Studio Cameroon
The Everyday Photography of Jacques Touselle
November 9, 2007–June 29, 2008
Pitt Rivers Museum
University of Oxford, England
reviewed by Hélène Neveu Kringelbach
The opening of the “Studio Cameroon” exhibition on November 9 2007 was one of the major events of the year at the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford. This unique display of portraits by Cameroonian photographer Jacques Touselle was the first exhibition held in the Museum’s new photography gallery. Curated by Philip Grover and Chris Morton, the display came out of an on-going project initiated by David Zeitlyn to digitize Touselle’s collection of more than 30,000 negatives, with support from the British Council and the British Library. It also benefited greatly from the research carried out in Cameroon by student Katie McKeown.1

Jacques Touselle has photographed ordinary citizens in Mbouda, a medium-sized market town in southwestern Cameroon, since the early 1960s. He made his début as an ambulance photographer, hanging up a starred fabric backdrop around the marketplace and snapping portraits for the National Identity Cards that became required in Cameroon in 1957. It is not known whether he learned his trade from the unnamed photographer who worked in Mbouda before him, and Touselle has consistently maintained secrecy about his possible sources of inspiration. For many in Mbouda, he was the first master photographer in the region, and Touselle himself seems to have done little to dispel this myth. When electricity came to Mbouda in 1970, he opened his first studio. At the height of its success, “Studio Photo Jacques” was buzzing with dozens of customers every day, enabling Touselle to own the only motorbike in town. He also trained a number of apprentices, several of whom have become successful photographers in their own right.2 From the mid-1980s, however, competition from the police, who began to shoot their own ID photos, marked the beginning of a decline. Today, sadly, an ageing Touselle spends most days sitting outside the dilapidated “Photo Jacques” studio.

The curators had chosen thirty-nine extraordinary black-and-white photographs, amongst the best in Touselle’s collection of negatives. One of the aims of the exhibition was to reflect on the process through which the photographer transformed an image into the final object his clients required, from a ID card to a framed photograph to be displayed in people’s homes. The series of creative decisions involved in this process is often a neglected dimension when displaying the work of Africa’s best photographers. The exhibition addressed this by showing a couple of images both as a print from the original negative and as Touselle’s framing (Fig. 1). The other photographs on display were printed from the negative, showing full frames that revealed the studio lights and other paraphernalia creeping in at the edges. The title, “Studio Cameroon,” was deliberately chosen to highlight the fact that the exhibition was as much about Touselle’s studio work as it was about his sitters, and this was achieved beautifully.

Much has been written about the way in which African portrait photography marked a rupture with colonial photography in the agency of the sitters. Indeed, a confident theatricality emerged from Touselle’s “pleasure photos.” He insisted that he would let his clients choose their poses, artifacts, and facial expressions. Yet an impression of shared performance emanates from many of the photo-

1 Portrait taken for identity card, and copies stamped with the studio’s name and date (1985), showing how Touselle cropped the image to show only the subject’s face.

2 Portrait of two friends holding a cassette player and a handbag, about 1975.
graphs on display, and part of Touselle’s talent would have been to make his subjects pose in a confident manner. People would bring in a new shirt, a favorite handbag, or a radio to commemorate unusual acquisitions. This may have been the case in the photograph of two friends in matching outfits, proudly holding a cassette player and a handbag (Fig. 3). In many cases, a shared ceremonial occasion would have been the opportunity to commission portraits like this as a celebration of a friendship. Occasionally, Touselle lent a suit, a hat, or a calabash symbolizing fertility for older mothers. He also owned an iron grille one could lean on for a natural pose (Fig. 3), and an artificial Christmas tree which sitters would request all year round. The taille basse outfit and headscarf worn by the woman in Fig. 3 is printed with a portrait of Queen Elizabeth II, possibly marking the Queen’s Silver Jubilee. The Queen never travelled to Cameroon but Mbouda is quite close to the English-speaking Northwest Province. The creativity of West African fashion often appears in striking glimpses in Touselle’s portraits. On a broader level, they are a fascinating reminder of the global connections people have long maintained in Africa’s most remote market towns, shaping the circulation of objects, fashions, and ideas.

By contrast, the family shots seem to reassert people’s attachment to traditional family patterns. Several couple portraits were made for marriage certificates, including one in which the man’s left arm is slung around the shoulders of his much younger wife, his head slightly titled against hers (Fig. 4). The curatorial team is in possession of documents showing that the man had three portraits made on the same day of 1987 with his three wives, for their marriage certificates. His obvious care to take the same pose in all the shots not only speaks to an ideal of equal treatment of co-wives; it also demonstrates the value that remained attached to polygamy at a time when the region was already predominantly Christian.

This exhibition was undoubtedly a milestone in the wider attempt of the last two decades to do justice to the artistic qualities of African portrait photography. Touselle’s best work is comparable to the best African portrait photography, perhaps with the exception of Seydou Keïta’s portraits. But it shows striking similarity with Keïta in the use of background cloth, the presence of modern accessories, and the agency he gave his sitters to choose their poses. Touselle’s portraits, on the other hand, have a distinctly small-town feel to them since he did not have the privilege of working in the socially diverse heart of a capital, as Keïta did in Bamako. But this was part of the appeal of this delightful and timely exhibition, which not only revealed some of Touselle’s studio work, but was also a tribute to a lesser affluent, lesser known, but no less artistic form of African portrait photography.

The leaflet Studio Cameroon: The Everyday Photography of Jacques Touselle was produced in 2007 by the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford.

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Notes
1 Katie McKeown’s unpublished MSc dissertation in African Studies, submitted in June 2007, is titled “Studio Photo Jacques: Documenting Lives and Making History in Rural Southwestern Cameroon”.
2 An exhibition held in 2005 at the National Portrait Gallery in London featured the works of two of his apprentices, Joseph Chila and Samuel Finlak, whose negatives had been acquired by David Zeitlyn.