

BATES COLLEGE MUSEUM OF ART

THIS UNTITLED self-portrait is part of Berni Searle's "Colour Me" series. It is part of "African Photography, For Whose Eyes?: Constructing and Deconstructing Identities" at the Mandeville Gallery at Union College, Schenectady.



Clarity in contrast

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



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THIS IMAGE, "Chief Holding Spear And Bow, Central African Republic, ca. 1920-1940," is part of "African Photography" exhibition at Union College.

By Amy Griffin

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taposes photographs made by contemporary African photographers with 19th-century missionary postcards to investigate how photography can objectify people — or whole continents.

The postcards infantilized Africans as helpless, exotic oddities in need of saving and helped solidify some of the most pervasive stereotypes of this diverse population. It's a persistent idea, as Nigeria-born writer Teju Cole (a visiting writer at Bard College) recently pointed out in an Atlantic magazine article "The White Savior Industrial Complex," addressing the continuing impulse to think that Africa can only be saved or defined by outsiders.

Challenging that kind of colonialist thinking, this exhibit's title might have included the question "Through Whose Eyes?" as it is *through* the eyes of African photographers that you begin to see the range of experiences of 20th- and 21st-century people on this continent.

In the exhibit, the postcards are presented in cases around the gallery, leaving the more 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 photo ("Untitled, 1956-57") is a black-and-white portrait of a young woman, her gaze downcast but strong. The curator, Marie Costello, interim director of the gallery, writes in her catalog essay that the woman is reminiscent of a Renaissance Madonna, and indeed the woman's broad-brimmed black hat

new exhibit at Union College's Mandeville Gallery, "African Photography, For Whose Eyes?: Constructing and Deconstructing Identities," jux-

appears as a kind of halo around her head.

Ghanaian Philip Kwame Apagya, like Keita, is a studio photographer who photographs clients, often for ID cards or gifts. His color photos with painted backdrops of office cubicles or beach scenes let the client choose what image to project, but the curved painted backdrops flatten out the space and create a surreal effect, in contrast to the elegance of Keita's large-format portraits.

Among the photographers using themselves as subjects are South African Berni Searle and Nigerian Iké Udé. Udé plays with the studio photography convention while critiquing fashion photography in "Sartorial Anarchy Untitled 4" (2010). Searle's 1998 untitled self-portrait from her "Colour Me" series upends the apartheid term for mixed ethnicities, "coloured," by covering herself in red spices and meeting the viewer's gaze with her own.

One of the show's few images without people is a striking landscape by David Goldblatt, a South African son of Lithuanian immigrants. The scene looks like another planet — brown rocks bake in the sun on an empty expanse. Among the rocks is something resembling blue ash. The title, "Blue asbestos fibers on a tailings dump at the Owendale Asbestos Mine, Postmasburg District, Northern Cape, October 26, 2002" explains the desolation as you realize with horror the full impact such mining must have had.

Also included in this show are Yto Barrada, Nabil Boutros, Samuel Fosso, Boubacar Touré Mandémory, Zwelethu Mthethwa, Obie Oberholzer, Malick Sidibé, Djibril Sy, and Guy Tillim, 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 photographers, invested in their own countries, a rich and complex view of Africa can be found in this exhibit.

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

On exhibit

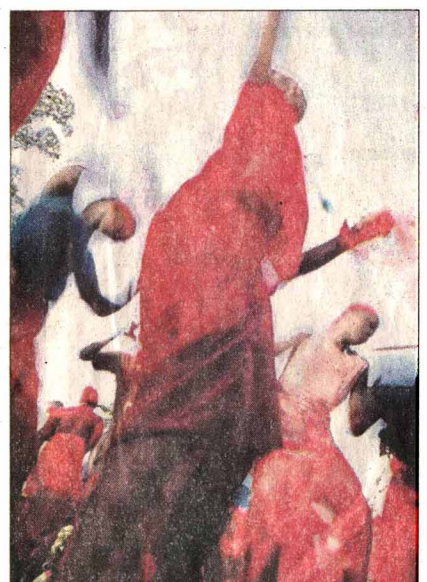
"AFRICAN PHOTOGRAPHY, FOR WHOSE EYES?: CONSTRUCTING AND DECONSTRUCTING IDENTITIES"

- **Where:** Mandeville Gallery, Nott Memorial, Union College Campus, Schenectady
- **When:** through May 13; hours: Monday through Sunday, 10-6 p.m.
- **Admission:** Free
- **Info:** 518-388-6729; <http://www.union.edu/Resources/Campus/mandeville/>
- **Events**
- **Reception:** Featuring Senegalese dancers and drummers, Thursday, April 12, 6-7:30 p.m.
- **Lecture:** Iké Udé will speak on his work Thursday April 26, 5 p.m.



JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK

"UNTITLED, 1956-57" was made by Seydou Keita, a renowned studio photographer from Mali who died in 2001.



"DANSE D'INITIATION à Djinoungué" is by Boubacar Touré Mandémory.