

Samuel Fosso



Samuel Fosso, *African Spirits*, 2008
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Opening Reception: Thursday, September 11, 2014 from 6pm-8pm
On View: September 12, 2014 – January 17, 2015

The Walther Collection is pleased to present a survey of photography by Samuel Fosso (b. 1962, Cameroon), one of the most renowned contemporary artists working in Africa. Since the mid-1970s, Fosso has focused on self-portraiture by transforming his body through performance, envisioning variations on African identity in the postcolonial era. His early experimental works and later series create a new imagery opposed to both the ethnographic visions of Africa and the commercial imperatives of studio portraiture. For the first time in the United States, this exhibition brings together Fosso's work from The Walther Collection, including vintage self-portraits and studio prints with new and recent photographs, featuring selections from his magisterial series *African Spirits* and *The Emperor of Africa*.

Samuel Fosso's photography has consistently reflected upon and commemorated themes in global visual culture. In 1975, at the precocious age of thirteen, Fosso opened his own studio in Bangui, the capital of the Central African Republic. During the day, he took pictures for paying clients, but at night he turned the camera on himself. Fosso's expressive black-and-white self-portraits from the 1970s make reference to popular West African culture — musicians, the latest

youth fashions, and political advertising — constituting a sustained and unprecedented photographic project that explores sexuality, gender, and African self-representation.

In *Tati* (1997), his colorful series commissioned by the Paris department store Tati, Fosso assumes such characters as the tribal chief, the golf player, and the “liberated” African American woman, embarking on a signature masquerade style. *Tati* shows Fosso’s impulse for satire. Fosso transforms his body, posing against inventive backdrops and donning elaborate costumes. The centerpiece of the *Tati* series, “Le chef qui a vendu l’Afrique aux colons,” is both an homage to African tribal leadership and a critique of the trappings of power in the age of European colonialism.

The pantheon of African Independence and Civil Rights icons forms the subject of *African Spirits* (2008), in which Fosso embodies historical figures from Angela Davis to Patrice Lumumba, Halie Salassie to Martin Luther King, Jr. In *African Spirits*, Fosso extends the method of his first self-portraits by reenacting historical images drawn from magazines and newspapers. These large-scale, highly theatrical, and often uncanny impersonations not only honor the figures who fought for Civil Rights and postcolonial freedom, but also display how their mastery of self-styling for the media helped to shape and enforce political ideals.

Fosso’s photo essays about memory and ritual include an elegiac black-and-white reflection on the violent death of a neighbor, *Mémoire d’un ami* (2000), as well as *Le rêve de mon Grand Père* (2003), in which Fosso performs the role of his grandfather, a traditional healer. Fosso’s most recent series, *The Emperor of Africa* (2013), extends his protean visions of political representation and cultural identity by reenacting the iconography of Mao Zedong.

Together, Fosso’s images provide a vivid departure from the traditions of West African studio photography, established in the 1950s and 1960s by Seydou Keïta and Malick Sidibé, and broaden the conceptual practice of self-portraiture.

Samuel Fosso was born in 1962 in Cameroon. Fosso’s self-portraits have been featured in seminal exhibitions including *In/sight: African Photographers, 1940 to the Present*, *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1945-1994*, *Africa Remix: Contemporary Art of a Continent*, and *Events of the Self: Portraiture and Social Identity—Photography from The Walther Collection*. Fosso lives and works in Bangui and Paris.

The Walther Collection is a private non-profit foundation dedicated to researching, collecting, exhibiting, and publishing modern and contemporary photography and video art. Based in Neu-Ulm, Germany and New York, the collection is engaged in a multi-year examination of African photography and video through the themes of portraiture, landscape, and the historic archive. A three-volume boxed-set of the collection’s exhibition catalogues, *African Photography from The Walther Collection*, is co-published by Steidl and available in a special limited edition. The collection’s monograph series includes Santu Mofokeng’s *The Black Photo Album*, Martina Bacigalupo’s *Gulu Real Art Studio*, Mikhael Subotzky and Patrick Waterhouse’s *Ponte City*, and Zanele Muholi’s *Faces and Phases: 2006-2014*. The current exhibition, *Typology, Taxonomy and Seriality: Photography from The Walther Collection*, is on view through September 21, 2014 at Les Rencontres d’Arles in Arles, France.

The Walther Collection Project Space is located at 526 West 26th Street, Suite 718, and is open to the public Wednesday through Saturday from 12pm to 6pm. For further information, call +1 212 352 0683 or email brendan@walthercollection.com.