

IKÉ UDÉ'S GLAMOROUS REBELLION

WORDS VICTORIA PASS, IMAGES LEILA HELLER GALLERY, NEW YORK

I first encountered Iké Udé's startlingly beautiful self-portraits two years ago in an exhibition called *Dandy Lion: Articulating a Re(de)defined Black Masculine* at the Reginald F. Lewis Museum in Baltimore, Maryland. Looking at what would become just the first four photographs of an ongoing series that now includes over thirty images, I was struck by the aesthetic complexity of these images, and their astonishingly diverse array of references to art, fashion, and history. Staring out at the viewer in an Ottoman-inspired onion hat made from West African fabric and a beautiful blue cape in *Sartorial Anarchy #2* (2010), Udé took on the appearance of the Ottoman scribe in a Giovanni Bellini gouache I had seen at the Gardner Museum. In *Sartorial Anarchy #4* (2010), with his casual posture and his face in profile, Udé takes on the enigmatic look of Sargent's *Madame X*, which hangs in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, his home for the last 32 years.

Iké Udé was born in Lagos, Nigeria, and became an avid consumer of magazines as an English boarding school student there. The codes of glamour and elegance in these magazines are part of what Udé is trafficking in with the *Sartorial Anarchy Series*. Trafficking – a word that Udé uses quite a bit to describe this series – is particularly apt, suggesting boundary transgressions, both licit and illicit. Udé poses in an astonishing array of men's clothing from various cultures and eras.

IKÉ UDÉ

Sartorial Anarchy #32, 2013
Pigment on Satin Paper
45.7 x 36.5 in / 116.1 x 92.71 cm
Edition of 5, 3 AP

FACE MASK: Striped knit Jamaican Rastafarian hat worn backwards, over face and head; Jamaica, 1970s-present
JACKET: Marching band uniform, 1970s, United States
TROUSERS: Sailing flags, Men, trousers, embroidered sail-flags, United States, 1950-60s
NECKWEAR: 16th century Western European ruff collar reproduction, reproduced with West African fabric, 2013
HAT: Top Hat, circa 1980s/1990s, United States
CANE: Vintage cane, 1980s, United States
TABLE: Low-table, Chinese, date unknown
VASE: Miniature black vase, American, 2010
DECANTER: Japanese sterling silver overlay captain/ship, decanter; early 20th century
PLANTER: Satsuma earthenware planter, Japan, Meiji Period (1868-1912)
CARPET: Persian Gabbah Oriental Rug, Vintage/Antique, date unknown





IKÉ UDÉ
Sartorial Anarchy #7, 2013
 Pigment on Satin Paper
 54 x 36.11 in / 137.2 x 91.72 cm
 Edition of 5, 3 AP

HAIRSTYLE: Medusa/American Afro and West African inspired hairstyle
 FLUTE: Indonesian flute, contemporary
 HAT: Antique Top Hat, 1900s, United States and Desert hat
 Pin in ceramic with silver wire wrapping, vintage, circa 1930s
 SHIRT: Contemporary/classic plaid shirt, 2005
 NECKWEAR: Wool, red/black, green, blue plaid tie, Scotland, 1930s
 JACKET: Contemporary plaid/ jacket, 2012 and a molded-glass-green cameo-stick pin, early 1900s, England
 SHORTS: Contemporary plaid shorts, 2011; belt and wool pom-pom, 2012
 SOCKS: Italian football/soccer socks, 1990s
 SHOES: White Golf-style shoes, Italy, contemporary/classic, 1998
 SHOE HORN: Antique bone/wood shoe-horn, late 1890s
 VIOLIN: Violin (contemporary reproduction, circa 1990s)
 CHAIR: Empire style-French-chair 1800/1815 (reproduction)
 CARPET: Antique carpet, origin and date unknown

In *Sartorial Anarchy #27* (2013), for example, Udé sports a swashbuckler's coat from the 1500s cinched with a World War II belt from a Soviet officer's uniform over contemporary Levis, Italian football socks, and a pair of 1920s spectator shoes. He accessorizes with a 1970s American bow tie, a Fulani hat, a Yoruba staff from the mid-twentieth century, and oversized English punk safety pins. A safety pin fastened straight through the crown of the Fulani hat becomes a monocle in a brilliantly witty conflation of English punk and

aristocratic styles.

In his 2010 statement on *Sartorial Anarchy*, Udé writes, "It is challenging, liberating and imaginatively rewarding to 'mess' with the tyranny of men's dress traditional codes and still work within its own sartorial restrictions." By only working with men's clothing in these images, Udé's work exposes the ways masculinity has been constructed throughout time and across the globe. For example, in *Sartorial Anarchy #31*, Udé's hair is styled

after a wig worn by the Egyptian Pharaoh Ramses II in the 12th century BCE. Udé's pose recalls Hyacinth Rigaud's iconic portrait of the French King Louis XIV (1701). The massive volume of Ramses' wig is not so different from the French Sun King's, and the Yoruba trousers he wears, echo Louis' short breeches; French patterned socks replace the hose, and the saddle shoes substitute for Louis' famous red-heeled shoes—all sartorial cues of masculine power from various times and places.

IKÉ UDÉ
Sartorial Anarchy #5, 2013
 Pigment on satin paper
 54 x 36.1 in / 137.2 x 91.7 cm
 Edition of 3, 3 AP

HAT: Miniature fedora, 1920s
 WIG: Macaroni wig, England 1850s
 CANE: Zulu (South Africa) fighting stick, 1950s
 JACKET: Norfolk jacket 1859/1860 to present
 BROOCH: Miniature blue/silver vintage brooch of Philadelphia policeman, circa 1940s
 SHIRT: French-cuff, two-tone white & blue collar shirt, 2009
 SPATS: Canvas boot spats, WWI, 1900s
 SHOES: Dress shoes, 1970s
 TROUSERS: Yoruba, Nigeria, 1940s
 CHAIR: Antique chair, origin unknown
 FLOWER: Gladiolus
 TABLE: Vintage side-table, origin unknown
 CARPET: Antique Blue Gabbeh rug, circa 1900s/1930s, Persian/Iran



Udé makes familiar garments strange and foreign garments familiar in *Sartorial Anarchy #8*. A Nigerian men's gown, skull-embellished slippers, a contemporary button-down shirt, and Scottish tartan trousers are a play on British academic dress. Udé poses on a bicycle, evoking Oxford lads on bicycles from *Brideshead Revisited*, reframing academic dress as an European form, just as "tribal" as the beautifully embroidered Nigerian gown. As Udé eloquently explained to me in a recent interview, "I'm most interested in art that is

invested with timelessness, time-tested, lasting beauty, regardless of the vagaries of passing cultural meanings, passing intellectual fashions, woven or unwoven about it.

I'm keenly aware of how fluently connected we are on a global cultural scale. It is the most fascinating thing – to see what a small, constantly rotating ball that we all reside on and how we have historically and presently negotiated our place on this large sphere, this large ball – especially with our invented,

naturalized cultures. In a sense, one can argue that I'm responding to our collective cultural sphere rather than contemporary art, which is but a speck on the huge earth-ball in rotation."

Sartorial Anarchy reveals masculinity and national identity as constructs. Made of one kind of material, a caftan represents Nigerian identity; made in another, it is a signifier of academic culture.

Ude's works are also, more simply, about



IKÉ UDÉ
Sartorial Anarchy #26, 2013
 Pigment on Satin Paper
 45.7 x 36.5 in / 116.1 x 92.71 cm
 Edition of 5, 3 AP

COAT: Gray Loden wool men, jacket, Austria, Winter Hunting riding sport jacket, 1842 to present
 BOOTS: Vintage red brown leather tall custom lace-up riding Rocketeer style boots, 1950s-70s
 TROUSERS: Men, Riding Jodhpurs/Men, Horse Riding Breeches, Anglo-Indian, circa 1920s-30s
 SHIRT/TIE: Shirt and tie pair, British, 1990s
 HAIR PIECE: Ibo Nigerian head/hair piece, circa 1800/1900s
 NET: Butterfly net, United States, 2013
 PIN: Vintage Millinery fruit cherries, 2012, United States

the pleasure of constructing and consuming beautiful images. Udé explains, "It is also important to appreciate the sense of irony and humor inherent in *Sartorial Anarchy*; there is serious pleasure in the totality of the work and one can simply enjoy it on that level, too. Above all, *Sartorial Anarchy* is conceptually about the language and semiotics of clothes and clothing as a cultural collective irrespective of time and boundaries and aesthetically about color, composition, harmony, lines, volumes, space, rhymes and other plasticity in art that concerns discerning picture architects."

Udé creates harmony through intricate rhythms of color and form. In #21 (2013), the curves of his Yoruba trousers match those of the nineteenth century Kingwood commode and vintage wooden chair. Red, yellow, and blue echo throughout the composition. In #5 (2013), the shape of a vase mimics the wig on Udé's head, and its bright orange hue is matched by the gladiolas in the vase. The curves of the vintage side table and antique chair resonate with a pair

of striped Yoruba trousers, and the blue and orange color scheme repeats throughout. Each composition's sophistication and aesthetic pleasure reflect the historical figure of the dandy, the source for this series.

The wig Udé wears in #5 is based on a style popular with a group of English dandies called Macaronis. In the 1750s, these men rejected the restrained fashion of English men and embraced the dramatic styles popular in France and Italy. They donned large wigs that resembled those worn by women topped with absurdly small hats. These styles tested the boundaries of what was seen as suitably masculine and English, and like Udé's work, revealed the performative nature of masculinity. As Udé explains in his statement on *Sartorial Anarchy*, "Dandyism is also the significance of sartorial distinction enhanced by indeterminate delicacy of pose, gestures, a tilt, determinate lines, a thrust here and there, all harmonized by an agreeable countenance." As for the Macaronis and the early nineteenth century dandy, Beau Brummell, Udé's clothing, deportment, elegance, and wit critique contemporary fashion and culture. Other dandies who influence Udé are the Comte de Montesquiou-Fezensac (1855-1921), and Jean des Essantes, the fictional decadent aesthete, modeled after de Montesquiou in Joris-Karl Huysmans' 1884 novel, *À Rebours (Against the Grain)*, and his fellow turn-of-the-century Italian decadent, Gabriele D'Annunzio (1863-1938). Each called into question the nineteenth century obsession with progress, science, and rationalism. Turning away from the outside world, they created lavish worlds focused on aesthetic and sensual pleasures. The elegance of their dress distinguished these men from the corrupt, materialistic world around them. Udé's dandyism is a refusal as it was with the fin de siècle decadents; a refusal of conformity, uniformity, and the prescriptive nature of men's dress codes. He notes, "In large part, I find contemporary fashion boring for its tedium and advocacy of mass uniform; on the other hand, I find it dangerous, because of its tyranny and threat to individualism. *Sartorial Anarchy* is, in a way, essentially a response to contemporary codes of fashion."

Udé also cites the influence of Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) in his work. Baudelaire described dandies as brilliant observers of modern life, *flâneurs* who, like detectives, roamed city streets observing clues that revealed the identities of their fellow urbanites. Baudelaire's dandy reveals the increasingly dominance of fashion and visual

culture in framing identity in the modern world, a message which Udé points out has even more currency in our digital world.

Udé also credits Japanese writer, Yukio Mishima (1925-1970), who carefully crafted a dandiacal presentation in response to the spiritual emptiness he saw in postwar Japan, and the always elegantly turned out Miles Davis as key inspirations. These men insisted on taking aesthetics and the sensual pleasure of a sophisticated appearance seriously. Each one understood how a careful and thoughtful mode of dressing could make a statement about the world he wanted to live in.

Udé's painterly style of photography proves that beauty can still have meaning in contemporary art. His early photographic series, *Uli*, which began in 1997, works within the confines of the kind of straight modernist photography canonized by historian and curator, Beaumont Newhall. Udé replaces the unmarked bodies that inhabit photographs by Edward Weston or Alfred Steiglitz with bodies decorated in abstract *Uli* patterns used on both bodies and buildings in Nigeria, protesting what Udé refers to as "the conservative, fundamentalist ... moral tone with which Beaumont Newhall framed the 'right' and 'wrong' kind of photography." Udé violates the restrictive tenants of photography that continue to linger in the contemporary art world, saying, "The camera is and should be merely one of the tools at the disposal of an artist in order to employ, to realize his or her visions. To merely duplicate and reproduce what is in front of a camera is a boring, uninspiring fact, not art. And art shouldn't concern itself with such square facts. Such constipated straight photography that Newhall preached and advocated is better suited for the police department, the immigration agencies and scientific purposes where facts are of necessary import.

Besides the medium, there is no distinction between a painter and a photographer. The aim is the same. We are all in the business of making pictures. And some of us make better pictures than others. That is all! No more, no less!"

In our interview, Udé also expressed frustration with the reluctance of scholars and theorists of African art and art history to claim Egypt as a classical past that informs the contemporary renaissance of African and African diaspora artists.

"The lively intelligence of individuals who

created the (European) Renaissance (were) busting with vitality and confidence, they weren't in the mood to be crushed by antiquity, they meant to absorb it, to equal it, to master it!... the exact same case applies to and should be made about the real grand genesis of African civilization, Egypt! With the exception of the late Cheikh Anton Diop, Robert Bauval and to a degree, Martin Bernal, African scholars have been complacent, lazy, timid and shortsighted to reclaim our Egyptian culture and use it as the foundation of our contemporary culture in much the same way pre-Renaissance Europe saw fit to do with Greco-Roman civilizations which owe a debt to Egypt. And by Egypt, I mean pre-Arab, African Egypt."

Udé cites Diop, who argues in his book *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality*, "The history of Black Africa will remain suspended in air and cannot be written correctly until African historians dare to connect it with the history of Egypt." Udé explains, "Egypt is in our backyard and has always been part of the African neighborhood since time immemorial ... You see awesome remnants of Egypt in in what we today call Ethiopia and Sudan. For sure, Sudan and most likely, Ethiopia were a part of greater Egypt before the current geographical map that we know and use today. Just as ancient Viking, Teutonic cultures, and so on, weren't enough to serve as the bases of what we today call Western civilization, conversely, Ife, Benin, Nok cultures and the likes, are not enough, for a classically based African Renaissance only Egypt would suffice ... Shelly once said, on behalf of Europeans, that "we are all Greeks: our laws, our literature, our religion, our arts all have their roots in Greece. But for Greece, we might still have been savages and idolaters." With great admiration and utmost respect to the great poet, I'll add that we are all Egyptians – that very cradle of African civilization that informed Greco-Roman civilization – and that Africans have unwittingly allowed (this fact to lie) in neglect at their own peril and present backwardness. Europeans emerged from the Dark Ages, only by emulating and re-imagining themselves after Greco-Roman civilizations that owe a debt to Egypt. Shelly was right and what is good for Europeans is good for Africans. We eventually become the emulative and imagined. In the end there is only one race, the human race – with one common African origin. Our present notion and understanding of race and/or racial difference – mostly a colonial product – is phony, idiotic, dumb, uniformed and will ultimately baffle and embarrass future generations who will intelligently and understandably find the current racial enterprise a regrettable nonsense."

Udé promotes a global view that erodes barriers and hierarchies and opens up those interstices where we might find something unexpected: a Moroccan fez that reminds us of an Oxford mortarboard, a nineteenth century military helmet from Uzbekistan that resembles Ramses II's coiffure, or a sixteenth-century European ruff collar made from contemporary West African fabric.

As the *Sartorial Anarchy Series* continues to expand, Udé plans to execute a unique portrait of the stars working in the vibrant Nigerian film industry, Nollywood, second only to India's Bollywood in the number of films produced each year. He correctly concludes, "I think that the Nollywood personages deserve to be exalted and immortalized within an artistic framework, in much the same way that Marilyn Monroe, Elizabeth Taylor and the likes were immortalized. And I'm in the perfect position to do an excellent job of it! ... My gift for portraiture and capturing the essence of elegance is very particular and uniquely my own."

IKÉ UDÉ

Sartorial Anarchy #21, 2013
Pigment on Satin Paper
45.7 x 36.5 in / 116.1 x 92.71 cm
Edition of 5, 3 AP

HAT: Bowler hat hugged by Octopus
SHIRT: Contemporary/classic white shirt, 2012, United States
BOUTONNIERE: Contemporary/classic boutonniere, 2007, United States
TIE: Wool collegiate/rep tie, 2002, United States
JACKET: 1930s/1940s School/Boater Blazer in red, yellow pinstripe, U.K.
TROUSERS: Embroidered indigo/blue Yoruba, Nigeria trousers with draw strings, 1940s
LEGGINGS: Pair of officers WWII, 1940s Leather Army Field Leggings Spats + straps
SHOES: Pair of contemporary shoes, 2012 worn with flower pom-poms in the 17th/18th century European manner
CHAIR: Vintage, origin unknown
COMMODE: 19th century Louis XV bronze mounted Kingwood Commode and painted wooden duck

