Aunty! is a unique collaboration between Catherine E. McKinley, a writer and collector, and Laylah Amatullah Barrayn, a photographer and curator, both Black women, presenting works where the subjects of the collection are women. Aunty! features over a hundred rare and original images, ranging from portraiture to stereographs, postcards to cartes de visite, taken as early as 1870 and as recently as 2013. Photographers include European and African colonial male owned studios—named and unnamed—and celebrated contemporary African female artists, spanning more than 143 years of the colonial and post-colonial eras.

This exhibition takes up the idea and figure of “Aunty” and the nuances of this naming. At once an expression of love and affection, Aunty is an honorific across most Black world cultures—a recognition of a feminine power rooted in indigeneity. As powerfully, it connotes the violence of the original colonial construction of the word: the corporeal, dark, servile figure, buffoonish or sexualized in her role of colonial servant. It is also a name burdened by African and Diaspora grappling with gender, and often troubling constructions of motherhood, sexuality, etc. This exhibition looks at Auntys through the troubling lens of colonialism by including a few earlier photographic images of the late 1870s, as well as the colonial and postcolonial lens of African male photographers, through vernacular images of post-Independence partygoers and studio sittings, and contemporary renderings. For McKinley and Barrayn, Aunty! is an attempt to look head on at the beauty of the images and also their more often discomfiting legacies, and the moments where the subjects look back at the viewer reassuringly, with a sense of control of her image, and pleasure in herself.

November 15, 2018 – January 31, 2019
Opening Reception: Thursday November 15, 6–9pm
Celebrated masters Seydou Keita (Mali) and Malick Sidibe (Mali) are featured here with images by other African studios of legend, including James Barnor (Ghana), Abderoumane Sakalay (Mali), Adama Sylla (Senegal), and many anonymous authors. Working between 1920 and 1983—eras spanning the later half-century of colonialism through the era of Structural Adjustment—each photographer captures the dignity, playfulness, austerity, grandeur, and fantasy-making of African women sitters. One memorable heroine reappears in several frames captured between the 1950s and late 1970s, reflecting the evolution of a nation from pre-independence Gold Coast to post-independence Ghana (1957), as it entered an era of liberation politics decidedly influenced by American Black Power. A portrait by French photographer Bernard Matussiere reflects a smouldering power and an awareness of both agency and vulnerability in singer and musician Fela’s Queens, style icons for women across the continent and Black women internationally. As with earlier eras, many of these images circulated as postcards, as cartes de visite, as colonial propaganda, advertising, and communication in marriage bids. But most were commissioned by the sitter and were hung and enjoyed at home and, produced in multiples, shared among family and friends.
African entrepreneurs began to pick up the technology of photography by the late 1860s, soon after its arrival on the continent with colonial agents. This was just three decades after François Arago officially announced the invention of photography at the French Chamber of Deputies in 1839. The first photos in The McKinley Collection are dated 1870. We have no other details regarding authorship or the sitters—very plainly clothed silhouettes in what we assume is a European studio because of the way they fit into a style of colonial typology-making, with little detail allowing us to place the subject in a broader context.
In European studios spanning the 1860s-1970s—images of African women were informed by a long arc of propaganda-making in support of European imperialist projects dating back to the 1400s. The result was a preponderance of nudes, and images fixated on hairstyles, body cicatrization, puberty rites, “women’s work” and “tribal” typologies. Many African photographers working at the same time would engage these tropes, as would later eras of African photographers (1950s-present), revisiting the shots of a woman’s back or hairstyle, but in a way that removed the colonial gaze and replaced it with the loving or honorific, but where a male one still mediated. Behind the European images is the knowledge of relationships between white men and Black female sitters where at best a grave power imbalance lies; often intimations of sexual liaisons or coercion are revealed. We don’t know many of the actual authors of these images. In the photographs of Sierra Leone’s celebrated Lisk-Carew brothers, Alphonse and Arthur, who opened their Freetown studio in 1904, the sitters reclaim a dignity, and the viewer can witness a palpable ease in relation to works of similar composition intended to circulate abroad. A rare photo of “The Reverend James Greaves, Black African,” circa 1890 by John Parkes Decker, a Gambian photographer, of a young girl attending her father disrupts the European gaze but bears a curiously colonialist title. “Coumba, fillette ma blancheuesse, Clotilde,” an image from 1908, is placed in a frame made with industrial tape fashioned for a colonial home. Studios in Conakry, Guinea; St. Louis, Senegal; Accra, Ghana have among them the most active, aesthetically fine, and significant production. Central African Republic girls suggestively model a “Premiere corset” and a “Premirer chemise,” costly articles that would have been ordered from Europe. A woman in a curious cap, is assumed to be dressed and photographed as part of a French Colonial Expo. A wealthy Senegalese Wolof noblewoman in the 1920s is dressed in costly indigo clothing and jewelry and photographed with dignity, the sitter in control of her image. The colonial studio—African and European— was a complex and storied collision of power and agency, beauty and the tragic.
Untitled, undated
Unknown
Morocco

Untitled, undated
Unknown
Senegal

Type de femme de Fort-Lamy, undated
Photo R. Pauleau
Tchad

Aunty Nkor, c. 1970s
Unknown
Accra, Ghana

Untitled, 2013
Thabiso Sekgala
South Africa

Far from Home, 2008–2009
Patricia Coffie (US/Ghana)
New York

Teme, 2013
Fatoumata Diabate
Mali

Phyllis: I Am Not Alone, 2010
Zina Saro-Wiwa
Nigeria/UK/US
United Photo Industries is a New York based non-profit organization that works to promote a wider understanding and increased access to the art of photography.

Since its founding in 2011, UPI has rapidly solidified its position in the public art landscape by continuing to showcase thought-provoking, challenging, and exceptional photography from across the globe. In its first 6 years, UPI has had the opportunity to present the work of more than 2,500 visual artists in gallery exhibitions and public art installations worldwide.

Proudly devoted to cultivating strategic partnerships, creative collaborations, and community spirit, we have approached our goal of cultivating a wide, diverse audience for powerful photographic narratives with unrelenting zeal, working closely with photo festivals, city agencies, and other nonprofit organizations across the globe to create new exhibition opportunities.

United Photo Industries’ marquee domestic initiative is Photoville — New York City’s premier free photo destination and one of the largest photography events in North America. A modular venue built from repurposed shipping containers, Photoville creates physical platform for photographers of all stripes to come together and interact — and for audiences to experience their work. Photoville each year exhibits hundreds of artists, with dozens of exhibitions, talks & workshops, and nighttime events in an outdoor beer garden.