

**GALERIE NATHALIE OBADIA**

BRUSSELS

## SEYDOU KEÏTA

17 November - 14 January, 2016

Rue Charles Decoster 8 - 1050 Brussels



Seydou Keïta, *Sans titre*, 1956-1959. Posthumous Gelatin black and white silver print.  
Courtesy CAAC-The Pigozzi collection & Galerie Nathalie Obadia Paris /Bruxelles  
© Seydou Keïta / SKPEAC

Galerie Nathalie Obadia is delighted to present the first exhibition in Brussels by Seydou Keïta (c. 1921–2001), one of the great masters of 20th-century photography. This event was made possible by the support of the Contemporary African Art Collection (CAAC – The Pigozzi Collection), which has the mission of spreading awareness of contemporary African art. This organisation is directed by collector Jean Pigozzi and the exhibition organiser André Magnin, the assistant to curator Jean-Hubert Martin in 1989 of the “*Magiciens de la Terre*” exhibition at the Centre Pompidou, which revolutionised the world of contemporary art by opening it up for the first time to non-Western artists.

In 1991, Jean Pigozzi and André Magnin discovered the (uncredited) photographs of Seydou Keïta, who was then completely unknown outside sub-Saharan Africa, following their visit to the exhibition *Africa Explores, 20th Century African Art* at The Center for African Art in New York <sup>1</sup>. The two men headed the hunt to track down the author of the photographs. At Jean Pigozzi’s insistence, André Magnin headed for Mali, his first visit

# GALERIE NATHALIE OBADIA

BRUSSELS

to the country. His driver took him to the house of Malick Sidibé (Soloba, Mali 1935 – Bamako, Mali 2016), the best-known photographer in Bamako at the time. When he saw the reproduction of the portraits Magnin had brought with him, Sidibé unhesitatingly exclaimed “That’s by Keïta! He’s still there, in Bamako-Coura, behind the main prison”.

Having retired in 1977, Seydou Keïta, who was born in 1921, was taken completely by surprise when he saw someone had travelled so far on account of the beauty of his images thirty years after he had shut his studio. His meeting with André Magnin, and then with Jean Pigozzi, would lead three years later (in 1994) to the photographer’s first solo exhibition, at the Fondation Cartier in Paris (France). Until that time Keïta had only seen his works in the form of the contact prints he made from the negatives. He later admitted, “You cannot imagine how moved I was the first time I saw the prints made from my large format negatives – flawless, clean, perfect. It was then that I understood that my work was really, really good. The people in the photos seemed so alive. It was almost as if they were standing in front of me in flesh and blood”<sup>2</sup>.

This remark by the artist demonstrates his ability “to see and capture individuality”, as Robert Storr points out. In his essay on Keïta, titled *L’immortalité en un déclic*<sup>3</sup>, the art critic was alluding to the practice the photographer had laid down for himself from the very start of his career in 1948: a single shot for each of his individual or group portraits. This approach, which was partly the result of an attempt to curb costs (photographic paper was rare and expensive in Bamako in the 1950s), and partly of an innate sense of how to find the right pose and composition, quickly set Keïta apart from the other African photographers then practising in Mali.

Seydou Keïta explained the reason for his success with his clientele. According to him, “technically, photography is simple, but what made the difference was that I knew how to find the right position, I never got it wrong. The face just turned away, the gaze being really important, the placing and position of the hands... I could make anyone look better. In the end, the photos came out really well. That’s why I say that it’s art”<sup>4</sup>. Keïta explained that he always had to find new ideas to please knowledgeable clients as, at that time, having yourself photographed was still an important event in Mali, as in all of West Africa. Thanks to “innovations he introduced on the level of accessories, poses and materials, Keïta anticipated the wishes of his clients and allowed them to become what they wanted to be in front of a camera”<sup>5</sup>. The idea of being able to move above one’s social status through a photographic portrait was then very powerful. Keïta was one of the first to give expression to this aspiration by offering the use of accessories. For his photographs, clients could dress up from head to toe, make themselves elegant or dress in European style, something that really struck a chord with many men in Bamako. Women, on the other hand, though always stylish, more often stuck to their traditional sartorial styles. Were they perhaps demonstrating that they were the guardians of African traditions in the urban communities of Mali, even as great changes were taking place<sup>6</sup>?

In his studio, Seydou Keïta kept a whole range of objects that symbolised modern life: watches, pens, telephones, alarm clocks and other treasures that, when associated with the women’s make-up, were outward signs of prosperity, beauty or elegance. Some of his clients posed on a bicycle, a scooter or near a car – including those belonging to Keïta, which he had been able to buy from the proceeds of his studio – or with cars that were normally the prerogative of the Whites but which, for the time of a pose, allowed Africans to enjoy their privileges.

Music was another important “accessory” in Keïta’s photographs. It became blended into the portraits in the form of a radio set. The young clients who chose this symbol of the modern West were demonstrating to their entourage that they were informed about the latest events and musical trends.

Rhythm was made visible in another and unexpected manner with the use of patterned materials that bring life and vitality to the surface of the images. Seydou Keïta’s great innovation was to use rolls of material that he bought in Bamako, which he hung in front of the adobe wall in the courtyard of his studio. From 1948 to 1954 his fringed bedcover provided him with his first background. Later he used several fabrics, which he chose for the graphic power of their patterns and which he kept for between two and four years. It was these backgrounds that later allowed him to date his photographs. One of the best examples of this admirable use of fabrics is exhibited at the Galerie Nathalie Obadia in Brussels, in which two women seem to float in a “sea of geometric motifs”. According to Dan Leers, “this accumulation achieves two objectives: regarding the composition, it creates a dynamic that keeps the eye of the viewer in movement within the field of the image; regarding artistry, it adapts an already old European tradition to the reality of Mali”.<sup>7</sup>

# GALERIE NATHALIE OBADIA

BRUSSELS



Seydou Keïta, Sans titre, 1956-1959. Posthumous Gelatin black and white silver print.  
Courtesy CAAC-The Pigozzi collection & Galerie Nathalie Obadia Paris / Bruxelles  
© Seydou Keïta / SKPEAC

Although there are precedents of Keïta's technique in photography, there are some too in painting, for example, the Nabis. Vuillard in particular employed the superposition and blending of motifs and patterns in his paintings. However, it should be mentioned that any claim that Keïta's compositions or poses were borrowed from paintings, such as that of the odalisque, are all without foundation as Seydou Keïta has always stated that he never owned any book, or saw any photograph that could have influenced his art. The only external factors that contributed to his work were technical. The fact remains that his work is recognised as part of the history of photography in Mali and West Africa, where a wave of African studio photographers appeared at the end of World War II and lasted until the 1960s.

Seydou Keïta's legacy is immense and it continues to influence contemporary photography in Africa and elsewhere. His emulators include, among others, the American Mickalene Thomas (b. 1971, lives and works in New York), the Nigerian Njideka Akunyili Crosby (b. 1983, lives and works in Los Angeles), and the Senegalese Omar Victor Diop (b. in Dakar in 1980, lives and works in Paris). Like Keïta, they have adopted the inclusion of accessories and the superposition of motifs which are, in the words of Dan Leers, "the projection of an inner force". Continuing in the line of their elder, they in turn ask us "to look afresh at the importance of African culture"<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> *Africa Explores, 20th Century African Art*, The Center for African Art, New York, États-Unis, 11 May - 18 September 1991, art curator Susan Vogel.

<sup>2</sup> Michelle Lamuniere (dir.), *You Look Beautiful Like That : The Portrait Photographs of Seydou Keïta and Malick Sidibé*, exh. cat. The Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University Art Museums, Cambridge, United States, 1er September - 16 December 2001, p. 47.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Storr, « *L'immortalité en un déclic* », in *Seydou Keïta*, exh. cat. Galeries nationales du Grand Palais, Paris, France, 31 March - 11 July 2016, p. 32-39.

<sup>4</sup> « *Seydou Keïta, propos recueillis par André Magnin, Bamako, 1995-1996* », in *Seydou Keïta*, Ed. Scalo Zurich, Berlin, 1997.

<sup>5</sup> Dan Leers, « *Seydou Keïta, un innovateur qui a fait école* », in *Seydou Keïta*, exh. cat. Galeries nationales du Grand Palais, Paris, France, 31 March - 11 July 2016, p. 40-46.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Storr, « *L'immortalité en un déclic* », in *Seydou Keïta*, exh. cat. Galeries nationales du Grand Palais, Paris, France, 31 March - 11 July 2016, p. 37.

<sup>7</sup> Dan Leers, « *Seydou Keïta, un innovateur qui a fait école* », in *Seydou Keïta*, exh. cat. Galeries nationales du Grand Palais, Paris, France, 31 March - 11 July 2016, p. 45.

<sup>8</sup> Dan Leers, « *Seydou Keïta, un innovateur qui a fait école* », in *Seydou Keïta*, exh. cat. Galeries nationales du Grand Palais, Paris, France, 31 March - 11 July 2016, p. 40-46.

# GALERIE NATHALIE OBADIA

BRUSSELS

***Born in Bamako circa 1921, Seydou Keïta died in Paris in 2001.***

Seydou Keïta was born in 1921 in Bamako, the capital of Mali, which was then known as French Sudan. As he received no schooling, from the age of seven he became an apprentice joiner under his father and uncle. The latter offered him his first camera, a small Kodak Brownie. By 1939 Seydou Keïta was already earning a living for himself as a self-taught photographer and in 1948 he opened his first studio in Bamako. He specialised in commission portraiture, of individuals and groups, which he took for the most part using a large format camera, in black and white, and with a preference for natural lighting.

As a result of his ability to flatter his subjects, his masterful framing and use of light, and the modernity and inventiveness of his settings, Seydou Keïta very rapidly became known in Mali and many other West African countries. In 1962, two years before the Republic of Sudan gained its independence, and at the demand of the authorities, he closed his studio to become the government's official photographer until he retired in 1977.

His private work, which thus covers a fairly short period (1948-1960), offers an unmatched account of the changes taking place in Malian urban society, which shrugged off its traditional values and aspired to a certain modernity during the process of decolonisation and approach of independence.

From 1991, the year he met André Magnin and Jean Pigozzi, who both contributed to the international recognition of contemporary African art, the photographs of Seydou Keïta have been seen right around the world. In 1994 the Fondation Cartier (Paris, France) was the first Western institution to give Keïta a solo exhibition. Since then a great many such shows have been dedicated to his work in leading international venues. For example, his first solo exhibition in the United States, in 1996, *Seydou Keïta, Photographer: Portraits from Bamako*, was held at the National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institute in Washington, D.C., and *In/Sight: African Photographers, 1940 to the Present* at the Guggenheim Museum in New York (USA); in 1995, *Big City Artists from Africa* was held at the Serpentine Gallery in London (UK).

When Seydou Keïta died in Paris in 2001 he enjoyed unparalleled success for a 20th-century artist from Africa. And his images have continued to receive international attention since the exhibition directed by Michelle Lamunier, *You Look Beautiful Like That: The Portrait Photographs of Seydou Keïta and Malick Sidibé*, which was presented between 2001 and 2003 in the USA at the Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University Art Museums in Cambridge (Mass.), at the UCLA Hammer Museum in Los Angeles (Cal.), at Museum of Art in Miami (Flo.), and at the Williams College Museum of Art in Williamstown (Mass.), following which it moved to the National Portrait Gallery in London (UK). Important exhibitions of contemporary African art have also paid tribute to this Malian photographer since the early 2000s, with *African Art Now* at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston (USA) in 2005; *100% Africa* at the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao (Spain) in 2006; and *Why Africa?* at the Giovanni e Marella Agnelli Pinacoteca in Turin (Italy) in 2007.

In 2008, Tate Modern in London gave Keïta his first solo exhibition in the UK. In 2016 two noteworthy exhibitions have presented Seydou Keïta's work: *In and Out of the Studio: Photographic Portraits from West Africa* at the Metropolitan Museum in New York (USA); and *Après Eden* at the Maison Rouge in Paris (France), the latter of which presented the remarkable collection of the German Artur Walther. The same year, the Galeries nationales du Grand Palais in Paris gave Seydou Keïta his first retrospective in France.

*The works of Seydou Keïta are held in important international public collections, in the United States by the Eileen Harris and Peter Norton Collection (Santa Monica), the MoMA (Museum of Modern Art), the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Bronx Museum of Art in New York, the LACMA (Los Angeles County Art Museum), the Detroit Institute of Arts Museum (Detroit), the Philadelphia Museum of Art (Philadelphia), the State Art Collection (Washington, D.C.), 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 (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 and the 21C Museum in Louisville, the William Benton Museum of Art – University of Connecticut (Storrs); in France, the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, the Fonds National d'Art Contemporain, and the Collection Agnès B. in Paris; in Germany, The Walther Collection (Neu-Ulm); in Sweden, the Moderna Museet (Stockholm), in Ireland, the Douglas Hyde Gallery (Dublin); in Switzerland, the Collection nationale du Crédit Suisse and the Contemporary African Art Collection – The Pigozzi Collection (Geneva); in Africa, the Musée National du Mali in Bamako.*

# GALERIE NATHALIE OBADIA

BRUSSELS

---

For further information, please contact **Constance Dumas**

constance@nathalieobadia.com — + 32 (0)2 648 14 05

---

**Galerie Nathalie Obadia**  
**Bruxelles**

**Seidou Keïta**

17 November - 14 January, 2017

**Brook Andrew**

2 February - 18 March, 2017

**Brenna Youngblood**

13 April - 20 May, 2017

**Galerie Nathalie Obadia**  
**Paris**

Cloître Saint-Merri

**Group Show**

*Photographies*

10 November - 30 December, 2016

**Sophie Kuijken**

7 January - 11 March, 2017

**Jean Dubuffet et Fabrice Hyber**

May - July, 2017

**Galerie Nathalie Obadia**  
**Paris**

Bourg-Tibourg

**Andres Serrano**

*Torture*

10 November - 30 December, 2016

**Ricardo Brey**

*All that is could be otherwise*

7 January - 25 February, 2017

**Shahpour Pouyan**

March - May 2017

**Jean Dubuffet et Fabrice Hyber**

May - July, 2017