

# The New York Times

## In Samuel Fosso's Photos, 'You Can See Evil, You Can See God'

The photographer's studio was destroyed during the civil war in the Central African Republic. But he built a new life in Paris, and his works are now in the collections of the world's great museums.

By Scott Reyburn | June 1, 2023



*Samuel Fosso at his exhibition "Tati 1997" at Galerie Christophe Person in Paris. Although Fosso's works are in the MoMA and Pompidou collections, "Tati 1997" is his first major solo show in a commercial gallery.*

In February, 2014, in the war-torn Central African Republic, Christian fighters were rampaging through a predominantly Muslim district in the capital, Bangui. The renowned Cameroonian-born portrait photographer Samuel Fosso had already fled. While looters stripped the corrugated iron roof off Fosso's vacated studio, three men tried to save his abandoned archive.

"It was very chaotic," said one of them, Peter Bouckaert, a Belgian environmental activist who was working for Human Rights Watch at the time. "I remember going up to a bunch of guys to tell them to go away, and then seeing one had grenades in his hand. So I decided to leave them alone."

During the previous day of mayhem in the city, Jerome Delay, a French-born photographer working for The Associated Press, had recognized some prints from Fosso's 2008 "Africa Spirits" series, in which the artist portrays himself as Malcolm X, Angela Davis, Muhammad Ali and other inspirational figures of African heritage, scattered in the dirt. "He showed them to us and then we decided to go back the next day to recover what we could," said Bouckaert.



Contact sheets and prints salvaged from Fosso's studio after it was looted during sectarian violence in Bangui, Central African Republic, in 2014.

Thanks to their efforts, Fosso's collection of tens of thousands of negatives, documenting his career as a black-and-white studio photographer in the Central African Republic since the 1970s, was returned to the artist in Paris, where he has made a home in exile.

"They sent me the negatives. But I lost everything. It cost me a lot," said Fosso, 60, in an interview at the Galerie Christophe Person in Paris, which is holding the first major solo show of the artist's work in a commercial gallery, through June 17.

"In Paris, I had depression," said Fosso, referring to the effect of learning that his studio, if not most of his archive, had been destroyed. "I wanted to kill myself."

Fosso already had an international profile at the time, since his work was featured in the influential exhibition "Africa Remix: Contemporary Art of a Continent," which opened in 2004 and toured to Düsseldorf, Paris, Tokyo and other major art cities. His mordant self-portrait, "The Chief Who Sold Africa to the Colonists," showing him enthroned as a tribal leader in gold jewelry and leopard skins holding a bunch of sunflowers, was on the front of the exhibition catalog for the London leg of the show.

"The Chief" was one of the "Tati" series of 11 color photographs Fosso made in 1997 to celebrate the 50th anniversary of a discount store located in the Barbès neighborhood of Paris. Much loved by immigrant communities in the city, Tati closed in 2020, a casualty of the Covid pandemic.

After winning first prize at a prestigious African photography exhibition, Fosso had been commissioned by Tati to take black-and-white images of passing shoppers. The artist far exceeded the store's original brief. Instead, he made a series of exuberantly performative color self-portraits in the guise of "The Chief," "The Businessman," "The Golfer" and other satirical archetypes.

"I had some inspirations. And also, I wanted to do them in color," said Fosso, who for the first time had the resources to turn the alter egos he'd been privately exploring in his Bangui studio since the age of 13 into a substantive, publicly exhibited artwork.



Fosso posing in "The Liberated American Woman of the 1970s," from his 1997 "Tati" series, which celebrated the 50th anniversary of a discount store in the Barbès neighborhood of Paris.

Christophe Person is exhibiting nine images from that breakthrough series, which are available for 20,000 euros each, or about \$21,460. All but one of 29 complete "Tati" editions have been sold, Person said: The last remaining set is priced at about €300,000.

Over the last 25 years, the artist's Paris-based agent, Jean Marc Patras, rather than a major commercial gallery, has been discreetly selling Fosso's self-portraits to a swath of reputation-building institutions that includes the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and the Centre Pompidou and Quai Branly museums in Paris.

Chika Okeke-Agulu, an art history professor at Princeton, who curated a recent retrospective exhibition of the artist's work at the Princeton University Art Museum, said he couldn't think of another photographer who so successfully used self-portraiture "to explore personal identity and biography, as well as global-scale political and racial subjectivity."

Self-portrait series by Fosso such as "Tati," "African Spirits," "ALLONZENFANS" (2013), "Emperor of Africa" (2013) and "Black Pope" (2017) all engage, in their own metaphorical ways, with the central issue of how, over the centuries, "white people treated Black people as subhuman," as Fosso put it in the interview.

He added that he always intended his works to be exhibited in museums "to allow the new generation of Africans to know this history, about slavery and civil rights."



Images from the “SIXSIXSIX” series (2015-16) by Samuel Fosso. Credit... via JM Patras; Musée du quai Branly — Jacques Chirac via JM Patras; Musée du quai Branly — Jacques Chirac

A dapper, youthful sexagenarian who smokes Benson-brand African cigarettes, Fosso smiles a lot, but his eyes are haunted by tragedy. He says that as a child he was partially paralyzed. His mother died when he was five, after the two of them fled the brutal civil war in the Biafra region of Nigeria. He was in Mumbai in 2008 when terrorists attacked the city. In 2015, he was staying at a hotel in Paris near the Bataclan theater on the night when scores of concertgoers were slaughtered.

The accumulated weight of these life experiences found artistic expression in 2015 when Fosso made “SIXSIXSIX.” Taking its title from the number of the beast in the Book of Revelation, this unique piece consists of 666 dark, unflinching, large-format Polaroids of the artist’s face and bare shoulders, all self-shot from the same angle, like police photographs. In 2020, the work was displayed in two tiers in a snaking 75-meter line at the beginning of the group show “Who is Gazing” at the Quai Branly museum.

“The people who came were completely astonished,” said the exhibition’s curator, Christine Barthe, who is in charge of photography at the museum. “It’s very direct. No clothes, no makeup,” she said. “To see so many pictures is like vertigo, like being face-to-face with yourself.”

The Quai Branly museum acquired “SIXSIXSIX” in 2021 for €600,000, according to Barthe. “It’s a very symbolic price for Samuel and for Black artists. It’s a sign of the uniqueness of Samuel’s work,” she said.

In the interview, Fosso was reluctant to supply fixed explanations for his work, preferring the openness of parables. “There are a million different sights for one picture,” he said. “In my pictures, you can see evil, you can see God,” he added, before stepping out into the street for another restorative Benson. “You have to take life as it comes.”