

LEILA HELLER GALLERY.

Yusuf, Muhammad. "Social safari." *The Gulf Today* (Month Date, Year).

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Leila Heller Gallery, Dubai, is currently (Jun. 22 – Sept. 1) presenting an exhibition of Malian photographer Seydou Keita, drawn from a selection of his black and white portraits of the residents of Bamako, Mali, from 1948 to 1960.

Originally executed by private commission and produced on an intimate scale — prêt-à-porter for his clients — these monumental renderings of the graphically stunning and psychologically engaging images of mid-century men and women presenting themselves before the camera reveal, according to Okwui Enwezor (Nigerian curator, art critic, writer, poet and educator), the emergence of “subjectivities and desires in a modern and modernising Africa”.

Although extant on the African continent from 1840, it was not until the early 20th century that the camera was made widely available by the technological revolution of the Kodak ‘brownie’ camera - which found its way into the hands of a young Keita in Bamako.

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He soon began professionally practicing photography and opened his own studio in 1948, when photography in West Africa, formerly under the strict cultural policies of direct French rule, became a vehicle for self-definition of a new, and distinctly modern, African subject.

Keita's images portray individuals outwardly displaying their own signs of class or self-identification, staring directly at the camera, on equal footing with the photographer, returning the gaze.

These photographs, as Enwezor notes, "do not only render reality; they penetrate ... it. These portraits are archetypes, models for the way their sitters wanted to appear. Their portrait is, therefore, the outcome of an elaborate constitutive process" — the constitution, that is, of a progressive, contemporary subjectivity — and thus society — in a time of social revolution in the transition towards postcolonial governance across the African continent.

Six works in the exhibition, (Untitled, 1948-1954), share the same textile background and frame the sitter to reveal a rich variety of expressions. Whether it is a father sitting with his child to express a sense of pride in his new family, or a reticent woman with her arms clasped together looking off towards the future or four women sitting together having tea, Keita develops a rich aesthetic vocabulary through his portraits staged against painted backdrops juxtaposing fabrics with signifiers of modern identity.

In a documentary by Brigitte Conrad made in 1998, just three years before Keita's passing, he also alludes to the ways in which photography were influencing a specifically modern Muslim identity.

He notes: "Because at that time, our great persona did not want to be photographed. Religion had forbidden it then. They said a

Muslim should not make photos. But young people would not listen to this. They wanted to be photographed".

Yet at the same time, the style of dress, the head wear, the prayer beads, and much of the physical content of these photographs, references the meeting of Malian tradition and religion with an encroaching contemporary world view.

Keita's portraits silently capture this transition and forging of identity that was taking place across the African continent in the mid twentieth century. His archives of over 10,000 negatives were brought to light in the early 1990s and he has since received significant international recognition for his innovative and modern images.

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His emphasis on the essential components of portrait photography — light, subject, framing — firmly establish him amongst the twentieth century masters of the genre. Keita collector Jean Pigozzi goes as far as to say that he believes that

Keita “should be considered one of the greatest portrait photographers of the 20th century; on the same level as Richard Avedon, Irving Penn and August Sander”.

Born in Bamako, which was at the time the capital of the French colony of Sudan, Keita (1921-2001) was the eldest of five children. Tracing his ancestry to the Soundyata Keita clan which founded the Mali Empire, he is a descendant of the Muslim Keita Dynasty that ruled from the 12th century to the early 17th century.

The young Keita opened a studio in 1948, and would briefly serve as the official photographer of the new Malian government, and later in his career, as a fashion photographer for ‘Harper’s Bazaar’.

In 1994, André Magnin organised the first solo exhibition of his modern prints at the Cartier Foundation in Paris. This exhibition marked the beginning of the global discovery of his work.

In 1997, a large monograph on his work was published with Scalo editions in Zurich. Among the exhibitions devoted to Keita’s work are those mounted by the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC (1996), the Guggenheim Museum (1996) and

the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (1997), Gagosian Gallery (1997), São Paulo Biennale (1998), Kunsthalles Wien (2001), the Museum of Fine Art Houston (2005), Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao, Spain (2006), Gallery Fifty One, Belgium (2011), Grand Palais (2016).

The exhibition at Leila Heller Gallery, Dubai, is the photographer’s first in the region, significant in introducing his work to an audience with a shared Islamic heritage and history. Since its establishment over three decades ago in New York, the gallery has gained worldwide recognition as a pioneer in promoting creative dialogue and exchange between Western artists and Middle Eastern, Central and Southeast Asian artists.

It has earned a reputation for identifying and cultivating the careers of artists leaving a lasting impact on contemporary art and culture. Currently representing a diverse roster of Western and Middle Eastern artists, it is also active in the American, European and Middle Eastern secondary art markets.

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In 2015, it opened its first international location in Dubai's Alserkal Avenue. At 14,000 square feet, it features three exhibition spaces, making it the largest gallery in the UAE.

Showcasing leading regional and international artists, many of whom present their work in the Middle East for the first time, it is dedicated to supporting the evolving practice of established artists.

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