

**MEDIA RELEASE**

## Major African portraiture exhibition at the Ryerson Image Centre explores the role of women in photography

July 17, 2019, Toronto --- This fall, the Ryerson Image Centre (RIC) will present a major exhibition exploring African photographic portraiture through the perspectives of women, both as sitters and photographers. Guest curated by rising scholar Sandrine Colard and organized by the RIC in collaboration with The Walther Collection, [\*The Way She Looks: A History of Female Gazes in African Portraiture\*](#) features contemporary works by female artists alongside twentieth-century studio portraits and early colonial images and albums. The exhibition opens on **September 11** and runs until **December 8, 2019**.

Throughout the history of photography, African women's bodies have been repeatedly objectified and fetishized. *The Way She Looks* shifts the focus instead towards women's gazes and highlights female acts of looking that challenge the male-dominated narrative of the medium. Showcasing over 100 works by both female and male practitioners from across Africa, the exhibition emphasizes the ways women see and present themselves while tracing how they moved from being eloquent photographic subjects to adopting positions behind the camera.

"Because the history of photography in Africa has concentrated on a few famous male photographers, the role of women in photography has often been overlooked," says Colard, a specialist of modern and contemporary African art. "By focusing on female portraiture and photographers, the goal of the exhibition is to account for their viewpoints in that history."

The works on view will be drawn entirely from The Walther Collection (Neu-Ulm, Germany and New York, USA), one of the world's most important holdings of photography and lens-based art from Africa. *The Way She Looks* represents the first time photographs from this significant collection have been exhibited in Canada.

The exhibition is divided chronologically into three parts. The first section showcases nineteenth and early twentieth-century photographic prints, *cartes de visite*, postcards, albums, and books from Southern and Eastern Africa. Despite the unequal power dynamics of colonial imagery, many early photographs offer windows into their subjects' experiences; the exhibition foregrounds photographs from this era in which the female sitters' confident and forthright gazes rival that of the photographer.

The second section features women's portraits since the 1950s by notable West African photographers, such as Malick Sidibé and Seydou Keïta. As regular patrons of rapidly

emerging portrait studios, women increasingly became co-authors of their own image: they styled themselves, carefully chose their outfits, commissioned the photographer, and performed during studio sessions. At the same time, documentary photographers began to record the African female experience in a period of rapid social, cultural and political change as many nations prepared for and achieved independence.

The final section highlights a number of significant African female and non-binary artists who have emerged since the 1990s, including Yto Barrada, Jodi Bieber, Zanele Muholi, Lebohang Kganye, Grace Ndiritu, Nontsikelolo “Lolo” Veleko, Sue Williamson, and Mimi Cherono Ng’ok. Exploring a wide array of subjects, from feminist, queer, and gender issues to history, kinship, migration, memory, and loss, many of the works made by these artists challenge conventional understandings of African female photographic representation.

“By privileging women’s perspectives, both in front of and behind the camera, this groundbreaking exhibition confronts the canons of art history and allows for new narratives,” says RIC Exhibitions Curator Gaëlle Morel. “We’re thrilled to celebrate the work of so many leading African artists, many of whom are being shown in Canada for the first time.”

Drawing on the uniquely expansive range of images in The Walther Collection, *The Way She Looks* provides a rare and timely historical overview of the African female experience in photography.

On view from **September 11 to December 8, 2019**, *The Way She Looks: A History of Female Gazes in African Portraiture* is organized by the Ryerson Image Centre, Toronto, Canada, in collaboration with The Walther Collection, Neu-Ulm, Germany and New York, USA. The exhibition is guest curated by Sandrine Colard. The show is supported by media sponsors the *Toronto Star*, *The Walrus* and *ByBlacks.com*, with additional support from the Ontario Cultural Attractions Fund. With generous funding from The Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation, New York. Promotional support provided by Allan Slaight and Emmanuelle Gattuso. A full schedule of free public programming, including tours and talks, is available via [ryersonimagecentre.ca/events](http://ryersonimagecentre.ca/events).

### **About Sandrine Colard**

Sandrine Colard is an art historian, writer and curator based in New York and Brussels. A specialist of modern and contemporary African arts (PhD Columbia University), Colard is a professor at Rutgers University-Newark and has been appointed Artistic Director of the 6th Lubumbashi Biennale 2019, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Colard is working on her book about the history of photography in the DRC (awarded 2019-2020 Ford Foundation Fellowship).

### **About The Walther Collection**

The Walther Collection is an art foundation dedicated to the critical understanding of historical and contemporary photography and related media. Through a program of international exhibitions, in-depth collecting, original research, and scholarly publications,

The Walther Collection aims to highlight the social uses of photography and to expand the history of the medium worldwide. For more information, visit [www.walthercollection.com](http://www.walthercollection.com) or follow @walthercollect.

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**FREE ADMISSION**  
**Free exhibition tours daily at 2:30 pm**

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Follow us @RICgallery

*The Ryerson Image Centre (RIC) exists for the research, teaching and exhibition of photography and related media. We are an active partner within the academic fabric of Ryerson University, the cultural network of greater Toronto, and the national and international artistic community. We develop rigorous yet inclusive programs for students, faculty, artists, researchers and curators, as well as the general public. The RIC boasts three interrelated areas of activity. Our exhibition program addresses topics of social, cultural, aesthetic and historical concern from a variety of contemporary perspectives. Our Peter Higdon Research Centre conducts and facilitates inquiry into primary resource materials and offers workshops, lectures, symposia and publication programs. Finally, we maintain a collection of photography spanning the medium's history, as well as several artist and journalism archives—including the renowned Black Star Collection of twentieth century photoreportage. For more information, visit [ryersonimagecentre.ca](http://ryersonimagecentre.ca)*

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