

# Malick Sidibé's 'The Eye of Bamako' at Somerset House – The Youth of Post-Colonial Mali

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Through black and white images taken on a Kodak Brownie camera Sidibé captures the dawning sense of euphoria and freedom as Mali adjusts to independence. His images show kids lounging topless by the Niger River, young adults in eccentric prints doing The Twist in city squares whilst in *Les Retrouvailles au bord du Fleuve Niger* a teenage couple pose side by side in an awkward prom-esque grip, consecrating their love in a photograph.

As *The Eye of Bamako* Sidibé chronicled the birth of a new urban elite, one who relished Mali's new consumer economy and absorbed the stylistic influences of Jimi Hendrix, The Beatles and James Brown.



Malick Sidibé 'A la plage' 1974, silver print on paper: 50 x 60 cm., signed and dated ©Malick Sidibé Courtesy: Galerie MAGNIN-A, Paris.

Girls wear explosive, netted prom dresses and woofed, bobbed hair whilst men pose in crotch crunching flares and androgynous tight tees. 'For the first time, Malians could listen to Western music' says Philippe Boutté, co-curator of the new exhibit 'they wanted to be dressed just like the stars they saw in the magazines'.



Malick Sidibé 'Les Retrouvailles au bord du fleuve Niger' 1974, silver print on paper: 50 x 60 cm., signed and dated ©Malick Sidibé Courtesy: Galerie MAGNIN-A, Paris.

Sidibé images are suffused with the imagery of popular culture. In *Les Trois Agents du FBI* three boys stare into the lens defiantly, they wear the trench coat and trilbies popularized by Neo-noir films. The image is reminiscent of a Cindy Sherman photograph where cultural references are cut out and plastered onto the human body like a stamp. In Sidibé studio portraits men pose in boxing gloves like they are in *Rocky* and teenage fans desperately clutch their favourite records.



Malick Sidibé 'Nuit de Noël (Happy Club)' 1963, silver print on paper: 120 x 120 cm., signed and dated ©Malick Sidibé Courtesy: Galerie MAGNIN-A, Paris.

There exists within these images a paradoxical blend of novelty and tradition which has been brought about by the turbulent acceleration of Mali's social climate. In *Les Jeunes Bergers*

*Peul* three boys stare ahead defiantly, they match their traditional African tunics with a brand new radio and a man bag.

Sidibé's images capture a religious and socially conservative society grappling with the contemporary. Having never owned an iPhone these people are yet to learn their angles; they don't know what a pout is or how to smize like Tyra Banks on *America's Next Top Model*. In *Groupe de Barbus* a group of friends act out a premeditated pose, their faces rattled with embarrassment as they try to negotiate the daunting lens of a camera for the first time. Others react playfully running and jumping, wrenching up into the sky.



Malick Sidibé 'Dansez le Twist' 1965, Silver print on paper: 120 x 120 cm., limited edition courtesy of Magnin. A, Paris ©Malick Sidibé Courtesy: Galerie MAGNIN-A, Paris.

For the first part of the exhibition Sidibé focuses on the nightclubs and city squares of Mali's capital Bamako. Unburdened by fame, Sidibé presses the camera against the bodies of men and women as they twist their hips to the floor and kick out.

These snapshots of bodies vibrating to rhythm are lit up by the exhibitions soundtrack (curated by DJ Rita Ray) which combines acoustic roots music and ground breaking electric fusions. The combination of sight and sound immerses the voyeur straight in to the atmosphere of Bamako's party scene.



Malick Sidibé 'A moi seul' 1978: 50 x 60 cm., signed and dated ©Malick Sidibé Courtesy: Galerie MAGNIN-A, Paris.

Since all the images are woven through with the paraphernalia of everyday life one can understand Sidibé's images without any guidance. Somerset House refrains including any labels and forces you to investigate the images unaccompanied.

Sidibé's photographs are pumped full of humanity, carelessness and euphoria, 20 years after they were taken – sat on the walls of Somerset House they continue to speak to a shared experience of modernisation and the diverse movements of the African diaspora. A few years before his death Sidibé told The Telegraph 'the moments when young people dance and play as though the stars belong to them – that is what I loved the most'.

By Annie Lord

[Malick Sidibé: The Eye of Modern Mali](#) at Terrace Rooms, South Wing Somerset House, London WC2R 1LA, 6 October 2016 – 15 Jan 2017. Free Admission.

<http://www.candidmagazine.com/malick-sidibes-eye-bamako-somerset-house-youth-post-colonial-mali/>