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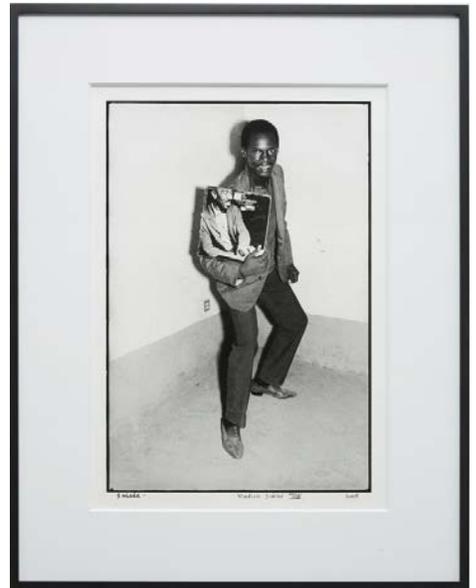
Malick Sidibe at Jack Shainman Gallery

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By Lia Wilson

The photographs of Malick Sidibé remind us how the political content of an image can shift and evolve under the unpredictable influences of time and the arrival of new contexts. Currently on view at Jack Shainman Gallery, Sidibé's work is a mix of black-and-white portraits and candid shots of local people from his native Bamako, Mali. The artist first began his work in photography by assisting a French colonial photographer and then later opened his own studio, Studio Malick, in 1962 in Bamako. Mali gained liberation from France in 1960, and Sidibé's photographs taken throughout the '60s and '70s document a community of young Bamakois during this postcolonial transition and the subsequent socialist and military regimes.

In a brief documentary directed by Douglas Sloan, Sidibé stated he was most interested in letting people enjoy themselves and in making his subjects happy.[1] At the time, he didn't consider his portraiture as art, but rather as a service: providing people with striking, beautiful pictures of themselves. Some of the portraits shown in Jack Shainman are hung in hand-painted, colorful frames made by Checkna Toure, an artisan who had a studio around the corner from Studio Malick. This framing grants its photograph a status of distinct object rather than an endlessly reproducible image, and serves as a reminder that the initial prints were meant as keepsakes and items of proud display by the subjects themselves.



Malick Sidibé. Soiree, 1972/2008; silver gelatin print. Courtesy of the Artist and Jack Shainman Gallery

The dress of Sidibé's young subjects ranges from traditional, formal Malian fabrics to Western suits, dresses, and bell-bottoms. Immediately evident in all of these images is the excitement and exuberance of this new mixing of styles. The influx of Western popular culture into a newly independent Mali allowed young Malians to feel more connected to a global youth culture of the '60s that was challenging traditions and seeking greater freedoms. Many of Sidibé's more candid shots were taken at parties and celebrations that occurred behind closed doors and past the curfew that had been instituted by the new socialist government. Young couples dance closely and wildly and hold up rock-and-roll and soul albums for the camera. We see people seized by music, alive in moments of joyous rebellion.

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Malick Sidibé. *Regardez-Moi*, 1962/2007; silver gelatin print.
Courtesy of the Artist and Jack Shainman Gallery

Mali has a long, rich musical heritage fundamental to its culture. Traditional Malian musicians were considered the “keepers of memory,” responsible for passing stories down through the generations. The country today is internationally renowned for its musical production, an expansive flowering of which began during the era Sidibé was documenting. His photographs take on still greater potency in the wake of 2013, when Islamic militants attempted to ban music in northern Mali altogether.[2] Live-music venues were shut down, local musicians thrown into exile, and instruments set afire. The world-famous Festival in the Desert was moved to Burkina Faso and then postponed altogether because of security risk. French and Malian forces disarmed the militants early in 2013, but the northern region remains contentious territory. While there are many theories on the motivations behind the attempted music ban, the endeavor itself underscores the threat that music and art can pose to political extremism. The stolen freedoms archived in Sidibé’s work become all the more precious in a time when this freedom has been imperiled. In addition to recording a specific moment in which a globalized Malian youth culture came into being, the images become testament to the centrality and sacredness of music in Malian society.

In the 1990s, a surge of European and American collectors, curators, and dealers took notice of African photographers of the mid-20th century, including Malick Sidibé and his fellow Malian photographer Seydou Keita. Suddenly Sidibé’s prints were being widely exhibited in Western galleries for a Western audience, elevating the photographer to the status of an international art star. Currently Sidibé and Keita are also included in the exhibition *Draped Down*, on view at the Studio Museum of Harlem. The exhibition claims to explore explicit and implicit references to fashion in the visual arts, and takes its name from a Harlem Renaissance-era term for emphatic self-fashioning[3]. Also included in *Draped Down* are two photographs by James Van Der Zee, the iconic portrait photographer of the Harlem Renaissance who was largely responsible for visualizing the emergent African American middle class of the ’20s and ’30s to the rest of the world. Putting Sidibé’s imagery in dialogue with Van Der Zee’s makes for a provocative conversation. The similarities that surface between these bodies of work are less about photographic form or technique and more about the attitudes they capture and convey; these are images that chronicle a flourishing of human hope, ambition, and new-found opportunity. The photographs of Malick Sidibé epitomize the inexhaustibility of meaning possible within an image. Their unassuming original intentions afforded them the unaffected nature that ultimately allows for their endurance and autonomy—as both specific cultural record and universal touchstone.

Malick Sidibé will be on view at Jack Shainman Gallery through April 26th, 2014.