

the guide to...

Viewing Fosso

Gargi Gupta

There's something impishly charming about Samuel Fosso. Dressed in black trunks and white gloves, he stands presenting a dandy profile to the camera, his eyes fixed somewhere on his biceps in the classic male model pose. In another, he seems to be doing a small jig, dressed in long flaring pants and a flowery print short jacket — a young Michael Jackson?

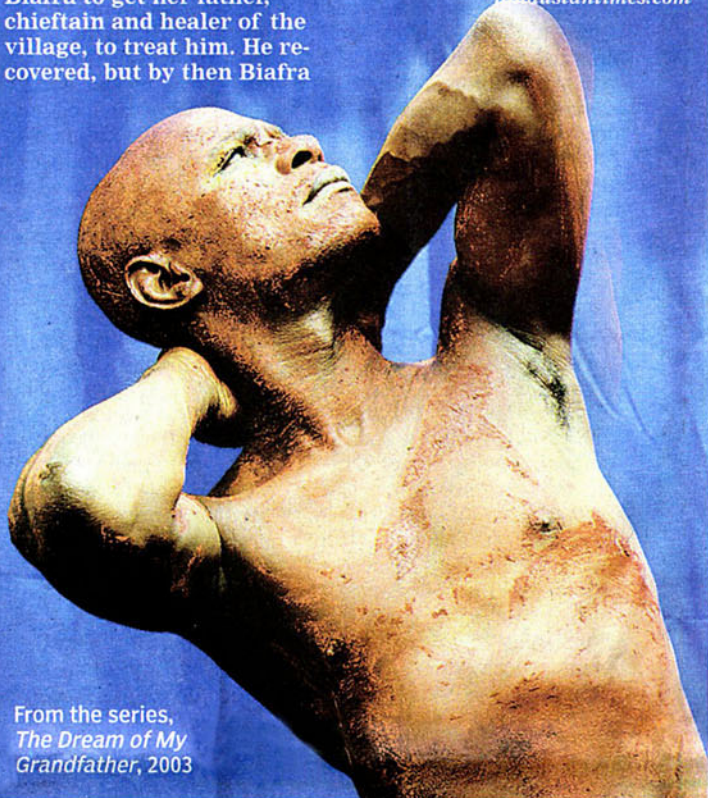
This is Samuel Fosso, known the world over for his self-portraits, an exhibition of whose works called Auto-portraits is on at Delhi's Photoink gallery. This is the first time Fosso will be seen in India, but he's among most highly regarded of African contemporary photographers today.

Fosso was born in Cameroon, paralysed in the arms and legs. When he was four, his mother took him to Biafra to get her father, chieftain and healer of the village, to treat him. He recovered, but by then Biafra

had declared independence and the family found itself in the midst of a bloody civil war. But none of these tensions and privations seem apparent in Fosso's work, especially in the early black-and-whites which come alive with the young boy's (they were done when he was only around 14) delight in dressing up and acting out his fantasies, of being, as he says, both "character and director".

In the later colour portraits, titled *Sailor, Chief, Bourgeois*, Fosso explores issues — identity, sexuality, etc — but even here you can see he is having fun. It's only *Dreams of my Grandfather*, his recent work where Fosso shoots himself in the process of 'becoming' his grandfather; that draws on his own early trauma and the fraught history of his country. But there are some things a man can't smile at.

gargi.gupta@hindustantimes.com



From the series,
The Dream of My Grandfather, 2003