

Philippe Boutté on why counting 400,000 negatives can be positive

October 11, 2016



Philippe Boutté

Philippe Boutté director of [MAGNIN-A Gallery](#) in Paris is co-curator of the new Malick Sidibé exhibition ‘The Eye of Modern Mali’, which [we reviewed last week](#). We wanted to talk to him in more detail about the late Sidibé and his influence and role in African photography.

Phillipe you mentioned in your tour of the exhibition that Sidibé had over 400,000 negatives. That is a huge amount has all the work been seen or catalogued?

“Unfortunately the majority of Sidibé’s archives have never been catalogued, re-printed or even seen since they were taken. A US university started to work on cataloguing a small part of the archives a few years ago in Bamako in conjunction with the Malick Studio, but this is a huge undertaking with much work still remaining.”

With that in mind then, how did you go about curating the images you did decide to show?

“We wanted to present a cross-section of the different periods and themes of Malick’s most famous photos. The three rooms gave us the opportunity to focus on the Parties, the River Niger and Malick’s Studio. We of course include some of his most iconic photos, such as ‘Nuit de Noël’, ‘Garçons à la Chaussée’, ‘Dansez le twist’, ‘un yéyé en position’, ‘Yokoro’, ‘Amis des espagnols’, ‘Combat des amis avec pierres’ which we felt were important to present in this tribute, the first solo show of Sidibé’s work in the UK. We also wanted to display prints

that were hand-titled and signed by Sidibé to make sure that the spirit of the photographer himself could be present.”

He has such a unique style, you look at his images and you are instantly transformed back to the time they were taken. But what about the great man himself, did Sidibé ever do any self-portraits?

“Yes he did, but these were solely for private use, to record a memory or to send to family or even for ID photos. Malick was shy and preferred to be behind the camera. He had the genius to put at ease his clients but he never wanted to be the subject of his photographs.”

Sidibé was obviously a family man, leaving behind him 17 children. Are any of them also involved in photography?

“Many of his sons were involved or are still involved in Malick’s Studio. Zacharia, Mody, Fousseyni, they all worked with Malick. Today, Karim is the one who is a photographer, and based in his father’s studio. He mostly does portraits and reportages for weddings and family ceremonies.”

The huge amount of negatives to look after and the importance of managing Malick’s legacy, who now manages this?

“The majority of the negatives remain in care of the family in Bamako. We also have around 10,000 negatives in deposits in Paris.”

Do you have a favourite image from those shown?

“Many people ask me this question. Malick was a great man: gentle and generous. He said, “in life as in photography I have told the truth and I have given”. This quote is a very good presentation of Malick by himself. Malick’s spirit is present in every photo in the exhibition and it is difficult to choose just one favourite. I love the ‘Yokoro’ (carnival): a picture taken in his studio where the 2 children are so joyful. I also like ‘Combat des amis avec pierres’, where a couple fight with stones as this is the only photo of that series that was deliberately composed by Malick. And of course, ‘Nuit de Noël’ – one of his most well-known images. That photograph is completely universal. Whether it is shown in Tokyo, Sao Paulo, Bamako, or London it is the synonym of tenderness, love, and the most beautiful part of humanity.”



Malick Sidibé Nuit de Noël (Happy Club), 1963 © Malick Sidibé Courtesy Galerie MAGNIN-A, Paris

Thank you Phillippe for taking the time to talk to us, your passion for his work we are sure will convince even more people to go and see his work whilst it is with us at [Somerset house](#).

Malick Sadibe – The Eye of Modern Mali – Somerset House until January 15th 2017.

<http://photography.news/phillipe-boutte-malick-sidebe-interview-magnin-gallery-paris/>