Have studio, will travel

SUNY New Paltz professor shows work done in Mali

By Deborah Medenbach

When SUNY New Paltz art professor François Deschamps traveled to Mali on a Fulbright fellowship in 2010, he dove into the deep tradition of West African photography that stretches back into the 1800s.

“He was very aware of the tradition of photography in Mali and wanted to draw on that in his own work,” said exhibit curator Daniel Leers. “He had a traveling studio and made digital photo frames around the images for his sitters. This is also traditional, because the old way was to make a glass frame of traditional Malian designs around a photo portrait. François’ are in paper.”

Deschamps’ yearlong exploration of portraiture is the focus of the “Photo-Rapide” exhibit that opens Jan. 23 at the Dorsky Museum of Art at SUNY New Paltz.

“A Fulbright is geared toward creating mutual understanding between countries, so half the time I was teaching and half the time I was doing my research and artwork,” Deschamps said. Teaching helped him understand how people solve problems and communicate their thoughts. “From there, the procedure I followed was that I would meet people and we would make an image together. I worked out of my backpack. I had my camera and a portable printer in there at all times. Sometimes I’d be at a store and chatting with the clerk and we’d get along well and I’d ask, ‘Can I take your picture?’ and that’s how it would happen.”

Deschamps formed ties in Mali that will bring him back to West Africa for additional projects. His year there has already changed the way he approaches his own work.

“It changed my approach to color. Previously my work had been somewhat monochromatic. I’m excited about having strong, vibrant color in my work now,” Deschamps said.

The Photo-Rapide show is paired with a display of more than 30 historical Malian portraitsfrom the 1950s-70s, created by some of the best-known portrait photographers of Africa, including Malick Sidibe and Seydou Keita.

“Much of this was material François brought back from his trip. He had prints made from the original negatives in Mali. The remainder are on loan,” said Leers, who also spent time in West Africa studying the photography there and has curated the photo collections at the Museum of Modern Art for five years.

A key curatorial aspect of this show centers on Mali’s independence from France in 1960. The art of photography was always technically equal to that of France or the U.S., but the focus shifted from French colonials capturing the exotic to Malians shaping their own national identity.

Dressed in modern clothes, sitters were placed against boldly designed Malian fabrics or painted scenes and wore culturally traditional jewelry. Indoor scenes were often set outdoors, with carpets laid on the ground and false walls to take advantage of natural light at a time when electric lighting was not yet available.

“The main thing is the poses that are uniquely Malian. We’re still learning about their meanings,” Leers said. “There’s the Badenya handshake that indicated a matrilineal connection between those in the picture. If they shook hands with the left hand, it meant goodbye. With the right, it meant hello. There are cultural specificities in posing: All the fingers and toes would be in view. You would show you were healthy with a bulky body, so there were large clothes and hairstyles that would be exaggerated upward to show substance. Portraits were expensive, so they were only done for a special occasion.”

A portable studio with Deschamps behind the camera will be set up at the exhibit opening to demonstrate Malian portraiture, using the guests as subjects.

A third exhibit on view at the Dorsky is “Russel Wright: The Nature of Design” curated by Dianne Pierce, the former director at Wright’s Manitoga Russel Wright Design Center in Garrison. The exhibit explored Wright’s design philosophy as it applies to human relationships with the natural world. Though Wright’s career spanned 50 years, this show focuses on his innovative work from 1945-68. An illustrated catalog with curatorial essays by Pierce, co-curator Donald Albrecht and Kerry Dean Carso is available.