

“African Cinema at the turn of the Century”

How to Make One Out of Four, the Portraits of Laurent Macarie

In the mid-1980s, Laurent Macarie was doing commercial product photography to make a living while quietly nurturing an interest in portraiture. In 1985, he opened his first studio in Paris and began photographing actors and actresses, including shooting on film sets where he first heard of the ***Panafrican Film and Television Festival of Ouagadougou*** (FESPACO).

March 1987, Laurent traveled to Burkina Faso for the 10th edition of the festival. Thomas Sankara was still President; Fela Anikulapo Kuti had just been released from prison and Sankara invited him as the guest of honor. It was Sankara who had changed the name of Upper Volta to Burkina Faso, “Land of Upright Men.” There was a heady and amazing atmosphere in Ouagadougou and Laurent was in the midst. The city was vibrant, full of artists and their attendant creativity, parties every night, music all day long. Though the festival was 20 years old, it was still mainly housed at the Hotel Independence and that’s where Laurent stayed too, him and everyone else – all the actors, actresses, directors.

While in Burkina Faso, Laurent decided to do a series of portraits. It was a natural fit - this one time, ten day community under the African sun and moon. Two of his images from 1987 were published in ***Actuel*** and ***Jeune Afrique***.

Though the festival is every other year, in 1988, Laurent went back to Burkina Faso at Christmas time. This time, for five weeks, and he arrived shortly after Thomas Sankara was assassinated. Blaise Compaore, the new president, came in with a curfew and a very different atmosphere. A few days before Christmas, the curfew was lifted and Laurent began to shoot; pictures during the day and pictures at night. Once back in Paris, he showed the finished portraits to the French newspaper, ***Liberation*** and they agreed to support a series of portraits for the next FESPACO and connected him to a journalist. The idea - one photo, one paragraph. The words never materialized and though the pictures did ***Liberation*** did not publish them.

One

In 1989, Laurent went back to the FESPACO and did his first series of portraits of African cineastes. ***Marie Claire Italy*** published a few of these images. Soon after, he met his American wife and began traveling back and forth to the United States from France, eventually moving and leaving the photographs behind, unseen by anyone.

Two

Nine years later, he was contacted by Catherine Ruelle of ***Racines Noires***. She was organizing a festival in Paris and asked to use his portraits for a small African cinema crowd. Laurent returned to Paris and did another series of portraits.

Three

The following year, ***Racines Noires*** built an African Village on the Croisette for the Cannes Film Festival. Every night, a new story. On the outside in small tents, artists were exhibited, dancers were dancing, music played – most importantly, Laurent’s portraits had another opportunity to be seen, and he did another series.

Four

In 2011, L'Institut Français, of the French Ministry of Culture, celebrated the 50th anniversary of La Cinematheque Afrique. And to celebrate this anniversary, they wanted an exhibition and again, requested the portraits of Laurent Macarie. The celebration began in Bamako, Mali with the **Rencontres de Bamako**, the premier photographic festival on the African continent. In fact, the exhibit is now a traveling show, still touring the world.

In 2013, FESPACO hosted the exhibit and Laurent returned to Ouagadougou for one more series.

“My motivation was not the cinema for which I am still blissfully ignorant. But it also meant that I was innocent of the reputation of my subjects. My photos reflect a community, the encapsulated group for a short period of time in one space. It was a challenge to be met and enjoyed through photography. Taking the pictures is why I've never made it to many of the films. I was too busy shooting but I am a denizen of the late night café, beer in hand.”

Without being focused on their notoriety, Laurent shot some of the most important African filmmakers, gracious enough to let him take their photo. Laurent has used a variety of medium format cameras from the 50s and 60s; all but the last series are in black & white. The older technology is not so imposing; it has a gentle way of working with its subjects. The models are relaxed, the photographer is calm, there are not too many shots, but the ones that are taken; the portraits captured are well worth the wait.

This exhibit is a “portrait” of African Cinema, encompassing 25 years from the end of the 20th century into the 21st.

ONE Grand Exhibition

50 Photographs from Four Series