Photo exhibition challenges stereotypes of African life

BY JOANNE E. MCAFadden
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The Mandeville Gallery's latest exhibition both raises and questions stereotypes about Africa.

"African Photography, For Whose Eyes? Constructing and Deconstructing Identities" takes us in Africa, such as warriors in tribal dress or a boy posing with a monkey. It was almost like people had been performing their part, 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 Bok Udoli, who will speak at Union during the exhibition, contributes a self-portrait, "Sartorial Anarchy: Untitled 6" (2010), in which he plays around with the ideas of identity and how dress is a form of identity, wearing gladnkids, a brightly colored African cape and a hat with purple flowers. Udoli, who is known for his work that explores Yoruba culture, is the publisher of Atlanta-based magazine, 'Candystripes.'

'Safari' is a portrait of a woman's body holding a towel and looking directly into the camera. This photographer uses her body as performance, and the space is a historical reference to the Dutch East Indies after trade and the days that Africans applied to themselves for initiation ceremonies. Kenyan Grace Ndiritu also presents a self-portrait, in the form of a 5-minute video where she uses her body as art form. "She's challenging the viewer here," Costello said. She then uses a video and behind a piece of African fabric and repetitively the fabric to expose her body.

In her photograph, "Girl in Red, Tangier," Yvo Karinna of Morocco makes a statement about the male gaze 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 photography by Seydou Keita 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 down toward against a backdrop of African fabric. "He wanted to make people beautiful," Costello said.

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

Malick Sidibe'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 styles as 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."

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Interim curator, Mandeville Gallery

GUY TILLIM, famous for his photography during apartheid, captures memories of time in South Africa. His black-and-white photographs show two brothers against a backdrop of newspaper headlines tacked up on the wall. "He wanted to show through color a more humanized look," Costello said. "They create their own beauty and decor."

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