

# M+B

## ARTSLANT

See Malick Sidibé's Portraits the Way His Subjects Did in the 1960s

By Sóla Agustsson

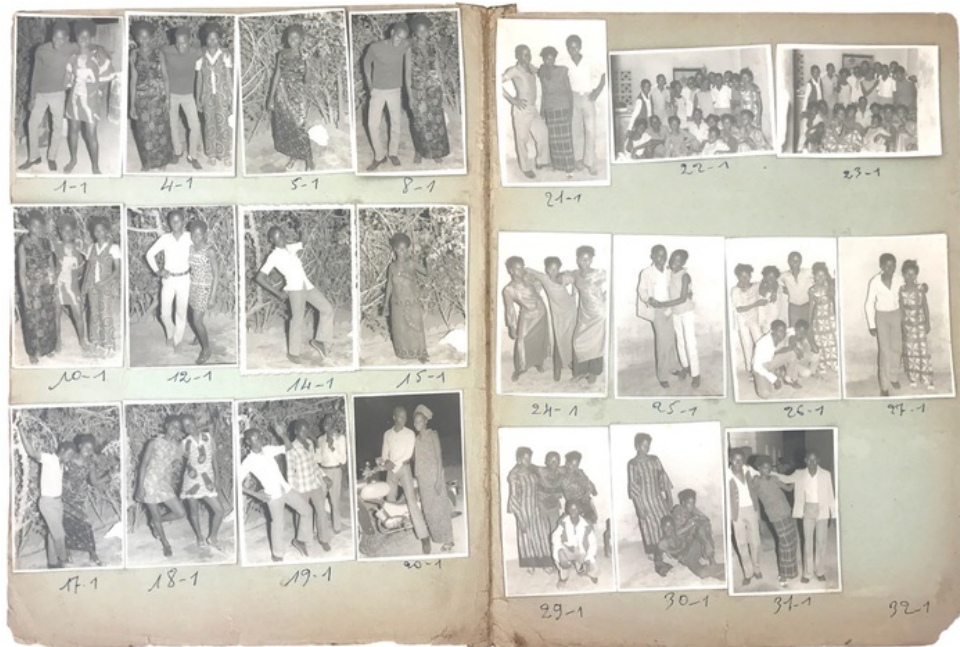


Malick Sidibé, *Nuit du 14/7/73*, Collection of 23 vintage gelatin silver prints mounted on paper 12-3/4 x 19-1/2 inches.  
Courtesy: the artist and M+B, Los Angeles. Photo: Jeff McLane

Malick Sidibé's striking images of the Malian rock-and-roll scene have been widely exhibited, though rarely in the form he originally sold to his subjects. After late-night parties, guests would come to Sidibé's photography studio to place orders for their portraits he'd taken earlier that evening. They did this, he claimed, partly because his studio had electricity, a luxury at the time. He often worked after hours developing chemises (French for "sleeves")—small proof prints arranged in colored folders and grouped by events for the guests. These chemises, some never before exhibited, are now on view at M+B in their original form.

While Sidibé's signature black-and-white portraits are undeniably enhanced when enlarged, this smaller format invites a glimpse into his early process and the particular cultural moment of Bamako, Mali. At the time, both the subject matter he was depicting and photography at large were rare in the newly independent country. The young subjects he captured, self-fashioned with the influence of western rock-and-roll and clothing, were considered somewhat controversial in conservative Malian culture.

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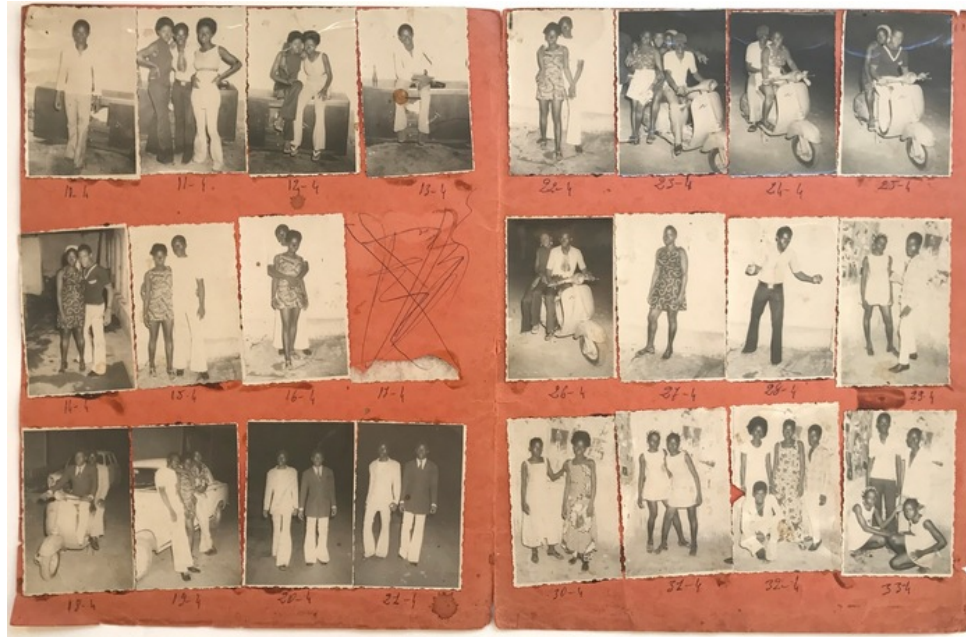
Malick Sidibé, 1971, *Les "Intimes" de Bagadadji*, Collection of 22 vintage gelatin silver prints mounted on paper 12-1/2 x 19 inches. Courtesy: the artist and M+B, Los Angeles. Photo: Jeff McLane

Sidibé was enmeshed in the scene and became a fixture at “grins,” dance parties and social clubs, and the chemises stand as an artifact of these events. Arranged in sequence, the 35-mm photographs reflect movement and the passage of time, like a contact sheet or film strip. They give credence to imperfect moments that weren’t appropriate for enlarging, such as photos of people blinking or having bad posture, and have a grittiness in contrast to his better-known studio work. Though many of his photographs are in a traditional portraiture style, with subjects posed and aware of the camera, his candid models exude a greater sense of freedom, and even intimacy. The format reflects a vivid and provocative moment in Malian culture, one which Sidibé, the first African artist to be awarded the Golden Lion lifetime achievement award at the Venice Biennale in 2007, wasn’t just documenting, but actively engaged in.

Dating from 1960 through the early 1970s, Sidibé’s photographs documented the political and cultural development of post-colonial Malian life. Fashions evolved, gender norms broke down, and old social formalities dissolved. *Formation Militaire* (1966) a rarely seen chemise depicting Malian soldiers (some of whom look quite young) performing drills, stands as an outlier to the carefree partygoers. This spread hints at continuing political conflicts after Malian independence outside of the particular scene Sidibé usually photographed.

While other exhibitions highlight Sidibé’s more stylized, posed portraits, *Chemises* offers a more candid lens, one that aesthetically borders on a family scrapbook. Photo albums seem a relic in our social-media driven mode of reminiscing, which privileges one or two images aimed to garner the most likes. But like hardcore punk zines from the 1970s and 1980s, the chemises’ original format preserves the raw sincerity of a sociocultural moment, and much of that is lost when images are blown-up and masterfully reproduced.

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Malick Sidibé, *Nuit du 22-9/72*, 1972, Collection of 23 vintage gelatin silver prints mounted on paper, 12-3/4 x 19-1/2 inches. Courtesy: the artist and M+B, Los Angeles. Photo: Jeff McLane

The aesthetic of massive, high-contrast prints for gallery display was a practice preferred by American and European art-world audiences; Sidibé's work wasn't exhibited in this form until the 1990s, when he became an internationally known artist. Though photography as a medium came to be embodied by its qualities of expansion, replication, and distribution, there is a sense of intimacy that these chemises, with their scalloped edges, exude. There is a sensibility one gets, not unlike sifting through old photos of strangers, relating to and imagining their life stories, that emerges in Sidibé's chemises that do not when looking at his larger, polished prints.

Many of these parties were familial gatherings, birthday celebrations, or graduation parties, and their subjects likely never expected their photos to be exhibited on this scale. Often, when observing photography, viewers forget that subjects in the images are not always models—they are people interrupted by a camera. Their lives began before, and continue after the click of the shutter. The chemises remove the artistic guise of the photographer, even with a lens as refined as Sidibé's. There is a dignity gained in honoring the images, and their subjects, in this original format.

*Malick Sidibé's Chemises continues at M+B, Los Angeles, through April 22.*