

BAMAKO

Clubs of



9 March – 16 April 2000

BAMA Clubs of **AKO**

Rice University Art Gallery

Clubs of Bamako

16 gelatin silver photographs by Malick Sidibé
2 polychrome sculptures by Emile Guebehi
1 polychrome sculpture by Koffi Kouakou
8 polychrome sculptures by Coulibaly Siaka Paul
Courtesy The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston
Museum purchase with funds provided by Nina and Michael Zilkha

Rice Art Gallery is located in Sewall Hall on the Rice University campus, 6100 Main Street, Houston, Texas 77005, and on the web at www.rice.edu/ruag

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All photographs by Malick Sidibé are courtesy of the artist and The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. Photographs of individual sculptures were taken by Thomas R. DuBrock and are reproduced courtesy of The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. The installation view and the photograph of Koffi Kouakou's *Standing Man* were taken by Tom Powel and are reproduced courtesy of Deitch Projects, New York.

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Malick Sidibé
Merengue Dancer, 1964



In this project of getting beyond simple nationalism into a new stage of multiple human identity, the arts play a leading role, feeling out avenues of conflation and comparison. This does not mean the adoption of some neutral international style that bleaches out cultural particularities, as it did in the modernist period when the invitation was to abandon one's identity in order to become Western. As the cycle shifts, the invitation is to balance one's identity with the various global demands of the moment – such as the demand presented by the temporary hegemony of Western technology and pop culture. Today, artists born in India, Korea, Japan, China and Turkey; in Senegal, Zimbabwe, Zaire and Côte d'Ivoire; in Cuba, Mexico, Venezuela and Argentina, are consciously creating styles that simultaneously honor particular cultural identities and make gestures of mutual incorporation with the Western tradition.

– Thomas McEvilly, *"Fusion: Hot or Cold?"*

Clubs of Bamako brings to Houston a culture at once familiar and exotic. The universal rituals of courtship of urban youth are easily recognized, and the global impact of rock-and-roll is no news to us today. We grew up listening to the James Brown and Jimi Hendrix albums touted by the young people of Mali, who gathered at such clubs as Les Beach Boys, Les Famous Flames, Quartier Latin, and Les Zazous, and we relive first kisses through Malick Sidibé's wonderfully immediate photographs. Similarly, standing by the life-sized sculptures created by Coulibaly Siaka Paul, Emile Guebehi, and Koffi Kouakou, we recall our own moves on the dance floor. More exotic, however, to many of us is the society in which this club culture thrived. The post-colonial Mali of the 1960s and 1970s was a nation in flux, one that was reshaping a fresh identity by drawing on ancestral traditions as well as exploring new imports – both ideas and products – from Europe and the Americas. For example, Boubacar Traoré's music of these years, including the "Kar Kar Madison," traces routes from Mali to Memphis and back again. It is the aim of this exhibition to introduce the work of these artists, and to uncover the richly textured interchange between African, African-American, and American cultures.

The photographs of Malick Sidibé were first seen in the United States in Susan Vogel's landmark exhibition *Africa Explores: 20th Century African Art*, shown at The Center for African Art, New York, in 1991. Presented as an anonymous artist, his work caught the attention of independent curator André Magnin and the collector Jean Pigozzi, who traveled to Bamako to meet the artist. Their encounter with Sidibé resulted in a significant catalogue and broader exposure of his work, much of which had been lost to the public eye since he closed his studio in the late 1970s. In 1998, Magnin took the unprecedented step of inviting the contemporary sculptor Coulibaly Siaka Paul of the Ivory Coast to respond to Sidibé's club scenes, tapping into a local tradition of sculpted portraits based on photographs. In turn, Coulibaly Siaka invited several colleagues to complete the series, including the brothers Nicolas Damas and Emile Guebehi as well as Koffi Kouakou. While some critics have questioned the intervention of an outside curator in this project, it is consistent with African artistic tradition to use the work of past generations to invigorate the present.

In an unpublished interview, Coulibaly Siaka Paul commented, "With sculpture, I find satisfaction, and particularly when I work with a theme . . . The customs [these photos] introduce continue in the present and inspire contemporary work for another exhibition."¹

In 1999, *The Clubs of Bamako* was presented by Deitch Projects in New York. Accompanied by the music of Boubacar Traoré, the exhibition was greeted with enormous acclaim. Through the remarkable generosity of Nina and Michael Zilkha, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, was able to purchase sixteen photographs from the studio of Malick Sidibé and eleven polychrome sculptures by Emile Guebehi, Koffi Kouakou, and Coulibaly Siaka Paul, thus preserving the major part of the artists' collaboration. Exhibiting these works at the Rice University Art Gallery on the occasion of the opening of the Audrey Jones Beck building at the MFAH fulfills both institutions' goals of addressing the world community. It is also a profound pleasure that we were able to present *Clubs of Bamako* during this year's *Houston FotoFest*.

We would like to express our gratitude to the artists, and to the many colleagues who helped make this exhibition of *Clubs of Bamako* a reality, including the African American Art Advisory Association, Judith C. Brown, William Camfield, Monica Garza, Peter C. Marzio, Nelly Pappas, Wynne H. Phelan, Bert Samples, Stephanie Smith, and Anne Wilkes Tucker.

Kim Davenport
Director, Rice University Art Gallery

Alison de Lima Greene
Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

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Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

¹ Coulibaly Siaka Paul, unpublished interview with Saxane Yaya.



LEFT
Koffi Kouakou
Standing Man, 1999
[in dark brown suit and hat]

RIGHT
Malick Sidibé
Karim Keita, The Gentleman, 1967



A new generation of photographers emerged in the first years after Mali gained independence from French colonial rule. Immersing themselves fully in the country's cultural and social life, these photographers were both participants and witnesses to the scenes they recorded. Malick Sidibé photographed the young generation in the nightclubs where they gathered and danced to rock-and-roll and Afro-Cuban music. Sidibé recalls that:

*At parties, when young folks are affected by the music, under its influence, they're excited and wild, as if in a trance, and they feel good. When I watched them moving with such frenzy I'd say to myself: "Dancing is a good thing in life. You've got to have fun because once you're dead it's all over!"*¹

Clubs of Bamako was inspired by a desire to recreate the atmosphere of Bamako at this time, as it was portrayed by the photographs and words of Malick Sidibé: the spontaneity, the festive atmosphere, the games, the laughs and the excitement. Accompanying Sidibé's photographs are human-size polychrome sculptures by contemporary African sculptors Emile Guebehi, Koffi Kouakou, and Coulibaly Siaka Paul that portray the people from this period, and bring their festive moments to life. Add to the visual art the music of the period, and the viewer is fully immersed in the atmosphere of that time.

The West has only recently come to realize the extraordinary variety of contemporary African creation. In all of sub-saharan Africa, from North to South and from East to West, numerous artists live and work in urban centers as well as in deeply isolated regions. Consequently, many approaches flourish. This individualism represents the struggle for freedom of creation, and the search for Africa's own personality. Too often African art has been misjudged and misunderstood by Western viewers who believe that colonialism or political pressures destroyed the different African cultures. In fact, as Sidibé's photographs demonstrate, cultures grow as a result of integration and new encounters. By integrating what initially disrupted or threatened them, cultures have changed, and become more complex. The paradox is that cultures need to be not only preserved, but also freed.

Beginning in the 1980s, exhibitions of African art started to develop worldwide. These exhibitions helped to revise judgments, and to show that an intellectual and cultural sphere in which everyone could accomplish their artistic aspirations still existed in Africa. To some extent, it is misleading to use the word "art" to encompass the mix of religious, magical, symbolic, and mythological systems that contribute to the visual culture of Africa. We bring these diverse elements together as a whole to fit our Western concept of art. It is important to remember that the meaning of this new whole was not in the minds of those who worked to create the different elements.

Clubs of Bamako offers two distinct examples of African visual culture. Born c. 1935 in Soloba, Mali, photographer Malick Sidibé studied at the National Institute of Arts (Institut National des Arts), and since 1952, has lived in the capital city of Bamako. He represents an inestimable heritage, since for the past forty years, he has captured the changing life of Malian society. Sculptor Coulibaly Siaka Paul describes Sidibé's photographs as "bringing me back to my own past as an African. The atmosphere, the costumes represent a period, a fashion, a history that, today, are part of our culture."² As with Sidibé's photographs, the work of Guebehi, Kouakou and Paul is deeply bound up in the community. They regularly create sculptures for local ceremonies, parties, and dances. Strongly influenced by the collective participation of their culture, the sculptors' works contribute to the stability of the community and contribute to the next generation of traditional African sculptors. As Sidibé's photographs form a record of life in a large urban center, the sculptures of Guebehi, Kouakou and Paul offer a glimpse into the visual history of more isolated regions.

More so than artists who live in big urban centers, artists from isolated regions of Africa have an artistic production essentially linked to the local culture. The myths, beliefs, rituals, and forces of the local environment shape their artwork. Consequently, often their artwork does not have much bearing outside the territory where it was conceived. Nevertheless, certain artists working in these isolated environments have incorporated outside elements into their work. One only needs to see, for example, the work of Emile Guebehi from the Ivory Coast, not far from Abidjan, to be convinced of this fact. For thirty years, Emile Guebehi has created made-to-order sculptures for the community of Ebrié. His sculptures depict day-to-day life, the history of the community, and other scenes from the villages. However, he also creates polychrome sculptures, using the same techniques, for international clients. His work not only represents an important artistic heritage, but also maintains a true link with the community.

By uniting Malick Sidibé's photographs with the polychrome sculptures of Emile Guebehi, Koffi Kouakou and Coulibaly Siaka Paul, *Clubs of Bamako* combines tradition and modernism to offer two different, yet complimentary, realizations and concepts of the same community.

– André Magnin

¹ Malick Sidibé, "Studio Malick" *Malick Sidibé*. Ed. André Magnin (Zurich/Berlin/New York: Scalo, 1998) 39.

² Coulibaly Siaka Paul, unpublished interview with Saxane Yaya.



ABOVE
Coulibaly Siaka Paul
Dancing Man, 1999
[with back on floor]

RIGHT
Malick Sidibé
On the floor under their feet, 1972





Installation view
Deitch Projects, New York 1999



Malick Sidibé
Christmas Eve, 1963



Malick Sidibé
Drissa Balo Wedding Party, 1967



Malick Sidibé
James Brown Fans, 1965



Emile Guebehi
Dancing Woman, 1999
[yellow and green striped short dress]



Coulibaly Siaka Paul
Dancing Woman, 1999
[crouching low]

About the Artists

Malick Sidibé

Born c. 1935 in Soloba, Mali, Malick Sidibé began working as a photographer in 1957. He is best known for the candid shots that he took at local parties, clubs and other gatherings of young people in the 1960s and 70s. He recalls that:

I was always on the lookout for a photo opportunity, a light-hearted moment, an original attitude, or some guy who was really funny. When young people dance, they're spellbound by the music. In that atmosphere, people didn't pay attention to me any more. That's how I took advantage of the situation and got people in positions that interested me.¹

Originally intending his photographs to serve as souvenirs for the club-goers, Sidibé never anticipated that they would gain the international attention they have received in recent years. Since 1995 he has had exhibitions of his work in Paris, Edinburgh, Montreal, San Francisco, Stuttgart, Madrid, Sydney, New York and Chicago. Sidibé still lives and works in Bamako, doing portrait photography and camera repair.

Emile Guebehi

Emile Guebehi was born in 1937 in the village of Nekedi, Abidjan, Ivory Coast. He began his artistic career by doing charcoal drawings on the walls of houses, but found more favor when he began sculpting. He created a wooden statue for a local healer and then was invited to create a series of works for the Ebrie community in Songon Dagbé in the Abidjan area. Now known as the "Master of Nekedi," Guebehi creates life-size sculptures from wood and paint, and arranges them to recreate scenes from the village history, fables and daily life.

Koffi Kouakou

Koffi Kouakou was born in the Ivory Coast in 1962. His father, Toungbo Koffi was an artist who created gold-covered sculptures in a traditional African style. Koffi Kouakou's work is more self-consciously modern. His first commission came from a European who asked him to create a sculpture of a shirt. Since then, all of his sculptures have been sold outside of the Ivory Coast. Like Guebehi and Paul, portraiture is central to Kouakou's work.

Coulibaly Siaka Paul

Coulibaly Siaka Paul was born c. 1964 to a family of traditional Ivory Coast sculptors. He learned the art of sculpture from his father and went on to create religious sculptures for missionaries in the center/west of the Ivory Coast.

¹ Malick Sidibé, "Studio Malick" *Malick Sidibé*. Ed. André Magnin (Zurich/Berlin/New York: Scalo 1998) 37.



Exhibition Checklist

All photographs are by Malick Sidibé and are gelatin silver prints. The photographs were taken in the nightclubs of Bamako, Mali in the late 1960s and early 70s and sold as postcards and souvenirs to the club-goers. They have been enlarged and reprinted for the purpose of exhibition.

Photographs

1. *I am Crazy for Records*, 1973
Printed 1999
13 3/4 x 9 1/2 inches
2. *Picnic at the Chaussée*, 1972
Printed 1998
16 3/4 x 16 7/8 inches
3. *On the Floor Under Their Feet*, 1972
Printed 1999
13 3/4 x 9 1/4 inches
4. *Very Good Friends in the Same Outfit*, 1972
Printed 1999
21 1/8 x 14 1/8 inches
5. *Look at Me with My Dark Glasses and My Hat*, 1969
Printed 1998
13 3/4 x 9 1/4 inches
6. *Bartenders*, 1968
Printed 1999
9 1/4 x 13 3/4 inches
7. *With My Bag, Rings, and Bracelets*, 1968
Printed 1999
16 3/4 x 17 inches
8. *Karim Keïta, The Gentleman*, 1967
Printed 1999
13 7/8 x 9 1/4 inches
9. *Drissa Balo Wedding Party*, 1967
Printed 1999
14 x 9 7/16 inches
10. *Babenco Club*, 1966
Printed 1998
16 3/4 x 17 inches
11. *The Technician of Radio Mali*, 1966
Printed 1999
13 3/4 x 10 1/4 inches
12. *Dance the Twist!*, 1965
Printed 1998
39 1/8 x 39 1/8 inches

13. *James Brown Fans*, 1965
Printed 1998
17 3/8 x 11 3/8 inches
14. *Merengue Dancer*, 1964
Printed 1998
13 7/8 x 9 3/8 inches
15. *Christmas Eve*, 1963
Printed 1999
47 x 44 7/16 inches
16. *Look at Me!*, 1962
Printed 1999
16 3/4 x 17 inches

Sculptures (All sculptures are polychromed wood)

1. **Emile Guebehi**
Standing Man, 1999 [holding record album]
69 1/2 x 34 x 25 inches
2. *Dancing Woman*, 1999 [yellow and green striped short dress]
71 x 37 x 29 inches
3. **Koffi Kouakou**
Standing Man, 1999 [in dark brown suit and hat]
70 x 18 x 11 inches
4. **Coulibaly Siaka Paul**
Dancing Man, 1999 [with back on floor]
22 x 27 x 62 inches
5. *Dancing Woman*, 1999 [crouching low]
50 x 21 x 22 inches
6. *Dancing Man*, 1999 [leaning back]
64 x 36 x 24 inches
7. *Dancing Woman*, 1999 [in striped dress and sunglasses]
56 1/2 x 25 1/2 x 29 inches
8. *Dancing Man*, 1999 [bent knees and slouching shoulders]
67 x 25 x 25 inches
9. *Dancing Man*, 1999 [crouching low]
50 x 27 x 26 inches
10. *Dancing Woman*, 1999 [crouching low in dark print dress]
52 x 24 x 30 inches
11. *Dancing Woman*, 1999 [slouching forward, heel raised]
63 x 25 x 27 inches



Malick Sidibé
Picnic at the Chaussée, 1972

Rice University Art Gallery