

The Menil Collection Presents *Samuel Fosso: African Spirits*

Fourteen self-portraits depict Fosso portraying intellectuals, political leaders, and prominent figures associated with Black liberation movements



HOUSTON—April 18, 2022—The Menil Collection is pleased to present [*Samuel Fosso: African Spirits*](#), an exhibition of the fourteen, large-scale gelatin silver prints from Samuel Fosso's *African Spirits* series. The show—on view at the Menil from August 5, 2022 through January 15, 2023—is presented in conjunction with the 2022 [FotoFest Biennial](#) and [*African Cosmologies Redux*](#), a new presentation of photography originally curated by Dr. Mark Sealy OBE, Director of Autograph, London, and Professor at University of the Arts London.

In this series of self-portraits, completed in 2008, Fosso portrays himself as Angela Davis, Martin Luther King Jr., Patrice Lumumba, Kwame Nkrumah, Léopold Sédar Senghor, Malcolm X, and other prominent figures from 20th century Black liberation movements. Fosso's photographs reference iconic images, such as Carl Fischer's photograph of Muhammad Ali that was published on the cover of *Esquire* in 1968 and the police mugshot taken of King after his arrest during the 1956 bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama. Fosso's reinterpretations of these historic photographs pay homage to the figures in the original images and raise questions about individuality, celebrity, the media, and the complicated history of representation.

Paul R. Davis, Curator of Collections at the Menil Collection, said, "The *African Spirits* series points to Fosso's artistry at picturing transformative moments in the lives of luminary figures. His subjects represent the cultural and spiritual tissue connecting liberation movements in the U.S. and those on the African continent. We are honored to collaborate with FotoFest and host this exhibition of Fosso's photography at the Menil in conjunction with the biennial's *African Cosmologies Redux* project."

Regarding his exhibition at the Menil, Samuel Fosso said, "I am proud to see the *African Spirits* series exhibited at the Menil Collection. I have a deep respect for the actions of Dominique and John de Menil, discovered in the Menil's publication *Art and Activism*. I made this series so that

more people can understand the history of these important figures and to share the thirst for democratization, which is also at the foundation of the Menil's fabulous collection.”

Born in Cameroon, Samuel Fosso lived in Nigeria until the Nigeria-Biafra War (1967–70), when he and his uncle moved to Bangui, the capital city of the Central African Republic. It was there that Fosso apprenticed with a local studio photographer. In 1975, when he was just thirteen years old, Fosso opened his own commercial portrait studio, Studio Photo National. He routinely finished off unused rolls of film by taking self-portraits that he displayed to promote his studio business or he sent to his family living in Nigeria. Exhibited for the first time in 1994 at the inaugural biennial exhibition *Rencontres Africaines de la Photographie* in Bamako, Mali, these early images brought Fosso immediate international recognition. His work can be found in numerous museum collections, including the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Philadelphia Museum of Art; and Tate Modern. Fosso continues to produce compelling work using the visual format of portraiture to explore social history, personal and shared memories, humor, and the psychology of personhood.

Samuel Fosso: African Spirits is curated by Menil Curator of Collections Paul R. Davis.

About the Menil Collection

Philanthropists and art patrons John and Dominique de Menil established the Menil Foundation in 1954 to foster greater public understanding and appreciation of art, architecture, culture, religion, and philosophy. In 1987, the Menil Collection's main museum building opened to the public. Today, the Menil Collection consists of a group of five art buildings and green spaces located within a residential neighborhood in central Houston. The Menil remains committed to its founders' belief that art is essential to human experience and fosters direct personal encounters with works of art. The museum welcomes all visitors free of charge to its buildings and surrounding green spaces. menil.org

Image Captions:

1. Samuel Fosso, *Martin Luther King Jr., FBI Mugshot*, from the series *African Spirits*, 2008. Gelatin silver print, 64 x 48 in. (162.6 x 121.9 cm). Courtesy of the artist and Jean Marc Patras, Paris. © Samuel Fosso
2. Samuel Fosso, *Muhammad Ali*, from the series *African Spirits*, 2008. Gelatin silver print, 64 x 48 in. (162.6 x 121.9 cm). Courtesy of the artist and Jean Marc Patras, Paris. © Samuel Fosso
3. Samuel Fosso, *Angela Davis*, from the series *African Spirits*, 2008, Gelatin silver print, 64 x 48 in. (162.6 x 121.9 cm). Courtesy of the artist and Jean Marc Patras, Paris. © Samuel Fosso