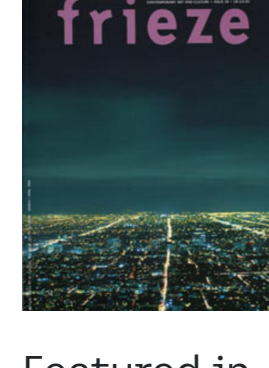


Samuel Fosso



BY JENNIFER HIGGIE IN REVIEWS | 03 MAR 98

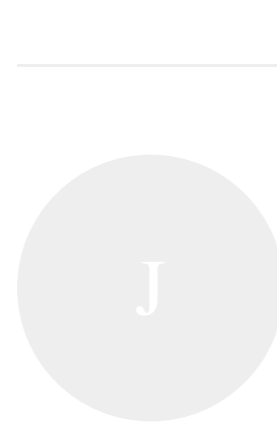
Featured in Issue 39

Born in Cameroon in 1962, Samuel Fosso lived in Nigeria as a small child but was forced to leave at the end of the Biafran war in 1972. He moved to Bangui, in the Central African Republic, where he found work as an assistant photographer. Six months later, aged 13, he opened his own photographic portrait studio. The 21 untitled self-portraits included in this show were made between 1975 and 1980. Taken at night, after he had already worked all day photographing clients, the images were discovered by French photographer Bernard Deschamps who happened to be passing through Bangui and saw Fosso's studio.

In every photograph the beautiful Fosso is subject, object and creator. Occasionally he includes other people, but their posture and placement relegates them to a secondary position. In one stagy, understated and slightly bizarre image, for example, Fosso, in large sunglasses autographs a book for an anonymous man, who inclines deferentially towards him. In other photographs, like an indifferent, latter-day and urbanised Narcissus, he's pictured sitting or standing with himself through the magic of a double exposure. The shallow depth of the studio is transformed with flowers, cane furniture and patterned cloth into a parody of a genteel boudoir. Unlike Narcissus, however, it's impossible to separate the reflected Fosso from the original - like a happily married couple, one 'self' co-habits comfortably with the other. It's interesting to compare these double images with 19th- and early 20th-century 'before-and-after conversion' double-portrait photographs distributed by European missionaries as proof of their 'civilising' influence on various African colonies. Fosso's playful fragmentation of the self-portrait creates a clever counterpoint to the continent's history of photographic colonialism, a form of aesthetic Euro-centrism, which reduced indigenous cultural and social complexities to convenient one-liners.

In some photographs a crudely painted backdrop alludes, rather surreally, to Bucharest, capital of Romania, an apparently popular signifier for 'modern' society in the socialist Central African Republic of the 70s. In others, Fosso plays with the hallmarks of both nascent socialism and artistic adolescence - freedom slogans. In one photograph, for example, he poses wearing nothing but his underwear and a blank smile against the backdrop of a patterned curtain with the words 'La Vie c'est Liberté' stencilled around his head. It's an image that transforms a platitude into a louche, cryptic and - when you think of the upheaval and dispossession of his childhood - heartfelt axiom. This countering of written statements with visual ambivalence results in images that are subtle, non-propagandising and ambiguous. Neither Bucharest nor aphorisms are ultimately more significant a sign of individual or cultural identity than the blankness of his sunglasses, his glacial stare, or his experiments in duality.

Fosso's combination of a secretive, almost child-like delight in dressing up, doubling and role playing, reiterates the idea that the self is somehow more than simply the sum of one's more obvious parts. The mocking, secretive self-consciousness, and restless self-absorption of adolescence represented in these images makes them extraordinarily compelling. It's this exploration of the slippage between personality and type, disguise and displacement that links his work to many of the theoretical and aesthetic issues that concerned photographers in the late 70s and 80s - Cindy Sherman's 'Untitled Film Stills' series, made at around the same time, most obviously springs to mind. Her work has a similarly anti-naturalistic, theatrical quality, that is more about the anticipation, or creation, of meaning than it is about the stating of concrete truths. Photography for both Fosso and Sherman is a medium they can trust to reflect reality's vicissitudes precisely because they know how appropriately fallible, how malleable it can be.



JENNIFER HIGGIE

Jennifer Higgie is a writer who lives in London. Her book *The Mirror and the Palette – Rebellion, Revolution and Resilience: 500 Years of Women's Self-Portraits* is published by Weidenfeld & Nicolson, and she is currently working on another – about women, art and the spirit world.

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