

If it is Tuesday, I am an African chief

Prominent photographer Samuel Fosso brings his arresting self portraits as a pirate, tribal chief, businessman, a society woman — and tells the tale of Central African Republic

PHOTO COURTESY: JM PATRAS



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SAMUEL Fosso is a name familiar to the people of Bangui in war-torn Central African Republic (CAR). He was, after all, their “little boy”. In 1975, as a 13-year-old, he opened his studio, Photo National, in the suburbs of Bangui. While the country, one of the poorest in the world, starved and was convulsed by coups after its liberation from France in 1960, Fosso turned his studio into a make-believe land. He deftly applied make-up on his clients, lent them new clothes and made them pose against fake backgrounds of metropolitan cities. And when the last customer left, he played out his own fantasies, con-

verting his studio into a burlesque stage, posing before his Yashica double-lens camera in briefs and bellbottoms, ludicrously printed shirts and sometimes even a pair of white gloves.

The Cameroon-born photographer, who is in Delhi for the first time for his show “Autoportraits” at Photoink gallery, says, “I wanted to escape the demons of my childhood. The process of coming in front of the camera was liberating. When I opened the studio, people came to see me, a young photographer, at work and I taught them how to be in front of the camera.”

Fosso, who fled to CAR in 1972 to escape the Biafran civil war in Nigeria, worked in his uncle’s factory in the morning and did chores for his wife in the evening. And one day, he chanced upon a studio run by a Nigerian. “I wanted to do something similar, a neat and tidy job,” says Fosso through a translator. So, armed with his uncle’s permission he opened the studio. And in the middle of the night, he became a young sailor, a pirate, a dull suited businessman and a lover kitted in fashionable bellbottoms and a flower-printed shirt — the last was much like Prince Nico, the Nigerian singer who made *Sweet Mother* the African national anthem. And then in 1994, he was

discovered by a French talent scout scouring Africa for photographers.

“I watched movies, looked at newspapers and researched each character I portrayed. They are all true stories,” says Fosso, dressed in a casual black leather jacket. Though some critics regard the self portraits as unoriginal and self-indulgent, Fosso insists, “The works *From the Dreams of My Grandfather* is a tribute to my grandfather who is a second god to me. Would anybody be self-indulgent in portraying his grandfather?” His discovery not only made him a celebrity but also brought art from Africa suddenly into focus. “It helped me financially,” says Fosso.

The 30 photographs on display date from 1976 to 2003, from early black-and-white poses in striped briefs and white gloves on a checkered floor to the pronounced *Tati* series where he turns into a bedecked African chief, a body-guard brandishing flashy glares and a

society woman trussed in a black dress with faux fur. Would he contemplate moving to Europe? “No, this is my land,” emphasises Fosso, based in Bangui.

The exhibition is on till January 2, 2009. From 11am to 7 pm. Contact 28755940. Price on request.

