

SORY SANLÉ'S BURKINA FASO PORTRAITS GO ON SHOW IN LONDON

written by Diane Smyth

CAPTURING THE PEOPLE OF BURKINA FASO IN THE FIRST DECADES OF AFRICAN INDEPENDENCE, SANLÉ'S PORTRAITS ARE FINALLY WINNING INTERNATIONAL RECOGNITION

Never heard of Sory Sanlé? If so you're not alone – in fact he was aged 74 and living in obscurity when French record producer and writer Florent Mazzoleni came across him while researching popular West African music. Fascinated by his album covers, Mazzoleni arranged to meet him at his studio – only to find him burning his negatives.

“He said people didn't care about the old stuff,” Mazzoleni told the New York Times' Lens blog earlier this year. ‘I spent all night looking at his photos and negatives with a flashlight. He has tens of thousands of photos from the '60s, '70s and '80s. He gave me a box of negatives that I could print. That's how our relationship began’.

From this inauspicious start Sanlé's legacy is now seriously being reappraised. In 2013 he was given a solo show at the Institut Français du Burkina Faso in Ouagadougou and Bobo Dioulasso, and four of his shots are currently on show at the Fondation Cartier in Paris in the Autophoto exhibition, alongside work by icons such as William Eggleston, Man Ray, Lee Freidlander, Daido Moriyama, and Jacques-Henri Lartigue. Now London's Morton Hill Gallery has given him his first international a solo show, Volta Photo 1965-1985, backed up with a book of the same name published by Reel Art Press, Sanlé's first monograph.

Born in 1943 in Burkina Faso, when it was still a French colony known as Republique de Haute-Volta, Sanlé started taking photographs in 1960 – the year the country regained independence. He learned his trade working as an apprentice to a Ghanaian photographer, learning to how process and print and to use a Rolleiflex twin lens camera, and cutting his teeth working as a freelance reporter and shooting record covers. But studio photography was his passion, and by the mid-60s he had opened his own studio, Volta Photo, in his hometown, Bobo-Dioulasso.

Bobo-Dioulasso was Burkina Faso's cultural and economic hub, and Sanlé captured a broad range of its inhabitants – from the hip youngsters relishing its flourishing music scene, to the dignified elders fusing traditional and modern life – creating a fascinating portrait of a nation in the first decades of African independence. “Sory was a democratic photographer in a good sense,” Mazzoleni has said. “Rich people, poor people, religious people, artists, musicians; everyone could become a hero at his Volta studio.”