

**SAMUEL
FOSSO**

**AFRĪCAN
SPĪRĪTS**

African Spirits is a series of fourteen gelatin silver prints completed in 2008 by Samuel Fosso. The large and detailed images are “self-portraits” (*autoportraits*) in which Fosso embodies prominent leaders of Black liberation movements during the 20th century. Several of the subjects may be readily recognizable to American audiences: Muhammad Ali, Angela Davis, Miles Davis, Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Nelson Mandela, and Tommie Smith. Other photographs reference official portraits or reinvent historical representations of independence-era African presidents and intellectuals including Aimé Césaire, Patrice Lumumba, Kwame Nkrumah, Haile Selassie, and Léopold Sédar Senghor. Fosso also directs attention to the profession and history of studio photography in Africa with his self-portrait as Malian photographer Seydou Keïta. For Fosso, who has described this series as an homage to those who gave him freedom, this collection of personages represents the connective tissue between Africa and the United States in the struggles for social justice and freedom.

Born in 1962 in the city of Kumba, Cameroon, to parents of Nigerian-Igbo heritage, Fosso ultimately moved with his uncle to Bangui, the capital of the Central African Republic. Cameroon, Nigeria, and the Central African Republic achieved independence from Europe in 1960. Divisive regional politics and wars—including coup d'états in 1966 that installed military regimes in Nigeria and the Central African Republic—unsettled some of the optimism in the newly independent African countries. Commercial studio photographers in West and Central Africa were integral to the young nations, and most of them made their living by taking portraits for identity cards, passports, and other official government documents. Many, including Fosso, supplemented their regular work with family portraiture and event photography that captured a burgeoning urban cosmopolitanism.

As a teenager living in Bangui, Fosso apprenticed in the studio of an expatriate Nigerian photographer before opening his first commercial space, Studio Photo Nationale, in 1975. After closing his studio in the evenings, Fosso often used the remaining frames left in film rolls to take playful and inventive self-portraits. These early explorations with the camera and with self-presentation brought Fosso international recognition when the images were first exhibited in 1994 at the inaugural *Rencontres Africaines de la Photographie* biennial in Bamako, Mali.

Fosso not only personifies iconic Black figures in the African Spirits series, he also reenacts key events and moments that defined their lives. In an interview with the late curator Okwui Enwezor, Fosso explained: “I might be representing a specific person, but aiming more for the idea of the person....” Flanking the gallery entrance, the two portraits of Martin Luther King Jr. are exemplary. One recreates the police mugshot of King after his arrest during the Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott in 1956. In the other, Fosso becomes the inspirational orator, a reference to King’s germinal “I have a dream” speech. Similarly, Fosso reimagines Carl Fischer’s April 1968 cover for *Esquire* magazine of Muhammad Ali. Fischer’s original image, which featured the world heavyweight champion as a martyred saint, was a response to Ali being arrested and stripped of his title for refusing to serve in the Vietnam War.

Fosso’s portrayals of Tommie Smith and Patrice Lumumba also evoke martyrdom. Smith and his U.S. track teammate John Carlos won gold and bronze medals, respectively, at the 1968 summer Olympic Games in Mexico City. The fist-glove Black Power salute they gave in protest during the award ceremony sent shockwaves around the world. In response, the U.S. Olympic team immediately banned the two athletes from competition and sent them home where they faced racist epithets, death threats, and uncertain futures as pariahs in their own country. Patrice Lumumba, a staunch pan-Africanist leader in the pursuit for independence, became the first prime minister of the Republic of the Congo (now Democratic Republic of the Congo) in 1960. In his photograph, Fosso wears a shirt analogous to the one Lumumba wore when the Belgian- and CIA-backed military regime of Joseph Mobutu (Mobutu Sese Seko) seized and publicly humiliated him. Within months of his capture, Lumumba was executed by firing squad by Congolese and Belgian forces in the region of Katanga.

In honoring these heroic figures at challenging and definitive points in their lives, the African Spirits series possesses a sharp sensitivity for the unevenness of human experiences. Fosso’s images raise poignant and still extremely relevant questions about the imbricated histories of the Black body, individuality, athleticism, celebrity, and the media. The Menil Collection is proud to exhibit African Spirits in conjunction with the 2022 FotoFest Biennial and *African Cosmologies Redux*, a new presentation of photography originally curated by Mark Sealy OBE for the previous biennial.

— Paul R. Davis, Curator of Collections

Major funding for this exhibition is provided by The Eleanor and Frank Freed Foundation. Additional support comes from Anne Levy Charitable Trust; Mark Wawro and Melanie Gray; Franci Neely; and the City of Houston through Houston Arts Alliance.

PUBLIC PROGRAMS

All programs will be held at the Menil Collection main building.

Exhibition Reception

Friday, September 30, 6 p.m.

Artist Talk: Samuel Fosso in conversation with Mark Sealy

Copresented with FotoFest

Thursday, October 6, 7 p.m.

Screening of Al Santana's *Voices of the Gods*

Copresented with Houston Cinema Arts Festival and FotoFest

Friday, November 11, 7 p.m.

Stop, Look, and Listen! Concert

DACAMERA Young Artists respond to the exhibition

Saturday, November 12, 3 p.m.

All public programs are free and open to everyone.
Please check menil.org/events for more information.

Menil members enjoy additional events.
To join and learn more, please visit menil.org/support.

Exhibition dates

August 5, 2022–January 15, 2023

The Menil Collection