

M+B



When Ofili Met Sidibé: Behind The Scenes in Mali

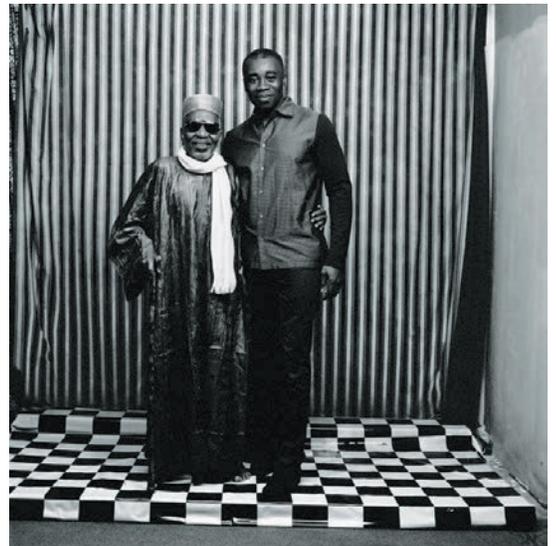
By Siobhan Bohnacker
September 29, 2014

In this week's issue of the magazine, Calvin Tomkins profiles the British painter Chris Ofili. Knowing of Ofili's admiration for the Malian photographer Malick Sidibé, we arranged for Sidibé to take a portrait to accompany Tomkins's piece.

The photographer Jihad Nga, a regular contributor to the magazine and a friend of the Sidibé family, joined Ofili for the portrait sitting. Here, he shares his account of the photo shoot.

—Siobhán Bohnacker

A visit to Malick Sidibé's house, in the heart of Bamako, Mali's capital, is a family affair. Sidibé is always flanked by his sons, his brother, and at least one of three wives. At seventy-eight, Sidibé is only able to stand for a few seconds at a time. One of his sons usually stands at the ready, should he decide stretch his legs. Now, when he takes a portrait, the shoot tends to be limited to one or two frames.



PHOTOGRAPH BY KAREEM SIDIBÉ

Knowing that Chris Ofili had travelled from Trinidad, I wanted to devise a way for one or two frames to become one or two rolls, at least, provided Sidibé felt up to it. The biggest variable would be the weather. In the rainy season in Mali, the mornings are pleasant and cool, but around noon the heat begins to take hold. With one of Sidibé's sons, I decided to get as early a start as possible, to increase Sidibé's chances of being able to work without getting tired. The last time I visited Sidibé was in July, and he spent most of the visit lying on a mattress, being fanned by his younger brother.

The next morning, when Ofili and I went to pick up Sidibé at his house, luck appeared to be on our side: the weather was cool, and Sidibé was ready to leave. When we arrived at the studio, and I pulled out fifteen rolls of film, Sidibé's son Kareem's expression was one of shock. He had expected that, as usual, his father would shoot only one or two frames. I didn't want to make any demands, so I just kept passing Kareem rolls, and as Sidibé seemed to be having a good time he continued loading them.

M+B



A pile of Malick Sidibé's photo proofs, known as chemises.



Sidibé is assisted by his son Kareem during the shoot.
Photography by Jihad NGA.

During the shoot, Kareem was by his father's side at all times. Sidibé would remain seated while Kareem loaded the film, composed the shot, focussed the lens, and checked the shutter. It wasn't until the last moment, when Ofili was in a pose that Sidibé liked, that Sidibé would stand, assisted by Kareem, and fire a single frame. Then he would return to his chair to rest while throwing out pose suggestions for Ofili. Many of these poses were unnatural to begin with, but Ofili's nervousness in Sidibé's presence made them look almost bizarre. I took the moments between shots to speak privately with Ofili and try to help him relax.

Despite the studio's small size, five of us stood behind Sidibé, watching the shoot. This turned into five directors giving five different sets of suggestions to Ofili, which at times became confusing to him and overwhelming to all of us. Meanwhile, the temperature in the studio was rising by the minute, not only because of the heat outside but also because of the enormous light bulbs Sidibé uses instead of flash. We switched the bulbs off and on between each shot, owing to their heat and the power they draw.

Two hours later, Kareem announced that the fifteen rolls were finished. I had the feeling that, with more rolls, Sidibé would have gladly kept shooting, but as it was he retired to the porch to visit with some friends.