

Daniel / Oliver

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Press release

Daniel / Oliver Gallery presents a new online exhibition, Adama Kouyaté - 50 Works, comprised primarily of vintage studio portraits by the Malian photographer, alongside a small selection of large-format works. Open November 2nd-26th, the exhibition focuses mainly on the Artist's studio practices, highlighting his unique, convivial style and photographic competence while also promoting ideas of the photo studio as an integral social hub within a community. The photographs, mostly taken at Kouyaté's third and final studio, Photo Hall d'Union, chronicle men, women, and children in a newly-liberated Mali—symbolized through personal props, bright fashion, and loud body language, the country's newfound freedom is put boldly on display.

Before the colloquial use of cameras in a region, studios are the principal sites of photography. The novel significance of sitting for a portrait is evident in early daguerreotypes or carte de visites. Much like these Western antecedents, the portraits taken by Kouyaté and his contemporaries in West Africa, such as Malick Sidibé and Seydou Keïta, served a similar function. Portraits were a staged and orchestrated event; subjects would very carefully choose how they would want to be immortalized in print by choice of clothing, jewelry, and other accessories. However, unlike the more formal nature of early Western portrait studios, the West African studios took on more of a social function. While Kouyaté's early work consisted mostly of commissioned portraits of life milestones such as weddings and births, his later work captures a more celebratory slice of life for the people of West Africa during the shifting political landscape. The effects of liberation are visible in the photographs as globalization takes its toll. Subjects are seen wearing Western clothing and sometimes even pose with their motorbikes.

Adama Kouyaté was born in the small town of Bougouni, Mali (then French-Sudan) in 1928. Kouyaté moved to the capital city of Bamako and discovered a love for photography in 1946 when he commissioned a Christmas portrait of him and his girlfriend by the well-known photographer, Bakary Doumbia. He was mentored by the aforementioned Doumbia as well as the French talent, Pierre Garnier. Kouyaté's apprenticeships led to the eventual founding of his own studio in the neighboring town of Kati in 1949. By the start of the 1960s, Kouyaté relocated to Burkina Faso and worked at 'Photo Halls Voltaic' until he was forced out by a 1966 coup d'état. From there he established a studio in the city of Bouaké in Cote d'Ivoire, where he worked for three more years. In 1969, the photographer returned home to Mali and founded his third and final studio, "Photo Hall d'Union," in the city of Segou. It was here the artist would begin to capture the sanguine energy of a post-war Mali.

Kouyaté continued to live and work in Segou until his recent death in 2020. While he maintained his popularity throughout his career, he only gained international acclaim in the 1990s. His work has been shown at institutions such as the Michigan State University Museum (2018), the Perlman Teaching Museum (2012), and the Palais de l'Archevêché (2004).

1002 Metropolitan Avenue, #11, Brooklyn, NY 11211
danielolivergallery@gmail.com | o. (914) 417-7869 | d. (650) 575-7459