeness of myself in the image, I found it easy to be my own sitter, and over time, I realised how deeply personal the self-portraits were in terms of how I experience life mentally, physically and spiritually. In essence, it showed my viewers where my head was at.

Yanta: Do you feel like it is a documentation of your inner-self or do you feel like you are letting people into your space?

Tshabalala: It does become a documentation of the self, of my life, the people around me, the things I am curious about. I suppose it is documenting and contributing to what

it is to be black and a woman, giving it a real-time perspective and depiction in my voice.

Yanta: Who do you draw your inspiration from? It doesn't have to be an artist it can be anyone. It's still an ice-breaker.

Tshabalala: I found inspiration from people's experiences, people just being, whether it is myself or my family members. I'm always curious about their joy, and how they hold themselves in their spaces. My paintings are a little safe space for me to express my true personality and feelings, so I draw inspiration from that. So if we're going to talk artistically, the best painter in terms of skill would be Kerry James Marshall because of how he looks at blackness and figuration he started that for me, I think of him as a virtual educator, if I had to choose an old master painter it would be him, I look up to him a lot, and he is one of my biggest influences. Painters like Ndijeka Crosby and Meleko Mokgosi, they just do it for me, are so good with the medium itself and how they treat it. They are just engaged with the medium and the application of the paint and techniques like composition.

Yanta: I also see a lot of Kerry James Marshall's influence reflected in your work

Tshabalala: Yes, it has to do with the choice of black skin and blackness. For me, James inverted the portrayal of blackness and pioneered it into positive imagery. He portrayed blackness in a dignified way. I see myself contributing to and maintaining the positive imagery associated with blackness.

Yanta: When did you notice the underrepresentation of black women in art?

Tshabalala: It goes back to varsity when I had repeated my art history class. The second time around, I was more focused, and I was engaging with the material. I had picked up on how I felt misplaced regarding my position in all of the history I was learning and the images I was being exposed to and I could not find or see myself the way I had wanted to be seen. I felt like I could not relate to any of those images and draw something positive out of those images. It was not the lack of black women in art because black women were being painted in history, but for me, it was a question of

how they are being painted. Were there a various images where people could find themselves and relate to it? And thus, it became very important to contribute my two cents. In my first painting, I wanted to see this very assertive, confident, but also well-rested woman. My first painting was of a woman reclined. The paintings I first made showed a woman whose facial expressions were aggressive, and the feeling it came with was desperate to see a bold and confident woman in a very direct gaze. So it was a “you see me and I see you” moment in a direct gaze. The gaze also showed that it is my space and my world, I am in control of this particular environment, so they are very strong in that sense.

I wanted to see a variety (of black women confident well-rested women) and there is so much room for variety to exist. For example different personalities of black women or people that we still need to be made aware of. So it is not to say that black women were not necessarily present in art but it was the question of how they were depicted. For example, they were depicted in the background of someone’s world, always doing some kind of domestic work or not having some kind of agency on their own bodies. It is always very passive in a way. The women that are shown probably have their personalities, their own desires, the things they do behind the scenes and outside of the work environment. I am curious about the lady in *Olympia* (by Manet) holding the bouquet of flowers, who is she, what does she do when she is not a maid, does she have lovers, quarrels, does she have fears, feelings, and all of that? Because all of these things contribute to how society views black women and for as long as we are shown in this linear way, then we are not treated like humans. There is no room for our feelings and thoughts, to be human. For me, it is very important to show or see black women as simple and let them be and simply let them exist. They don’t have to be these supercharged, superwomen or super anything

Yanta: What does *Enter Paradise* mean and why that title?

Tshabalala: So *Enter Paradise* was a solo exhibition I did two or three years ago. It was my first solo that was in Ghana in the space ADA. For me, it was an invitation; it is like inviting someone into your paradise in this case. My paradise is an intimate, personal and mundane space that I created myself, my own little world that I am allowed to exist in and I can change my mind five million times, it’s home. It was me

stating that paradise does not have to be a distant place with palm trees or the images associated with paradise or the paradise that people yearn for but for me, paradise can be an immediate space, wherever you are, like home and wherever you look around. What gives you the feeling of exhaling of being in a place of rest, what gives you peace of mind; the immediate space? When I was looking at my surroundings and finding my paradise in the mundane place. When I'm mopping the house and I take a five-minute breather in a little corner on a chair, I sit down and listen to music. That is paradise right there. At that moment I am resting, I am at peace and do not care about anything else. I did add a bit of foliage to play around with the idea of this leafy, very abundant space but at the same time, all of that is already existing in your place. *Enter Paradise* became an invitation for the viewer to experience that with me and reflect on what their paradises are.

Yanta: How did you feel after making the first painting from *Enter Paradise*?

Tshabalala: The first one I made was the one I was talking about with the lady sitting down in the corner in a chair with her feet up, with the bucket she was mopping with, wearing the pyjamas and gowns (*A Study of the Nude (Self*)(2021). The first thing you do in my household, at my grandmother's house, is that you clean, and tidy up the house; that had become a routine for me. When I captured that reference image I was cleaning, I had my headphones on; I was listening to whatever it was I was listening to. I just sat down and thought let me capture an image of this and after I went back to my library because I do that a lot. Most of my references are existing pictures of moments and places that I had already been to, so now I try to find them to see if they fit the theme or the work I am trying to work on, but that image or reference made so much sense when I was working on *Enter Paradise* as a show, it kind of inspired the title. It reminded me of a show where part of the title included "*Enter Paradise*". That image was the first one, and it made sense because it presented the whole show.

Yanta: I have noticed that the background of your paintings in this series is often of a jungle or a forest-like environment. Why do you choose to place yourself in that specific setting, especially *Ode to Rosseau* and *Paradise 7*?

Tshabalala: I do like having the foliage around me, even though it is sometimes completely constructed. This is where Henri Rosseau [is involved] because he is one of the artists I look up to and when you look at his practice, he did many of these imagined and constructed landscapes. I like the idea of constructing or imagining a world and painting allows me to move things around, place things where they do not belong and make it look completely normal. Thus I decided that I was going to beautify my space with foliage and make it "paradisey", and it made sense to have this exaggerated foliage to make it beautiful.

Yanta: I have noticed that you paint your lips and nails red in most of your paintings, which I found captivating. Is there a particular reason why you chose that colour?

Tshabalala: The first reason was the contrast between the black skin. The red lips and nails are usually associated with femininity, being female or womanhood. When you see this depiction of put-together women, they often have red lips or nails and the black women stereotype. When I think of all those vintage movies with black women, they usually have red nails and red lips, so I started using that. It made sense; it is a feminity, but it also contrasts with the black skin so well, and it kept recurring in my work.

Yanta: In what ways do you think that your body of work contributes to Black feminism and feminism art in South Africa?

Tshabalala: My work offers permission to just be (exist and relax); women have been really strong fighters. I would also like to think of my work as a strong black woman to just be and to rest because I desire that for myself, and I desire that for other women. I hope that in feminism as a whole, I am asking for black women to rest, and I am creating space for that in my work. Rest is important.

Yanta: I think that it is incredibly beautiful that you portray yourself in your personal space and your "paradise". It almost lets the viewer know that you love yourself. What does self-love mean to you, and why is it important for women?

Tshabalala: Well, firstly, self-love in my personal life in the past couple of months, and so I've learnt that it doesn't always look confident or bold or anything like that. Sometimes, you need to allow yourself to be vulnerable, acknowledging your feelings and the things that make you feel at peace. As much as I have depicted this image of self-love, taking care of yourself in the most practical way, like taking care of your skin and your body, loving your body or engaging with your body, it also looks like allowing yourself to fall apart, giving yourself time to wallow. It is just a variety, and it comes packaged in different forms, so I had to learn that in the past couple of months because I did not feel my self-love was showing up. It felt like I was putting on a mask or doing this or doing that. My self-love showed up as giving myself space, not feeling beautiful on some days, beautiful in a conventional way and allowing myself to go through all of that. That is self-love for me. I think it is important for anyone to reflect and decide what self-love looks like for them and create space for that.

Yanta: The gaze is quite evident in your portraits, almost intense and confrontational. Why is that so?

Tshabalala: When I started engaging with the idea of the gaze, I wanted to speak on black women taking agency of their bodies and say, "If you're looking at my body or looking at me, then I am looking at you too". It was this exchange of looking; there is no passivity in it, but the works were initially very aggressive in their desire to be seen. The more I grow, the more I see the works and the softer they are becoming. Now, the subject is not interested in whether or not the audience or the viewer is looking at them. They are most interested in perceiving themselves and just existing and being. The gaze has gotten softer, but the figure still has agency in their own bodies, they know they exist in these bodies, and they take that quite seriously or at least take care of those bodies more seriously. It is not so much about the viewer or who is looking anymore because all of that does not really matter. In the grander spectrum of things, at least for me, now it is just about how you interact with your own body. How do you interact with your own space? You cannot control how the next person views you, but you can control how you view yourself. I feel like the figures in my paintings are maturing as well, just as I am in real life.

Yanta: I saw your work at Banele Khoza's gallery last year, and your style has changed. How has your style of painting changed over time?

Tshabalala: My work does a back-and-forth, it is not linear. With each body of work or with each canvas, I am always curious about something new. For example, how do I paint this or that, so it becomes me challenging my actual skills. I wouldn't say I like thinking of my practice as this linear style or way of being because I don't think it's who I am as a person, I am not linear. As I said, I think of my work as a space to change my mind, even in how I engage with the painting of the figures, it must represent that for me. One minute, I feel like I want a flat black, and another minute, I want it grey or I want it more brown. All of that stuff, to me, is like permission to change your mind, permission to figure it out. One minute, it looks like this or like that, so the most consistent and important thing is the existence of the black figure, the black female figure in particular or figures in the minority. I have painted some of my friends in the LGBTIQ+ community, and sometimes, I've painted males and black men. It is like being art class; you're learning, and you are figuring it out and you kind of insert the new things you learn about in your work. You try something new, and you change your mind, and it doesn't work out. My audience is witnessing me learn in real time.

Yanta: Please describe how your art is important to society

Tshabalala: You know how you ask the question, "Is art the most important thing?" in the grander scheme of things and sometimes the answer to that is no or not really as there are more detrimental things like whether you live or not or how you live. Simultaneously, art documents the times that we exist in, and it contributes to history. When we look back years later, these artworks contribute to the conversations about what we were like, what we were wearing, and what we were talking about. In a way, it plays a role in documenting society and important conversations happening in real-time. How do I think my work is important? I guess it is another contribution of what it was like for me and the people that I am witnessing around me to be black and a woman in the current time. The most important topic right now is the resting black woman for me, and in the future, when we look back to the works that existed during this time, my work will contribute to conversations and the repose of blackness and black womanhood.

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