

An Artist at the Edge of Independence - Malick Sidibe at Red Hook Labs

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By Zachary Small



When **Mali** gained its independence from France in 1960, Malick Sidibé was just beginning his life as a professional photographer in the country's capital city of Bamako. He was an artist with the rare ability to capture the zeitgeist of his environs, documenting Malian youth culture in the throes of liberation. Set to the sounds of James Brown and other American rock-and-rollers, **Mali's decolonization electrified the streets with hope for a free, democratically self-governed state.**



Exhibition Views, Malick Sidibé, *The Eye of Modern Mali*, 05/04 – 05/07/2017, Red Hook Labs, New York. Courtesy Red Hook Labs.

Symbols of Unrestricted Joy

Now, Brooklyn's [Red Hook Labs](#) presents *Malick Sidibé: The Eye of Modern Mali* nearly one year after the artist's death in 2016. Jointly presented with [1:54 Contemporary African Art Fair](#) and MAGNIN-A Paris, the exhibition contains some of the artist's greatest hits. The raucous and kinetic subjects of Sidibé's camera stand as the exuberant symbols of unrestricted joy; not only symbols of a country undergoing rapid change, but also storytellers of rock-and-roll's major cultural influence on the West African society.

The exhibition begins with what Sidibé is best known for: his [portrait photography](#). As a symbol of one's wealth and social status, portraiture was a popular commodity in colonial West Africa. However, Sidibé was allergic to the art form's static, confined traditions – he wanted to infuse it with a new vibrancy that matched the country's postcolonial vibe. “As a rule, when I was working in the studio, I did a lot of positioning,” he once said in [an interview with Lens Culture](#). “I didn't want my subjects to look like mummies. I would give them positions that brought something alive in them.” Bucking tradition, Sidibé dresses his subjects in the imported images of the American popular culture. These tropes (think cowboys and outlaws from Spaghetti Westerns) provide a familiar yet distanced outlet for expression. Photographs like *Un faux coboye* captures this international culture exchange. Here, a young man poses in a hostile contrapposto, perhaps readying himself to draw his gun on short notice. Behind him, we see small signifier's of Sidibé's studio space. Curtains and a carpet reminds us that Sidibé is not so interested in the truth of his subjects' portrayals, but in the inner freedom his work affords them.



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Sidibé’s Nighttime Photography Smacks of Hollywood Romanticism

Malick Sidibé’s work is generous like that, delivering a consistent sense of empowerment through the camera lens. He manages to avoid having a forceful, authorial gaze by engaging with his subjects – a fitting methodology for someone so interested in the vibrancy of freedom. And although Sidibé trained as a studio photographer, he truly excels at [documentary photography](#). He takes the compositional control of a studio out into the world. With photographs like *Combat des amis avec pierres*, we gain a sense of how Sidibé mitigates his control over form with a desire to free his subjects. At first glance, these two figures are ready to battle with stones held high above their heads. Behind them, a vast beach sprawls into the horizon like the battered topography of a battlefield. Taking a closer look at the two figures, however, we see something that betrays Sidibé’s composition and title. The two friends are smirking, battling with themselves to stay in character. This is what makes Sidibé’s photographs such a joy to look at, the sense that we are all in on the charade.

But where Sidibé shines brightest is in the nighttime. As one of the first major nightlife photographers, he found a reverent beauty within his partying subjects. Somehow avoiding the flattening, ugly effects of flash photography, Sidibé’s nighttime photography smacks of Hollywood romanticism. *Nuit du 31 Décembre*, for example, depicts a woman in a white dress ascending a staircase. It is a simple photograph, but one that communicates the artist’s

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desire for the woman in white who emerges from the darkness. Her eyes meet the camera, gesturing not to erotic intrigue, but to a reciprocal playfulness seen throughout Sidibé's oeuvre.

Concluding the exhibition is arguably Sidibé's most famous photograph, *Regardez-moi!*, which combines the artist's strong compositional framework with his unparalleled instinct for joy. Squatting down amidst a crowd of people, we see one central figure giving his all on the dance floor. His moves are as wild as his outfit – a pair of high waisted trousers topped by a psychedelic shirt. The man looks toward the camera, showing off his dance moves, even while humorously upstaging the woman behind him. *Look at me* says the photograph's title, but with Sidibé behind the camera, we already are.

Featured image: Exhibition Views, Malick Sidibé, The Eye of Modern Mali, 05/04 – 05/07/2017, Red Hook Labs, New York. Courtesy Red Hook Labs.

<http://www.widewalls.ch/malick-sidibe-red-hook-labs/>