

# VOGUE

## In the First Survey of Photographer Sam Fosso, the Self Portrait Is an “Opportunity to Engage with Biography”

By Liam Freeman | November 22, 2021



*Samuel Fosso, Autoportrait  
From the series "African Spirits", 2008 ©  
Samuel Fosso - Musée du quai Branly -  
Jacques Chiracatelier label image*

Why do artists create self portraits? For the French-Cameroonian photographer Samuel Fosso it goes beyond documenting what he looked like at a given time; self-portraiture is a means of self representation; of capturing different aspects of his personality so he feels truly seen. It is commonplace in West Africa to commission photographs of a baby at around three months old, but no such photographs of Fosso exist.

As a child, Fosso suffered from a partial paralysis of the lower limbs and his mother, he says, “saw it as a waste of money to commission a photograph of a disabled child.” He describes photography as “a form of therapy that has enabled me to bring about a sense of self and tell the world that I exist, that I am here. Self portraits give me the opportunity to engage with my own biography.”

This month the first comprehensive survey of Fosso’s work, *Sam Fosso*, opened at the Maison Européenne de la Photographie (MEP) in Paris. The show brings together over 300 prints from all the major series the 59-year-old has taken throughout his half-century-spanning career. In one of his most well-known series, *1970s Lifestyle* (1975-78), Fosso relishes in the fashions of the time: high waisted flares, tight fitting shirts with oversized collars, giant sunglasses and platform heeled boots.

In those early years, Fosso earned a living by photographing everything from weddings and baptisms to New Year’s celebrations and identity card photos, using whatever film was left to take his self portraits. He would send some of them to his grandmother in Nigeria to let her know he was safe and well.

Through Fosso's lens, the studio transforms into a stage, often featuring heavy drapes, adire textiles, harlequin-tiled floors, and backdrops he designed himself. *Autoportrait* traces how over the years Fosso expanded his self-portrait practice into embodiments of leaders of the pan-African liberation and Civil Rights movements (Nelson Mandela, Miles Davis, and Mohamed Ali among them) spiritual and religious figureheads from both Animist and Catholic cultures, and soldiers from France's African colonies who were enlisted to fight in the First and Second World Wars. "One unifying theme behind all my self portraits is the question around power," he explains. "I want to express the idea that a person who is not free is not alive."

Fashion plays a pivotal role in Fosso establishing his multitude of characters, and in turn the industry has looked to him, including a 1999 shoot for the fall/winter issue of *Vogue*. "Clothes help me tell the character's story and share their own emotions," he says. "But most of all, the clothes help me understand them. Once I press the camera button, I am the character, I am not myself anymore." In 1997, the French discount retailer Tati asked Fosso along with Malian studio photography pioneers Malick Sidibé and Seydou Keita to recreate their studios inside the store and take pictures of customers. Instead, Fosso proposed a more original project: to shoot a new series of colour self-portraits styled in Tati clothes and accessories. In one of those images, *Liberated American Woman of the 1970s*, Fosso



Samuel Fosso, Autoportrait  
From the series 1970's Lifestyle, 1975-78 © Samuel Fosso  
courtesy Jean-Marc Patras / Paris

is dressed in a matching trousers and jacket cut from vibrant patchwork, stilettos and heavy make-up. "If my concept requires me to play a female character, then that is what I'll do, I am not trying to create a queer picture," he says.



Samuel Fosso, Autoportrait  
From the series "Tati", *Le rocker*, 1997 © Samuel Fosso  
courtesy Jean-Marc Patras / Paris

More recently, Grace Wales Bonner, winner of the 2021 CFDA Award for International Men's Designer of the Year, credits Fosso's work with having inspired her to become a designer. Photographs from the *1970s Lifestyle* series, in particular one of Fosso dressed in white trousers frayed at the hem and platform boots, held a particular fascination. "I looked at Black representation in different places, when people were turning the camera on themselves," Wales Bonner says. "And I was thinking about Samuel in this context, about his tenacity for style, the connections established between style and place and how he has complete control over his image." This year Wales Bonner finally realized a collaboration with Fosso by inviting him to shoot a series of self-portraits in her archive designs for the 22nd issue of *A Magazine Curated by*.

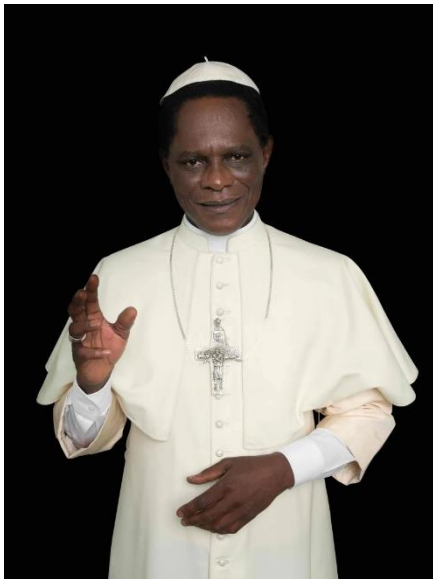
Although Fosso was born in Kumba, Cameroon in 1962, he was sent to live with his grandparents in Nigeria from a young age. The hope was that his grandfather – a traditional doctor and village chief in his Igbo community of Afikpo – would be able to cure his paralysis. Fosso survived the Biafran War which claimed the lives of over a million people between 1967-1970, before settling in Bangui, Central African Republic, with his uncle who helped him set-up his first studio at the age of just 13. He called it

Studio Photo National. “Africa was arbitrarily divided into countries by European colonialists,” he says. “I wanted my studio to reflect my desire to create a sense of pan-African unity and identity.”

Fosso’s 2008 series *African Spirits* pays tribute to 14 major figures of African history and the diaspora who were central to cultivating the sense of unity and identity he speaks of. Self-portraits of him personifying the likes of Angela Davis, Martin Luther King, and Senegal’s first president Léopold Sédar Senghor are deliberately not labelled. “I am particularly interested in the role slavery has played in the history of Africa,” Fosso explains. “Slavery is the source of questions around liberation, colonialism and power. Historically political debates unfortunately have not been between Black and white people. White people have imposed segregation and decided between themselves when to end it. I don’t see the likes of Davis or King as political figures, they wanted respect and human rights.”



Samuel Fosso, Autoportrait  
From the series "Tati", *La Femme américaine libérée des années 70*, 1997 © Samuel Fosso courtesy Jean-Marc Patras / Paris



Samuel Fosso, Autoportrait  
From the series "Black Pope", 2017 © Samuel Fosso courtesy Jean-Marc Patras / Paris atelier label image

As much as Fosso’s work pays homage to Black history, it is also about presenting his visions of Black futures. In the series *Black Pope* (2017), he acts out gestures of prayers and blessings dressed in a cassock, zucchetto, and mozzetta – meticulously sourced from the Pope’s official tailor Gammarelli. Even though, as Fosso says, Catholicism is an “imported religion,” the Christian population in Subsaharan Africa is expected to double by 2050 as it declines in Europe. He is at once highlighting the absence of Black voices in the papacy to date and how central those voices will be to its survival.

All the while Fosso is taking his photographs, he is constantly thinking about how the images will live beyond their creation. “I don’t see myself doing this work for my own personal aggrandizement,” he writes in the exhibition catalogue. “I do it to enter a dialogue with the public. I am first and foremost interested in the viewer’s response to my ideas, and only when I have presented the work in public do I lose my shyness and fear.” He concludes: “It is then that I become proud of what I have accomplished and I know that my communication is good.”