

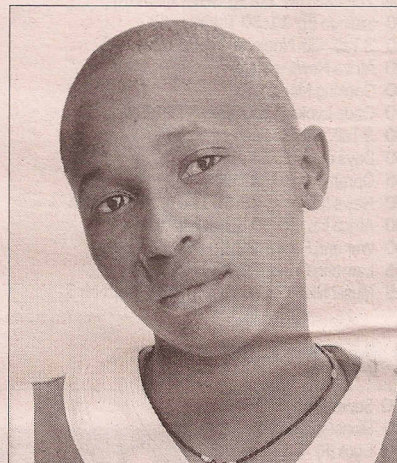
# Perceptions challenged

**A**lmost as certainly as there will be traffic on Empire Road and brown grass in winter, Johannesburg seems forever fated to produce documentary photographers.

Whether or not they choose to label themselves as such, Jozi's photographers-in-training and their respective schools have a penchant for the literal, for testimony and for the moralising potential of the photographic image.

The close relationship between documentary-style photography and fine art galleries in South Africa no doubt has its roots in the struggle era, when some galleries provided a forum for photographic content and photographers who would have battled to find a voice in the mainstream media. The documentary-style image cannot but raise questions about the context of its display, and today it is doubtful that the conventions of the gallery will always provide the best frame for a photographic exposé, tribute or essay.

Zanele Muholi's solo exhibition at Brodie/Stevenson, *Faces and Phases*, illustrates this conundrum. The body of work is a series of black-and-white portraits concerned with "the commemoration and celebration of black lesbians' lives" that sets out to "challenge" the public's perceptions of gender identity. The curatorial statement frames the work as artistic activism, the photographer's response to "the violation, rape and murder of innocents because of their



**Left: Zanele Muholi; Dikeledi Sibanda 2007; silver gelatin print 86.5 x 60.5cm**

**Right: Zanele Muholi; Eulander Koester, Guguletu, Cape Town 2008; silver gelatin print 86.5 x 60.5cm.** Courtesy of Brodie/Stevenson

sexualities and ethnicities." There is no doubt that Muholi has something important — even urgent — to say, but one wonders about the intended effects of her statement on the artsy neo-liberals who tend to frequent Brodie/Stevenson's openings.

The premise underlying credibility as an artist-activist is that the photographic image

validates its subject and, in this instance, that the gallery exhibition automatically gives value to its contents. Both ideas are highly questionable, but in South Africa at least, they are still the ticket for many photographers to the fine art cattle market we know and love..

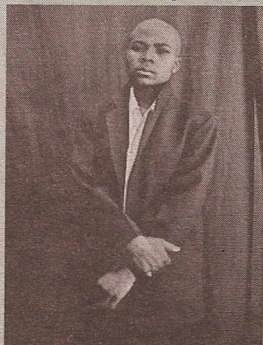
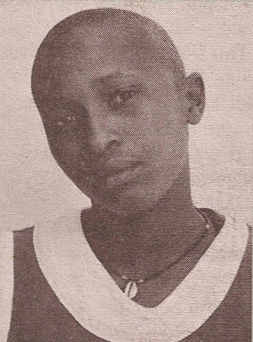
**Currently at Brodie/Stevenson**

Mail and Guardian / July 10-16 2009

Sunday Times / Lifestyle 19 July 2009

## HOT THANGS

### This Week's Must-do



**What is it?** The "Faces and Phases" photographic exhibition by Zanele Muholi, on at the Brodie/Stevenson Gallery in Johannesburg from July 9 to August 1. The exhibition showcases an ongoing series of black and white portraits that celebrate the lives of black lesbians. Muholi has also exhibited her work in cities like New York and Milan. For more information,

visit [www.brodiestevenson.com](http://www.brodiestevenson.com) or call (011) 326-0034.

**X-factor?** The exhibition features black lesbians from across the world — from Toronto to Joburg, London to Cape Town.

**What might make you think twice?**

If you think homosexuality is unnatural, this is definitely not the place for you.

— Zipezhinhle Msimango