

For Immediate Release

AUTOPORTRAITS

Photographs by Samuel Fosso

27th November to 2nd January 2009 (Extended till 10th January, 2009)

Collaboration between Photoink, The Embassy of France in India & CulturesFrance

We are delighted to present *Autoportraits* by Samuel Fosso at Photoink. This exhibition marks the first occasion for such an internationally renowned African photographer's works to be seen in India. Fosso has spent over thirty years photographing the one subject he knows and understands so well – himself. A lot is written about the intentionality of photographers, who photograph themselves. For Fosso, the self-portraits were initially made to send back to his family in Biafra. They remained hidden in boxes till Bernard Descamps came looking for African photographers to initiate the first Bamako festival in 1994. For Fosso, any interest in his self-portraits for an exhibition was a strange proposal but he finally acquiesced. From that moment on, Fosso's life changed and his work became part of the larger history of photography, shown across festivals, museums and galleries outside Africa.

Fosso's early black-and-white self-portraits in the studio were a radical departure from the existing studio practices in Western Africa. In the after hours, the studio became his theatre where he acted out boyhood fantasies, recalling musicians, actors and celebrities whom he wanted to ape. Looking back at this playful staging, the self-portraits fashioned a sense of African identity that was already brimming with tensions. He acted out taboos and this early self-assertion of individuality later translated into more complex scenes that addressed African masculinity, identity and sexuality. In 1997, Fosso adapted to colour and the tableaux he created defined a specific place for the African male body in the world. Memory and history continue to play an important role in the way he transforms himself, becoming the signifier of his ancestry and modern icons.

The works on view represent a significant part of Fosso's self-portraits from 1976 to 2003.

BIOGRAPHY

Born in Kumba, Cameroon in 1962, Fosso was paralysed in his arms and legs for the first four years of his life. Desperate to have him cured, his mother took him back to her native village in the South-Eastern part of Nigeria – to Biafra. In 1967, a year after he recovered, Colonel Ojukwu declared the independence of Biafra from Nigeria. What followed was one of the worst civil wars in Africa where an estimated 1 million people died. Fosso and his family survived by fleeing to the forests and lived like refugees. In 1972, Fosso was brought to Bangui, capital of the Central African Republic, by an uncle, who taught him the craft of shoemaking. At the time, there were only two photography studios in Bangui and young Fosso nursed a great desire to learn photography. He apprenticed at one of the studios and in 1975, his uncle, convinced of his talent, helped him set up his own studio, 'Studio Photo National'. He continues to live and work in Bangui.

Fosso's works have traveled far and wide. His solo exhibitions were shown at – Recontres d'Arles photography festival in Arles (2008), 7th Recontres Africaines de la Photographie in Bamako, Mali (2007), The Platform for Art, London Underground, Gloucester Road Station in London (2005), Centro internazionale do Fotografia Scavi Scaligeri, Verona, Italy (2004), PhotoEspana in Madrid (2003), Centre Nationale de la Photographie in Paris (1995) to make a few.

His works have been included in major group exhibitions – *Street and Studio, An Urban History of Photography* at TATE MODERN in London (2008), *Masquerade: The Self in Contemporary Art*, Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney (2006), *The whole World is Rotten*, Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati (2006), 9th Havana Biennale in Cuba (2006), *Africa Remix*, Centre Pompidou in Paris (2005), 26th Sao Paulo Biennale in Sao Paulo (2004), *Image and Identity: Portraits by Philip Kwama Apagya, Samuel Fosso, Seydou Keita and Malick Sidibé*, Sheldon Art galleries in Saint Louis (2004), *In/Sight: African Photographers, 1940 to the present*, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York (1996) amongst many others.