

Studios d'Afrique
by ADAMA KOUYATÉ



Opening reception: Saturday, February 8th 2020 from 2 to 6 pm
Show: February 11th - April 18th 2020

Gallery FIFTY ONE TOO is proud to present its upcoming show 'Studios d'Afrique' with photographs by Adama Kouyaté, (Bougouni, 1928). Since the 1990s the Malian photographer has been shown in many group exhibitions worldwide, alongside his contemporaries such as Malick Sidibé, and Seydou Keita. A selection of photographs from his publication 'Studios d'Afrique' (Editions Gang) will be presented for his first solo exhibition at the gallery.

In the hope of finding an employment, the seventeen-year-old Kouyaté decided to leave his little town in southern Mali for the great capital of Bamako. Working as a shoemaker and a driver for a few years, the young man asked the pioneering Malian photographer Bakary Doumbia to take a portrait of him and his girlfriend on Christmas Eve 1946. Struck by the beauty of the photograph afterwards, Kouyate decided to become a photographer himself.

Kouyaté started his photographic career as an apprentice for masters such as Bakary Doumbia and Pierre Garnier. In 1949 he founded his very own studio in the village of Kati, not far from Bamako. After ten years of earning his own income from mainly making studio- and wedding portraits, the young photographer left Mali for Ouagadougou and Bouaké in Ivory Coast. It was only after 1969 that he decided to come back to a village north of Bamako to continue his photographic studio business.

With its lively, swinging neighborhoods, the capital has been said to be the African city of photography. Ever since the first settlements run by French colonists or Lebanese tradesmen in the 1930s, a tradition of 19th-century studio portraiture had long been established. However, during the years after Mali's independence in the 1950s, there were not many native photographers. Adama Kouyaté is part of a generation of native pioneers that was able to catch the energetic atmosphere of a carefree society.

Kouyaté's black and white portraits reproduce the Malian urban lifestyle in his studio, by attracting groups of youngsters, couples and women of Bamako in the late sixties and seventies. People who did not possess a camera, came to the studio to capture important moments of their lives, or simply to keep a trace of it. His studio (which was basically a small storage space) was equipped with only two studio lights and simple backgrounds, sometimes with painted palm trees on it. By laying out accessories such as radios, LP's, watches, cigarettes or letting his customers pose on a scooter, the photographer created an artificial stage referring to a modern, forward-looking life.

The photographs of 'Studio d'Afrique' make us travel back in time, where the objects reveal the western influences of that period. Adama Kouyaté is part of a generation of photographers that was discovered by an international crowd later in his life. Since the 1990s his work has enjoyed a worldwide recognition. Until today, the photographer continues to work with the same Rolleiflex camera at 'Photo Hall d'Union', his studio which remained the same ever since 1969.