

# ARTFORUM

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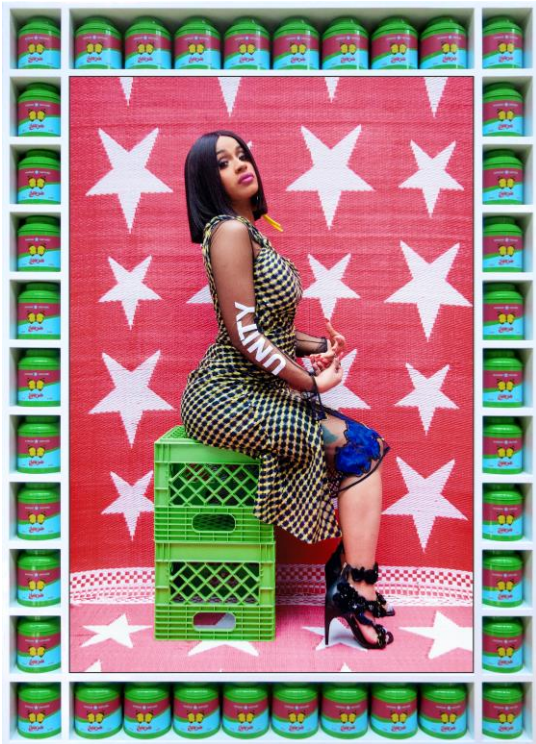
## “African Spirits”

YOSSI MILO GALLERY

245 Tenth Avenue

July 11–August 23, 2019

Long before there was the selfie, there was the “autoportrait.” A world away from the Pictures generation,



in 1975 Samuel Fosso set up a small photo studio in Bangui, capital of the Central African Republic, and photographed himself in the flashy disco styles of the time (tailored bell-bottoms and platform boots, natch). Fosso’s black-and-white “Autoportraits” series, 1975–78, was a gesture of self-fashioning, a response to outside influences that resulted in a uniquely African artistic expression. That sense of constructing and celebrating identity lies at the heart of Fosso’s images as well as those of the other artists included in “African Spirits,” a group show that surveys the history of photographic portraiture across the African continent.

Eschewing chronological display, “African Spirits” instead exhibits photographs by contemporary artists alongside their pioneering predecessors. Malick Sidibé’s pictures capturing the vibrant, highly stylized youth culture of postcolonial Bamako, Mali’s capital, are placed near South African photographer Zanele Muholi’s black-and-white self-portrait *Fisani, Parktown*, 2016. Whereas Sidibé portrays the self-styling of Bamako’s nightlife denizens, Muholi depicts

herself in costume, adorned with a crown and a necklace of oversize safety pins. Elsewhere, the large-scale mixed-media assemblage *Cardi B Unity*, 2017, by Moroccan photographer Hassan Hajjaj, depicts the reigning queen of rap, surrounded by a frame of green-tea canisters. Opposite this work is a selection of small, vintage gelatin silver prints, including several by Sanlé Sory, who documented Burkina Faso’s dynamic cultural scene, which blossomed after the country gained independence from the French in 1960. Meanwhile, Seydou Keïta’s *Untitled (Man with Flower)*, 1959, finds its inheritor in the images of Beninese photographer Leonce Raphael Agbodjelou, such as *Untitled*, 2012, featuring a trio of muscle-bound men posing before a backdrop of boldly patterned textiles. In both, sartorial flair lends the subjects an air of performative brio, underscoring the centrality that fashion plays in many of the pictures included in the show.

Though portraiture unites all of the artists in “African Spirits,” these works also make explicit that posing for the camera can be a deeply empowering act of selfhood. Such a revelation is well worth a picture’s thousand words.

— Joseph Akel