

FRIEZE

Samuel Fosso is ‘The Man with a Thousand Faces’

The artist’s large-scale exhibition at the Walther Collection, Ulm, displays his skill for impersonation and adds depth to the genre of self-portraiture

By Eric Otieno Sumba in EU Reviews, Exhibition Reviews | 12 August 2022



The title of Samuel Fosso’s travelling retrospective, ‘The Man with a Thousand Faces’, has more basis in fact than viewers might initially expect. The Cameroonian-born, Nigerian artist’s monumental series ‘SIXSIXSIX’ comprises no less than 666 Polaroid self-portraits taken in his Paris studio between October and November 2015. Exhibited at The Walther Collection as a video slideshow, the series disrupts the mundane archetype of ID-style photographs through subtle changes of expression in each frame. The vast range of emotion on display, indicative of a life marked by death and disruption, renders this work a fitting – even necessary – introduction to Fosso’s five-decade career.



Samuel Fosso, ‘The Man with a Thousand Faces’, 2022, installation view, The Walther Collection, Neu-Ulm. Courtesy: the artist and The Walther Collection, Neu-Ulm

A pronounced self-reliance is evident in Fosso’s early self-portrait series ‘70’s Lifestyle’ (1975–78), which was shot entirely at the Bangui-based studio he opened aged just 13 after the deaths of both his mother and,

subsequently, his grandfather compelled him to move to the Central African Republic, where he worked with his uncle as a shoemaker before discovering photography. Fosso worked on commercial projects at Studio Photo National by day – a selection of his traditional family portraits is also on display – and posed in front of his own camera by night, mastering the styling, scenography, lighting and composition needed to create vivid black and white portraits inspired by imported pop-culture magazines. In one of the images, he poses with palpable pride in front of his aptly renamed Studio Photo Genteel, from which he worked commercially in Bangui for the next decade.

Impersonation, enactment and allusion are stylistic devices employed across the exhibition, which features about 130 individual works from nine series. Despite vast thematic differences, the projects cohere neatly. For instance, ‘Emperor of Africa’ (2013) – in which Fosso, referencing the fraught relations between China and a number of African nations over the last two



Samuel Fosso, ‘70s Lifestyle’, 1977, photograph. Courtesy: the artist



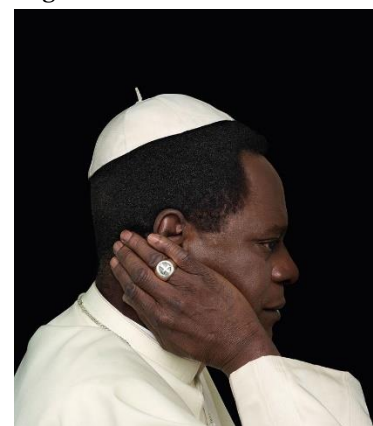
Samuel Fosso, ‘The Man with a Thousand Faces’, 2022, installation view, The Walther Collection, Neu-Ulm. Courtesy: the artist and The Walther Collection, Neu-Ulm

stands at the window, utterly vulnerable, a tiny towel tied around his waist, looking into a hand-held mirror that reflects his horrified gaze as the immensity of the tragedy dawns on him.

In stark contrast, one of the three images exhibited from the series ‘Black Pope’ (2017) shows Fosso dressed as pontiff in full profile, his right arm raised in divine sanction. His cassock was tailored by Gammarelli, the pope’s official tailor, who, according to the artist, agreed to embroider ‘Black Pope’ inside the gown and shoes. Fosso’s pontiff stands on a meteorite, in an allusion to Maurizio Cattelan’s *La Nona Ora* (The Ninth Hour, 1999), a hyper-realistic sculpture of Pope John Paul II after being struck down by an asteroid. Rather than invoking Cattelan to depict his own version of an antipope, however, Fosso, who describes himself as religious, told me at the exhibition opening that he would welcome the election of a Black pope in his lifetime. Here, as in many of his meticulous compositions, the personal and political intersect. Adding incredible contextual and technical depth to the genre of self-portraiture, Fosso’s *oeuvre* bears witness not only to larger post-colonial histories but to the remarkable story of his own life.

decades, impersonates former chairman Mao Zedong – comfortably shares space with his portrayals of West African Tirailleurs who fought for France in both World Wars (‘ALLONZENFANS’, 2013). While the performative aspect of the artist’s work often predominates, Fosso’s figures also convey a documentary intention that bears witness to the public – and private – repercussions of migration, geopolitics and war.

With the series ‘Memoire d’un Ami’ (Memory of a Friend, 2000), Fosso returns to a recurring motif in his life: grief. The photographs re-enact the night in June 1997 when his neighbour, Tala, was murdered by police in Bangui. Woken by the commotion, Fosso rushed to see what was happening, only to realize he was naked. In one image, he



Samuel Fosso, ‘Black Pope’, 2017, photograph. Courtesy: the artist