

LEILA HELLER GALLERY.

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Portraits of a nation in transition

Fifteen years after his death, Seydou Keita's work is being showcased for the first time in the UAE in an exhibition by Leila Heller gallery



Untitled, gelatin silver print, 1952-1955

In 1991, Jean Pigozzi, well-known photographer and collector of contemporary African art, visited a small exhibition of African art in New York. He was so impressed by the beauty and originality of two portraits by an anonymous photographer from Mali that he asked his curator, André Magnin, to travel to Mali and find the photographer.

Magnin's search led him to 70-year-old Seydou Keita, who once ran a photography studio in Bamako. When Keita showed Magnin the negatives of the more than 10,000 portraits he had taken in his studio between 1948 and 1962, the famous curator was so impressed that he and Pigozzi began working with the photographer to restore his negatives, started publishing books of his photographs and organising shows of his work in museums around the world. This is how an unknown, self-taught, photographer from Mali became recognised in the art world as a master of portrait photography.

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Untitled, gelatin silver print, 1954-1960 Seydou Keïta/SKPEAC

Fifteen years after his death, Keïta's work is being showcased for the first time in the UAE at an exhibition organised by Leila Heller gallery. On display are monumental renderings of a selection of his black and white portraits of the residents of Bamako taken in his studio between 1948 and 1962. They are images of ordinary people — a proud father posing with his baby on his lap; children smiling shyly into the camera; young men and women trying their best to look stylish and modern; older people in traditional attire and traditional settings, and young couples who look very much in love.

Keïta's skill as a portrait photographer is evident in the way he staged the portraits, captured the light, posed his subjects and framed the images. He used traditional African textiles in the background that complement the bright printed dresses worn by the women, or contrast dramatically with the Western suits worn by the young men. He provided his sitters with Western clothes and accessories such as sunglasses, handbags and hats, and props such as a radio, or a car to fulfil their desire to appear modern. It is also interesting to know that Keïta took just one photograph of each sitter.

His photographs are visually stunning and psychologically engaging. But these images of ordinary Malians who wanted their photographs taken are significant not just because of their high artistic quality, but also because they tell us a lot about the changes that were taking place in urban Malian society in the mid-20th century when Mali was transitioning from a cosmopolitan French colony to an independent country.

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The fact that youngsters were defying their Islamic tradition, which forbade people from having their photographs taken, is a sign of the mood of a new generation in search of its identity. Yet, their attire, their headgear, and other traditional elements speak about the blending of Malian tradition and culture with a contemporary world view, silently capturing the forging of a modern African identity across the continent.

Keïta was born in 1921 in Bamako, which was then the capital of the French colony of Sudan. His ancestors belonged to the Soundyata Keïta clan, founder of the Mali empire in the 13th century, and the Toure family, one of the three founding families of the city of Bamako. The Muslim Keïta Dynasty, which ruled in Mali from the 12th century to the early 17th century, is believed to have descended from Bilal Keïta, a freed slave who embraced Islam and became one of the Sahabas of the Prophet (PBUH), and was the first muezzin in Islam.

Keïta never went to school, and became an apprentice to his carpenter father and uncle at the age of seven. His fascination with photography began in 1935 when his uncle returned from a trip to Senegal with a Kodak Brownie camera. Keïta convinced his uncle to give him the camera and began taking pictures of his family and the apprentices in the carpentry shop.

He started working as a professional photographer in 1939, taking pictures on the streets or at the homes of clients, while continuing his job as a carpenter. Apart from getting a few technical tips from some photographers in Bamako, Keïta was self-taught and had never even seen any books on photography. He opened his studio in 1948 in a space offered by his father, and soon it became the most famous photo studio in Bamako, bringing in clients from all walks of life, and even from neighbouring countries. After Mali became independent in 1960, Keïta was appointed the official government photographer. He closed his studio in 1962 and spent the next 14 years covering formal events, visits by heads of state and other state functions; but those images are not accessible and have perhaps been destroyed.

After he retired in 1977, Keïta focused on his passion for mechanics by repairing moped engines and photographic equipment, which is what he was doing when Magnin found him in 1990. After this meeting his life changed. He travelled to Paris, New York and other cities around the world to attend his exhibitions, got acquainted with famous photographers and their work, and even worked as a fashion photographer for “Harper’s Bazaar” magazine. When Keïta saw his pictures printed in large format for the first time, he was amazed. “You cannot imagine what it was like for me to see those clean, large-scale prints of my negatives. I knew then that my work was really good because the people in my pictures looked so alive, almost as if they were standing in front of me,” he said.

Although he never went back to studio photography, in 1998, Keïta did a demonstration of his way of taking portraits for a documentary and a photoshoot organised by “Harper’s Bazaar”. He worked in an open air studio, using colourful African fabrics in the background, carefully adjusting the poses of his models and their dresses, just as he had done in his studio four decades ago.

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Keïta passed away in Paris in 2001, but his portraits of a nation and a traditional Muslim society in transition continue to be exhibited and admired around the world. Jyoti Kalsi is an arts-enthusiast based in Dubai.

“Seydou Keïta” will run at Leila Heller Gallery in Alserkal Avenue, Al Quoz until September 1.