

The Other Self

Vivian Maier, Jacques Sonck,
Norbert Ghisoland and Adama Kouyaté

Opening: Feb 8th from 1 until 6 pm

Show: Feb 11th until Apr 5th 2014



GALLERY FIFTY ONE is pleased to announce the exhibition 'The Other Self': a group show about portraiture, seen through the eyes of Vivian Maier, Jacques Sonck, Norbert Ghisoland and Adama Kouyaté. These portraits are taken over the past century, in different continents, in studio or urban settings and in black & white. Except for the work of Vivian Maier, which contains color work as well. These four photographers captured portraits of ordinary people: joyful people, eccentric people, people in the margin, people with dreams, etc.

The portraits by Norbert Ghisoland (Bel, 1878-1939) were made in his studio in the 'Borinage District' or the coalmine area southwest of Brussels, in the beginning of the twentieth century. Ghisoland made portraits of this coalmine community, who had their portraits taken for a certain (family) event. He placed his customers in decors associated with the upper class: self-painted backdrops with views of non-places like landscapes combined with furniture or leisure attributes of that time like a bicycle or boxing gloves and used soft light. His models were dressed in specific wardrobe, which corresponded to the chosen setting. What strikes the most in Ghisoland's portraits is the posture of these coalminers: they look uncomfortable, almost ashamed posing in front of the camera. They don't smile at all. Their gaze reminds the spectator of their hard existence. Their facial expression, in contrast with their scenery and their costumes, gives Ghisoland's portraits a surreal feeling.

The studio photos from the sixties and seventies of African studio photographer Adama Kouyaté (Mali, 1928) characterize the post-colonial Malian community, an era with high hopes. In contrast to Ghisoland, Kouyaté's portraits are joyful, full of young hipsters striking confident poses: the men in flares and tight, half unbuttoned shirts, the women in fashionably cut print dresses. His tiny studio consists of only two high-voltage lamps and a backdrop: plain or with the visual like a seaside landscape with palm trees and flowerbeds. In front of this curtain, accessories like an ordinary wooden stool or an old colonial motorcycle completes the decor. Although the images are more stir in a manner, they are nonetheless intriguing documents of a particular social history of a nation.

For almost two decades Jacques Sonck (Bel, 1949) dwells the Belgian streets to portray people who are atypical in their behaviour, conduct, appearance and looks. These physical particularities in individuals are of interest to Sonck. It is not sensation he is looking after for, he merely wants to emphasise the 'person' behind these 'façades'. Although a selection of only his street photography is presented in the show, Sonck frames the depicted persons as such that their lower body parts are left out and each of them are in front of a black, grey or white urban background. So it seems their portraits could be taken in a studio as well.

Only self-portraits by Vivian Maier (Fr-USA, 1926-2009) are included. Although most part of her work still need to be developed since a huge stack of unpublished film rolls were discovered by real-estate agent John Maloof, one can tell that she made self-portraits throughout her photographic career, which spanned from the '50s until the '90s. So her image is been captured in black & white as in color. According

to John Maloof: 'A self-portrait is a unique confession by an artist'. Still Vivian Maier self-portraits are difficult to read. How did she intend each self-portrait to be: just as her likeness or as a resemblance, experimenting with certain significance? What can be read, is that she hardly every showed any emotions. Her portrait is captured as a reflection and is fragmented by frames and doorways in cities of New York and Chicago. On the other hand only her shadow can be seen as well, whether or not framed together with other subjects. Both ways are a visual language between reality and illusion.

The Other Self deals about portraiture with a double standard. The portraits are a resemblance of individuals, rather than their representations. In a way this exhibition shows only self-portraits, not just the ones taken by Vivian Maier: a portrait is a self-portrait on a certain moment in time, no matter who the eye of the beholder is.