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VISUAL ARTS

Photo exhibition challenges stereotypes of African life

BY JOANNE E. MCFADDEN
For The Daily Gazette

The Mandeville Gallery's latest exhibition both raises and challenges stereotypes about Africans.

"African Photography, For Whose Eyes? Constructing and Deconstructing Identities" takes viewers on a tour, looking at Africans through the eyes of 15 internationally known photographers from nine countries across the vast continent.

"African Photography," which is on exhibit through May 13, is the work of the Union College gallery's interim curator, Marie Costello.

Costello has used an interesting technique to expose the stereotypes held by Westerners. She culled 80 missionary postcards from the library at Yale Divinity School, which she displays in cases around the circular gallery inside the Nott Memorial. Juxtaposed with the work of contemporary photographers, the cards reveal a difference that is hard to ignore.

The postcards, which range in date from 1910 to 1940, highlight what is most different about Africans as compared to Europeans. For example, some focus on Africans' jewelry, tribal dress and hairstyles. Others show Africans with or working for the missionaries, emphasizing the missionaries' sense of superiority.

One set features some of the most exotic images one might see in Africa, such as warriors in tribal dress or a boy posed with a monkey. It was almost like people had to perform their past, feeding into the stereotypes, Costello said. All of the postcards were designed to show the missionaries' need to "civilize" the Africans, she said.

OTHER VIEWPOINTS

On the walls opposite the postcards are images by African photographers, from playful portraits with a sense of humor to provocative statements on Africa's colonial past and everything in between.

Nigerian-born Iké Udé, who will speak at Union during the exhibition, contributes a self-portrait, "Sartorial Anarchy Untitled 4" (2010), in which he plays around with the ideas of identity and how dress is a form of identification. He strikes an elegant pose, wearing plaid knickers, a brightly colored African cape and a hat with purple flowers. Udé, who is known for his work that explores various dualities, is the publisher of aRUDE magazine.

Samuel Fosso of Cameroon uses his body to perform history and culture. In his self-portraits, he looks at how fashion constructs an identity. In one portrait, he shows himself as a young, hip, wealthy person. His portraits poke a little fun at the photography that was so popular in Africa for ID cards and mementos.

A self-portrait of an entirely different kind is presented by South African Berni Searle. A 1998 untitled work from her "Colour Me Series" shows her head and shoulders covered with a red-orange spice as she is lying down and looking directly into the camera. This photographer uses her body as performance, and the spice is a historical reference to the Dutch East India spice trade and the clays that Africans applied to themselves for initiation rites.

Kenyan Grace Ndiritu also presents a self-portrait, in the form of a 3-minute video where she uses her body as an art form. "She's challenging the viewer here," Costello said. She sits on top of and behind a piece of African fabric and manipulates the fabric to expose her body.

In her photograph, "Girl in Red, Tangier," Yto Barrada of Morocco makes a statement about the 9-mile gap between Europe and Africa across the Strait of Gibraltar. "The whole city is focused on getting across this nine miles," Costello said. The photograph shows a woman dressed in a red, flower print dress staring at a mosaic wall with her back to the camera, in essence, turning her back on her African culture.

The exhibition includes a black-and-white photograph by Seydou Keïta of Mali, the most renowned studio photographer in Africa. It shows a young woman, elegantly dressed and posed, holding a flower, with her eyes looking downward against a backdrop of African fabric. "He wanted to make people beautiful," Costello said.

Philip Kwame Apagya of Ghana uses brightly colored painted backdrops by local artists for his studio portraits, and they're just plain fun, showing subjects interacting with the backdrops in an Internet café, with warriors in tribal dress and at the beach.

Malick Sidibé's black-and-white photos are fun, too, pointing out how very much the same people can be, regardless of where in the world they live. A series of six photographs capture the idealism of the young people of his homeland, Mali, during the 1960s and 1970s. They're clearly having a good time and wearing the same wild fashions that were popular in the U.S. during that era.

"It was a time when Mali had a sense of hopefulness and optimism," Costello said. "That was really salient in the culture. He was really capturing the youth at that moment. They thought the whole world was ahead of them."

LIFE TODAY

Other photographers document life in Africa today. Djibril Sy's color photographs from 2008 and 2009 show elegantly dressed women gathering their ration of water at a local well in Senegal, while another jumps into a river of clean water in celebration.

Boubacar Touré Mandémory, also of Senegal, shoots from a low angle. His color photographs show a young man carrying an armful of fish and a woman dancing an initiation dance.

South African Zwelethu Mthethwa shows women in their living spaces, simple dwellings created out of shacks with cardboard and fabric-lined walls. "He wanted to show through color a more humanized look," Costello said. "They create their own beauty and decor."

Guy Tillim, famous for his photography during apartheid, captures moments of time in South Africa. His black-and-white photograph shows two brothers against a backdrop of newspaper headlines tacked up on the wall.

Obie Oberholzer's two-color photographs in the exhibition are a humorous portrait of gas station attendants with their company's mascot, a zebra, as well as an artsy, time-exposure photograph of Adderley Street in downtown Cape Town with its neon lights during the Soccer World Cup in 2010.

Egyptian Nabil Boutros shows a night streetscape of Alexandria, which he sees as a modern city.

David Goldblatt portrays a sobering reality of his native South Africa with his 2002 photo "Blue Asbestos Fibers on a Tailings Dump at the Owendale Asbestos Mine." This photo was the first that Goldblatt had shot in color. Asbestos mining did a great deal of damage to the people and land around the mine.

COMPANION PIECE

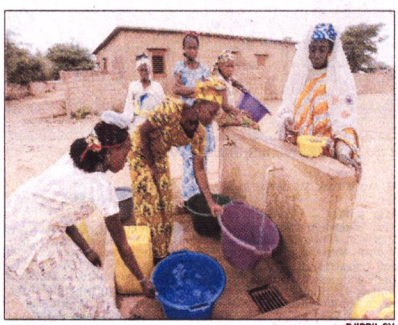
As a companion to the photographs, Costello provides copies of Drum, a magazine published by blacks in South Africa in the 1950s, again showing how they saw themselves, in contrast to how Europeans saw them.

In addition to the work itself, the exhibition offers some food for thought. "I want people to look at how one culture can frame another culture that isn't theirs in a way that is not really their culture," Costello said.



COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK

"Untitled (Interiors Series)" from 1997 by Zwelethu Mthethwa is part of "African Photography, For Whose Eyes? Constructing and Deconstructing Identities."



DJIBRIL SY

"Dans le village de Bow au Nord du Senegal" by Djibril Sy is part of "African Photography, For Whose Eyes? Constructing and Deconstructing Identities."



COURTESY OF STUX GALLERY, NEW YORK

"Sartorial Anarchy, Untitled 4" from 2010, by Iké Udé (who will be appearing at Union College), is part of "African Photography, For Whose Eyes? Constructing and Deconstructing Identities."

'African Photography, For Whose Eyes? Constructing and Deconstructing Identities'

WHERE: Mandeville Gallery, Nott Memorial, Union College, Schenectady
WHEN: Through May 13, Monday through Sunday, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.
HOW MUCH: Free.
RELATED EVENTS:
- 6-7:30 p.m. today: Reception, with Senegalese entertainment
- 5 p.m. Thursday, April 26: Photographer Iké Udé to speak on his work in the worlds of art and fashion.

MORE INFO: 388-8360, www.union.edu/gallery. Guided tours available upon request

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>
> **MARIE COSTELLO**
> Interim curator, Mandeville Gallery