

Rotimi Fani-Kayode Nothing to Lose



Rotimi Fani-Kayode: Untitled, 1987-1988
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The Walther Collection presents **Rotimi Fani-Kayode: Nothing to Lose**, the first solo exhibition in New York of photographs by the British-Nigerian artist, featuring large-scale color and black-and-white portraits from the late 1980s. Fani-Kayode's images interpret and reveal sexuality across racial and cultural differences, vividly merging his fascination with Yoruba "techniques of ecstasy" and homoerotic self-expression through symbolic gestures, ritualistic poses, and elaborate decoration. The exhibition, on view at The Walther Collection Project Space from **March 23 through July 28, 2012**, will focus on the influences of exile, religion, sexuality, and death on the artist's last works.

As a Nigerian-born photographer who lived and worked in the U.K., Fani-Kayode was active in the gay political response to the HIV/AIDS crisis, and was a leading voice among black British artists during the flourishing queer culture of the late 1980s. Influenced by his experience as an African exile in Europe and his spiritual heritage—his family were keepers of the shrine of Yoruba deities in Ife, Nigeria—Fani-Kayode staged and photographed performances in his studio in which the black male body served as a means of expressing the boundaries between spiritual and erotic fantasy.

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Like his contemporaries Derek Jarman and David Wojnarowicz, Fani-Kayode positioned his photography as a public and political act, even while he broke with the predominant approach of documentary realism practiced by many black and African Diaspora artists. For Fani-Kayode, the imaginative space of the studio allowed him to create new icons whose sexuality and keen sense of mortality offered a vision of the black body outside of common Western perceptions.

“On three counts I am an outsider: in matters of sexuality, in terms of geographical and cultural dislocation; and in the sense of not having become the sort of respectably married professional my parents might have hoped for,” Fani-Kayode said. “Such a position gives me the feeling of having very little to lose.”

The photographs on view at the Walther Collection Project Space represent key works from the series “Nothing to Lose,” commissioned as part of the 1989 group exhibition *Bodies of Experience: Stories About Living with HIV*, which feature primarily portraits and self-portraiture; and from the series “Ecstatic Antibodies,” included in the 1990 group exhibition *Ecstatic Antibodies: Resisting the AIDS Mythology*, which display transformations of the body through the use of masking. In addition, a selection of other black-and-white and color photographs, produced between 1987 and 1989, will also be on view. These highly personal images illuminate the various combinations of Western and African forms in Fani-Kayode’s late works and highlight his desire to give artistic voice to marginalized social groups.

Rotimi Fani-Kayode (1955-1989) was born in Nigeria to a prominent Yoruba family, who fled to the U.K. as political refugees in 1966. He received a B.A. at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., in 1980, and an M.F.A. at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn in 1983, before returning to the U.K, where he lived and worked until his early death at the age of 34. Fani-Kayode was the founding member and first chairman of Autograph ABP (Association of Black Photographers) in 1988. His photographs have been exhibited internationally since 1995, including retrospectives presented by Autograph ABP at the W.E.B. Du Bois Institute at Harvard University in 2009 and Rivington Place, London, in 2011. Many of his photographs were created in collaboration with his late partner Alex Hirst, collected in the posthumous 1996 publication *Rotimi Fani-Kayode and Alex Hirst: Photographs*.

About the Walther Family Foundation

The Walther Family Foundation is a private nonprofit organization dedicated to researching, collecting, exhibiting, and publishing modern and contemporary photography and video art. Founded in the traditions of European and American photography, the collection has expanded to incorporate works across regions, periods, and artistic sensibilities, giving particular focus to artists and photographers working in Africa and Asia. Through its in-depth exhibitions and vigorous publishing program, the Foundation showcases photography and video that advances the history and understanding of the medium. The Foundation has two exhibition spaces: the Walther Collection in Neu-Ulm/Burlafingen, Germany, and the Walther Collection Project Space in New York City. www.walthercollection.com

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