

Malick Sidibé: 'There wasn't a youth trend he didn't photograph'

Charlotte Jansen, Thursday 6 October 2016

As a major exhibition of his work appears in the UK for the first time, **Charlotte Jansen** explores the man who captured modern Mali



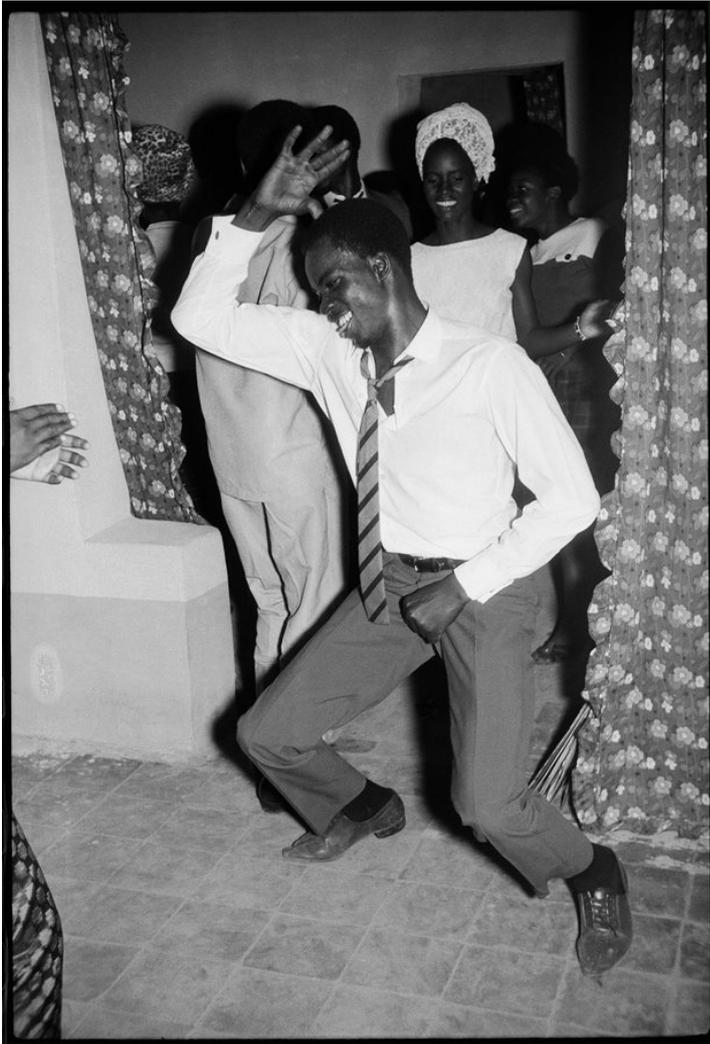
Malick Sidibé , A la plage, 1974. Photograph: Malick Sidibé/Galerie Magnin- A, Paris

As a photographer working in [Mali](#) just after independence, Malick Sidibé captured the spirit of the post-colonial nation's new identity, as seen through the changing scene of its capital.

He went on to become the first African artist and the first photographer to receive the prestigious Golden Lion award at the Venice Biennale, and his portrait photography has been shown across the world.

But less is known about the place it all started: Studio Malick, the poky room on Corner 19, 30th Street, in the Bagadadji neighbourhood in Bamako which by the early 1990s had become a local landmark, with queues of customers keen to sit for a portrait.

As the first solo exhibition of his work opens in London as part of the [1:54 African art fair](#), I went in search of the people who had met the man, to find out more about the setting in which these now famous images were taken.



Danseur Meringué , 1964. Photograph: Malick Sidibé/Galerie MAGNIN-A, Paris

Abdoulaye Konaté – artist and former director of the photography festival Rencontres de Bamako – met Sidibé in the 1970s when they were both students at the Institut National des Arts. He would call at Sidibé’s studio in the morning and they would walk to the university together. He remembers the studio was always open to the public, piled high with cameras and cardboard boxes.

French gallerist and curator André Magnin, who first started working with Sidibé in the early 1990s, remembers it as a hub of local social life.

As young people partied on the banks of the River Niger, and in the clubs and bars popping up across the city, “Malick took photos of those carefree and spontaneous moments of freedom and merriment”, Magnin says. He would then rush back to the studio on his Vespa to develop the pictures.

Though Sidibé died in April at the age of 80, Lassana Diarra, director of the Medina gallery in Bamako, still regularly visits Studio Malick and has documented the impact of the photographer’s work on several generations in Mali, particularly within the community, where he played a very active role.

“People recognise photos of their parents, in which some of them were very young: for example the photos of the young people at the beach, who are adults now,” Diarra says.

Throughout the 1960s and 70s, “there were always people outside his studio, talking about everything and nothing.” Childhood friends, photographers and journalists would sit there, and Sidibé “would also have to solve all kinds of social and financial problems people were having. It was party atmosphere with Malick as patriarch – everyone called him Uncle.”

Bamako-born photographer Racine Keita agrees that Sidibé’s photographs captured a profound shift in Mali. “He was the first photographer to go out of the studio and meet the youth, there’s no group of young people from that time who didn’t have their photo taken by Malick.”



Les jeunes bergers Peulhs (young Peulh shepherds), 1972. Photograph: Malick Sidibé/Galerie Magnin- A, Paris

Sidibé’s son Karim continues to take photographs at Studio Malick. Fellow photographer Seydou Camara hopes that together with the next generation of Malian photographers they can build a museum dedicated to Sidibé and his legacy in Bamako.

With or without a museum, Studio Malick remains a landmark. Magnin says that even today, old timers still gather outside the Bagadadji studio, sinking into in old plaited plastic chairs “killing time, talking about goings-on, drinking tea and mulling over the good old days”.

[Malick Sidibé: The Eye of Modern Mali](#) is on show at Somerset House until 15 January 2017

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/06/malick-sidibe-modern-mali-exhibition-somerset-house-london>