

GALERIE NATHALIE OBADIA

PARIS - BRUXELLES

SEYDOU KEÏTA

25 April - 14 May 2022

3, rue du Cloître Saint-Merri, 75004 - Paris



Sans titre/ Untitled (OT052-MAKE308), 1952-1955
Posthumous Gelatin black and white silver print on cartoline paper 280g back-mounted on Aluminium 1mm. Plexiglass framed, 122 x 162 cm, Edition of 5 + 2 AP
© Seydou Keïta / SKPEAC
CAAC- The Pigozzi Collection & Galerie Nathalie Obadia

Nathalie Obadia is pleased to present the third exhibition of Malian photographer, Seydou Keïta (c. 1921-2001), who, from 1948 to 1962, ran one of the most sought-after photography studios in Western Africa. This exhibition coincides with the second edition of *Traversées Africaines*, which focuses on contemporary artists from Africa or the African diaspora.

In Bamako, in the 1950s, it was widely said that “*whoever had not been photographed by Seydou Keïta did not have a picture.*”¹ This quote illustrates the growing reputation of a self-taught photographer, originally destined to become a carpenter and who happened upon photography by chance. In the beginning, Pierre Garnier, manager of the Sudanese Photo Hall, took him under his wing, taught him how to develop his photographs and provided him with materials and equipment. Later on, the young artist also met Mountaga Dembélé, a pioneer in the field of Malian photography and teacher for the colonial administration, who gave him precious tips on technique.

Upon his return from a trip to Senegal, his uncle gave him a small Kodak Brownie Flash camera, with which Seydou Keïta first captured his family and friends, then the passersby in the street. In 1948, he decided to found his own studio and set himself up on the family plot, behind the main jail, in the Bamako-Coura quarter (“Nouveau-Bamako”). Seydou Keïta decided to specialize in commissioned portraits, individual or group, which he realized mostly with a view camera, in black and white. Thanks to the quality of his prints and the great sophistication of his portraits, demand for his work surged. “*Bamako’s elite came to have their pictures taken at my studio: civil servants, merchants, politicians;*” he liked to recount. In fact, a varied clientele came knocking on his door, first Malian, but soon also from neighboring countries, including Senegal, Guinea or even the Ivory Coast. Seydou Keïta benefited both from Bamako’s strategic placement, on the main road that goes to Dakar by train, and from the very lively Bamako-Coura quarter. With their families or friends, alone or as couples, clients queued to be photographed, seduced by the postcard-sized, stamped prints, which they could send to their loved ones. On the walls of his studio, Seydou Keïta hung some of his previous photographs, so that his clients could get some ideas before posing for the camera. This exhibition echoes his studio hanging, with a dozen prints exhibited on one wall, shedding light on the diversity of his work.

In the interest of saving paper and time, the artist only took one photograph per client. According to him, “*The technique of photography is simple, but what made the difference was that I knew the right position for every sitter; I never made a mistake.*”¹ One of the pictures in this exhibition attests to the veracity of this declaration: two women, clad in their best clothes and captured in all their spontaneity by Seydou Keïta. Fabric hangs on the wall behind them. The photographer used his fringed bedcover as a background for a while, before purchasing fashionable fabrics, mostly wax, which he replaced every two to three years. To this day, these fabrics are key in dating his works. What’s more, they provide, behind the subjects, a veritable gallery of motifs, which are eye-catching and connect the images to one another.

Another exhibited print is one of the most striking examples of this use of background, so unique to Seydou Keïta. We see two women, eyes fixed on the camera and hands placed palm to palm, who “*seem to float in a sea of geometric patterns.*”² Like the majority of women who come to his studio, the models wear traditional dress and jewelry. They pose elegantly in front of the motifs that blend with those of their outfits: the spectator’s eye sometimes gets lost, before settling on the singularities of the photographed individuals. The fabric lends a theatrical quality to the scene: in front of the lens, Seydou Keïta’s models have the freedom and space to fashion their own images and, sometimes, to play the role they aspire to: “*Keïta anticipates his clients’ desires and allows them to be whoever they want to be in front of the camera.*”² For instance, the young photographer lets his models choose from the accessories stored at his studio: a radio, watches, ties, plastic flowers... He even allows them to pose next to his Vespa – a possession that marks the artist’s own financial success. All these accessories symbolize the will to reach a certain social status or to allow oneself the same privileges reserved for Whites. Many men prefer to pose in European dress, like these three clients, with their hands nonchalantly in their pockets and a cigarette perched on their lips; or this young boy with a beret, immortalized next to a bicycle. Natural light, focus on the pose, backgrounds punctuated by the motifs: all these elements characterize Seydou Keïta’s pictures and make them instantly recognizable.

The photographer never claimed the influence of artists from Mali or from elsewhere, in fact, and he had very few books from which he could glean artistic inspiration. His work is no less a turning point in West African photography. As Yves Aupetitallot reminds us, the medium was a tool used for the French colonial expansion in the Sub-Saharan region: photography, for example, served to identify and classify the subjects of the French power, and contributed to create, in the long term, a stereotyped and supposedly “scientific” vision of Malians. Seydou Keïta is “*the consummate descendant of this history and of the emergence of African photography in reaction to the ethnocentric photography that came from colonialism.*”³ Thus, these elaborately composed, silver gelatin portraits constitute a unique testimony to the changes that occurred in Malian society at the time, a society that was emancipating from traditions and aspired to a certain modernity, while decolonization was under way and independence drew near.

In 1962, two years after the proclamation of independence of the Sudanese Republic, and at the request of the authorities, Seydou Keïta closed his studio and became the official government photographer until his retirement in 1977. However, outside Subsaharan Africa, his work was unknown to the western art world, until 1991. It was only then, following the exhibition *Africa Explores: 20th Century African Art* (Center for African Art, New York), that collector Jean Pigozzi and curator André Magnin discovered uncredited photographs by Seydou Keïta. André Magnin decided then to set off in search of the unknown author of these pictures. Thanks to artist Malick Sidibé, he was able to identify then meet him. Astounded by the thousands of dormant negatives, carefully conserved by Seydou Keïta, André Magnin selected a number of them for Jean Pigozzi's collection. The artist's first retrospective took place in 1994 at the Fondation Cartier: for someone who only made contact prints and very few enlargements, Seydou Keïta was moved when he discovered the large-scale prints of his photographs. "You can't imagine what it was like for me the first time I saw prints of my negatives in large-scale, no spots, clean and perfect. I knew then that my work was really, really good. The people in my pictures look so alive, almost as if they were standing in front of me."⁴

¹ « Seydou Keïta, propos recueillis par André Magnin, Bamako, 1995-1996 », in Seydou Keïta, Éd. Scalo Zurich, Berlin, 1997.

² Dan Leers, « Seydou Keïta, un innovateur qui a fait école », in Seydou Keïta, cat. exp. Galeries nationales du Grand Palais, Paris, France, 31 mars – 11 juillet 2016, p. 45 et p. 40

³ Yves Aupetitallot, « Seydou Keïta vers la modernité post-coloniale », Seydou Keïta, cat. exp. Galeries nationales du Grand Palais, Paris, France, 31 mars – 11 juillet 2016, p. 22

⁴ Michelle Lamunier (dir), *You Look Beautiful Like That : The Portrait Photographs of Seydou Keïta and Malick Sidibé*, cat. exp. The Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University Art Museums, Cambridge, États-Unis, 1er Septembre – 16 Décembre 2001, p. 47.

Seydou Keïta was born in 1921 in Bamako (Mali) and died in 2001 in Paris (France).

Since 1991, the year he met André Magnin and Jean Pigozzi who both greatly contributed to the international recognition of African contemporary art, Seydou Keïta's works has been showcased all throughout the world. The artist will have an exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum (New York) in 2024. Seydou Keïta's work was recently featured in solo shows at Foam Fotografiemuseum in Amsterdam (Netherlands, 2018), at the Galerie Nathalie Obadia of Brussels (Belgium, 2016), the Grand Palais in Paris (France, 2016), the Tate Modern of London (United-Kingdom, 2008), *Seydou Keïta: Portraits from Mali* (USA, 2007) at the Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland, the William Bennington Museum of Art, *Mali Portraits by Seydou Keïta* (USA, 2003) at The University of Connecticut in Storrs, the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna in Rome (Italy, 2001), the Saint Louis Museum of Art (USA, 1998), the Museum of Modern Art of San Francisco (USA, 1997), the Pinacoteca o Estado de Sao Paulo (Brazil, 1997), the Minneapolis Institute of Art (USA, 1996), *Seydou Keïta, Photographer : Portraits from Bamako* at the National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institute in Washington (USA, 1996), the Espace Fernand Léger in Montreuil (France, 1995), the Centre National de la Photographie de Paris (France, 1995), *Black Movie* at the Musée d'Art et d'Histoire à La Chaux de fonds de Saint Gervais in Geneva (Switzerland, 1994), the Ginza Shiseido Art Space of Tokyo (Japan, 1994), the Fondation Cartier pour l'Art Contemporain in Paris (France, 1994).

His work has been showcased in major exhibitions held in prestigious institutions like *Autophoto* at the Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain in Paris (France, 2017), *AFRICA. Raccontare un mondo* at the Padiglione d'Arte Contemporanea Milano in Milan (Italy, 2017), *Trésors de l'islam en Afrique, De Tombouctou à Zanzibar* at the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris (France, 2017), *Art/Afrique, Le Nouvel atelier* at the Fondation Louis Vuitton in Paris (France, 2017), *Making Africa, A continent of Contemporary Design* at the Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona in Barcelona (Spain, 2017), *In and Out of the Studio: Photographic Portraits from West Africa* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art of New York (USA, 2015), *Après Eden, la Collection Walther* at La Maison Rouge of Paris (France, 2015), *Look at Me!* at the Tropenmuseum of Amsterdam (Netherlands, 2014), *Malian Portrait Photography* at the Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art in New Paltz (USA, 2013), *Who, What, Wear. Selections from the Permanent Collection* at the Studio Museum Harlem in New York (USA, 2012), *Africa/ Africa* at the Centre d'art contemporain in Meymac (France, 2012), *África: Objetos y Sujetos, Teatro Fernán Gómez* at the Centro de Arte in Madrid (Spain, 2011), *Events of the Self: Portraiture and Social Identity* at the Contemporary African Photography from the Walther Collection in Neu-Ulm (Germany, 2010), *100% Africa* at the Guggenheim Museum of Bilbao (Spain, 2006), *African Art Now: Masterpieces from the Jean Pigozzi Collection* at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston (USA, 2005), *Faces in the Crowd : Images of Modern Life from Manet to Today* at the Whitechapel Art gallery in London (United Kingdom, 2004), *Joy of Life – Two Photographers from Africa* at the Hara Museum of Contemporary Art in Tokyo (Japan, 2004).

Seydou Keïta's works are also featured in prestigious international public collections such as the Eileen Harris and Peter Norton Collection (Santa Monica), the MOMA (New York), the Metropolitan Museum Art (New York), the Bronx Museum of Art (New York), the LACMA (Los Angeles), the Detroit Institute of Arts Museum (Detroit), the Philadelphia Museum of Art (Philadelphia), the State Art Collection (Washington), the Akron Art Museum (Akron), the Fogg Art Museum - The Harvard University Art Museums (Cambridge), the Princeton University Art Museum (Princeton), The University of Chicago, the Samuel P. Harn Museum of Art - University of Florida (Gainesville), the Michael C. Carlos Museum - Emory University (Atlanta), the Saint Louis Museum of Art, the 21C Museum (Louisville), the William Benton Museum of Art - University of Connecticut (Storrs) in the United States ; the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, the Fonds National d'Art Contemporain and the Agnès B. Collection (Paris) in France ; The Walther Collection (Neu-Ulm) in Germany; the Moderna Museet (Stockholm) in Sweden; the Douglas Hyde Gallery (Dublin) in Ireland; the Collection Nationale du Crédit Suisse (Geneva), the Contemporary African Art Collection – The Pigozzi Collection (Geneva) in Switzerland and the Musée National du Mali (Bamako) in Africa.

Paris Saint-Honoré

Valérie Belin
Modern Royals
24 March - 28 May 2022

Brook Andrew
24 May - 23 July 2022

Paris Cloître Saint-Merri

Youssef Nabil
Memory of a Happy Place
17 March - 8 May 2022

Shirley Jaffe
Hommage to Shirley Jaffe
17 May - 16 July 2022

Paris Cloître Saint-Merri - Espace II

Shahpour Pouyan
17 May - 16 July 2022

Brussels

Joris Van de Moortel
Foolhardy Boarding A Lost State of Mind
17 March - 1er May 2022

Guillaume Leblon
The Traveler Walking On Tiptoes
19 May - 9 July 2022

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