Clarity in contrast

Union College exhibit offers a fresh perspective by setting contemporary African photography beside 19th-century postcards

By Amy Griffin

A

image of photographed African photographs by contemporary African photographers with 19th-century missionary postcards to investigate how African photography can objectively— or who can controversial.

The postcards included images of African as he did, and depict scenes of daily life, and helped to understand some of the more pervasive stereotypes. It's a perfect idea, as Nigeria-born writer Tony Cole (a visiting writer at Bard College) recently penned an article on African photography for the Atlantic magazine. Article Title: "The White Man's Industrial Complex," addressing the continuing imperative to understand that Africa can only be defined or understood by outsiders.

Challenging this kind of colorblindness, this exhibit might have included the question "Through White Eyes?" It is the issue of the eyes of African photographers that you begin to see the range of experiences of both 19th- and 21st-century people on this continent.

In the exhibit, the postcards are presented in a circle around the gallery, leaving the most prominent wall space in the gallery for the photographs, a wise decision that celebrates and foregrounds the contemporary work.

The earliest contemporary work in the show is by Seydou Keita, a renowned studio-photographer from Mali who died in 2001. The phone ("Untitled, 1956-57") is a black-and-white portrait of a young woman with a gentle gaze and warm smile. The original, Marie Candia, a niece of the gallery, later wrote in her catalog essay that the woman is a restorer of a Renaissance Madonna, and indeed the black-bowed woman black hat appears as a kind of halo around her head. Ghanaian Philip Kweku Angyem, like Saito, is a studio photographer who photographs clients, often for 100 guilders or gifts. His fiber photos with painted backgrounds offer exoticized or disheveled scenes (the client chooses which image to project, but the curved painted backdrops frame the image and create a surreal effect, in contrast to the elegance of Eastern beauty portraits.

Among the photographers using themselves as subjects are South African Romo Sebele and Ngoteng Bele. Uke plays with the studio photographic convention while critiquing balding photography in "Memorial Portrait (Ukete)" (2010). Saito's 1996-97 self-portrait from her "Color Me" series spent the sporting term for styled hair, "colored," by covering her head with nuts and seeds and licking the viewer's hair with her own.

One of the few black images in the show is a striking landscape by Donald Goldin, a South African son of Lithuanian immigrants. A black and white landscape with another planet—brown rocks in the sun in a empty space. Among the works is something resembling blue art. The title, "Blue horizon" shows on a color photograph by the Overseas Archive, Poonamsburg District, Western Cape, October 29, 2002," explains the description you make with horror the full impact such mining must have had. Also included in the show are 'Yan Bả ranch, Nabi Bounou, Ibrahima Fofana, Bouah Touré Madjigou, Zuwatina Amadou, Ous Ouschoh, Malick Sall, Djamal Sy and Guy Télibe, as well as examples from the early days of Drum magazine, which, the wall text explains, became an influential vehicle for African self-expression.

Although a portrait of an entire continent is impossible, by the agency of these photographs, set in their own context, a rich and complex view of Africa can be found in this exhibit.


On exhibit:

**African Photography: For Whose Image? Constructing and Deconstructing Identity**

**Where:** Mondelle Gallery, Nelson Memorial Union College Campus, Schenectady

**When:** Through May 13; Tues., Wed., Thurs. 12-5 p.m.

**Admission:** Free

**Web:** 518-388-6729; http://www.union.edu/Resources/Campus/ art/Events/

**Events:**

**Reception:** Featuring photographers and curators, Thursday April 12, 5-7 p.m.

**Lecture:** Join us for this week's event on Thursday April 26, 5 p.m.

By Amy Griffin is a frequent contributor to the Times Union.

"DANGEROUS WATER" by Susan M. Morgan, 1985, is an oil on canvas painting at the Museum of Art and Design. The painting "Color Me" is by Seydou Keita.

"UNTITLED, 1956-87" was made by Seydou Keita, a renowned studio-photographer from Mali who died in 2001.