‘Photo-Rapide’ both exhibit and studio

Portraiture has Mali influence, sitter inputs

The portrait artist is responsible for creating an accurate image by placing the sitter in the right pose and surroundings. Artists have utilized photography for portraiture as early as 1839 as a way to capture the image of a person, with the photographer controlling the lighting and the composition.

Another approach to portraiture is when the sitter is allowed to control how the portrait is arranged, including props, background and the interactions with these items. With this in mind, the exhibit of “Malian Portrait Photography” and “Photo-Rapide: François Deschamps,” running concurrently at the Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art at the State University of New York at New Paltz, is a gem. For many years, photo studios have been an important way to document Malian culture. SUNY New Paltz Professor François Deschamps experienced this during his year in the West African nation of Mali during his recent yearlong Fulbright fellowship. His work took on the influence of Malian portrait photography, where the sitter interacts with the photographer in order to create a meaningful portrait. In this exhibit, Deschamps exhibits large-sized prints of these collaborations, showing bold colors and surprising combinations of the sitter, their clothing and their hands. Some portraits are more straightforward, such as the one of beautiful Gado Diallo, her serious gaze connects with the photographer, which contrasts with her whimsically bright headdress and blouse illustrated with yellow, red and blue conch shells.

In keeping with Malian tradition, Deschamps has set up a photo studio inside “Photo-Rapide,” where he is “in residence” on scheduled dates, taking photos and interacting with gallery attendees. The completed portraits are mounted on the wall beside his studio, allowing prospective clients to view his work. Stop by his studio and see the variety of props available for portraits, such as brightly patterned African cloth, musical instruments and an old battered suitcase — a handy prop if you wish a portrait depicting the day you left town.

Entering the exhibit on the wall directly in front, visitors see 24 hand-painted cutout wood portraits by Joseph Koné, which were commissioned by Deschamps as authentic signs to promote his “Photo-Rapide” studio. Koné painted these

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François Deschamps' 'Gado Diallo,' 2011, 24x35 pigment print, courtesy of the artist. COURTESY PHOTO
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signs from the portraits Deschamps provided as samples of his work. Visitors might be surprised to see Gado Diallo depicted once again as an advertising sign for the photographer’s work, as in the Malian tradition.

Visitors will be further enlightened on the history of Malian portrait photographers with the collections featured in this exhibit, such as the work of El Hadj Tijani Adigün Sitou, Abdourahmane Sakaly and Seydou Keïta. Comparing the historical photos taken more than 50 years ago with current trends, the clothing and props may have changed, but the Malian sense of identity remains.

Deschamps will be at the gallery Saturday and March 16, creating West African-style photo portraits of visitors in his studio, Photo-Rapide, 2-5 p.m. The Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art is located within SUNY New Paltz at 1 Hawk Drive, New Paltz. Gallery hours are Wednesday-Sunday, 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Visit www.newpaltz.edu/museum for information.

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