

I, me and my image

Samuel Fosso, one of Africa's best-known photographers, is showing for the first time in India.

Self-portraits are Fosso's forte — something he has been doing for 32 years now, starting as a 13-year-old who would dress up and pose in front of the camera at night, after his day's work at the photo studio in Bangui. In this, he's very similar to Pushpamala N, whose oeuvre in the past decade — whether in exhibitions like 'Phantom Lady' or the recent 'Paris Autumn' — has centred around elaborate imageries built around a central character, played by herself.

GARGI GUPTA sits them face-to-face and discusses their singular art



PHOTO CREDIT: NATIVE WOMEN OF SOUTH INDIA; MANNERS AND CUSTOMS BY PUSHPAMALA N AND CLAIRE ARNI



GG: How did you come to photograph yourself?

SF: Christmas time is very important in central Africa and lots of studio photography is done at that time. But the portraits that people would make of me would ridicule me. I always thought I was the one who knew how to photograph myself.

PN: I was a sculptor and it happened quite by chance, more out of my love of the 'popular' and my interest in cinema. It was a hundred years of cinema in 1996 and a Mumbai gallery had asked artists to make one work on cinema. I had always liked this Fearless Nadia character; I had a photograph of hers and I said let me stitch this costume, and I asked a young friend to take my pictures. But when I was looking through the rolls, they were really interesting. So I decided to make an entire story around it.

But I don't take my own photographs. I work more like a film director, work out the scene and direct other people to take photographs.

MY PHOTOGRAPHY IS A STATEMENT. THERE IS SOMETHING AFTER WAR, AFTER DISABILITY, SUFFERING... THIS IS ME AND I AM JUMPING ALL OVER AND I AM HAPPY

— SAMUEL FOSSO

SF: Do you work in a studio? Do you get someone to think of costumes?

PN: I work in different ways. This costume [right: Phantom Lady] I copied from a photograph and asked a tailor to make it. Some things I hire from a costume company. It is all very cheaply done. For example, when I did this work I didn't pay the photographer. Later on when I sold some works, I paid her. Artist friends feature

in my work. I choose the locations.

SF: You're lucky (laughs), you manage without having to run a photo studio!

PN: You still have the studio?

SF: Yes. A number of customers come in, but less than before because customers today are more attracted by colour and I still work in black-and-white. But now I have a digital camera — so I take colour portraits — and a printer.

PN: Self-portraiture is always connected with narcissism. But you've said that you saw it as a healing.

SF: Doing self-portraits is a liberating process for me. A lot of my work deals with pain, the pain inflicted when I was a child and we were going through the Biafra war in Nigeria. There is that story I am telling and I can only tell it through me. I also want to tell the story of the opposite of that, the story of the people who liberated Africa, and also those who've made the world a little better than it was when I was born. This is my



PUSHPAMALA N/INDIAN LADY



DRESSING UP: (Clockwise from top) Fosso, the dashing pirate; young Fosso, circa 1970s; Pushpamala in Fearless Nadia gear; the artist in the image of the goddess Laxmi

way of thanking them, of paying tribute.

PN: I think it's also celebration. It's very witty, very funny. For me, too, using self-portraits is liberating, an opening up of one's persona to many possibilities.

SF: Yes, it's like you've been in one of the hotels in Mumbai and you made it out. You can't forget it. Ever.

PN: These me of 'Great Women of India', a play my mother made us do which had all these women from mythology to history — Maitreyi, Sita, Rani of Jhansi, et al — coming on stage. What you're doing is similar... a roster of the great black heroes of Africa.

SF: I am not embodying heroes because I'll never be a hero. I am just representing them, in a specific moment.

GG: Have you ever had a problem with the way the West sees Africa?

SF: I was not interested in going to the forests and shooting pygmies and poor people. The only image that people would get of Africa was that of poverty. That was something my practice was against. Actually my photography is a statement, that there is something after war, after disability, suffering... this is me

and I am jumping all over and I am happy. **PN:** The photo studio in these early photographs is like a mini stage. It has a curtain, a painted backdrop, a stage-like thing, props and costumes, and these spotlights.

SF: We would use blue or green as backdrop because people didn't want their skin to appear too black. The lighting would be completely homemade. Most of the early photographs were taken not only for myself but also for testing the lighting. We would buy steel basins, make a hole, and put a steel rod through it. Because I was very small when I started, I had to cut the tripod.

PN: Have you exhibited in Bangui (in Central African Republic)? What has been the reaction?

SF: I exhibited twice in Bangui. People are starting to appreciate that photography can be an art. Not just me, but also Seydou Keita, Malik Sidibe.

PN: The Bamako Biennale must have helped. In fact, you were discovered there...

SF: I have showed four times there. Bamako is the capital of photography on the African continent. There is the biennale, and also the school of photograph there.

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Fosso's exhibition, *Autoportraits*, is on at the Photonik Gallery in New Delhi till January 2