

Secrecy in a secretive age

Vienna's MAK presents the first European solo show of Iké Udé. The Nigeria-born artist talked to *Austria Today's* Andrea Schellner from his New York base via email.



IKÉ UDÉ: The artist himself as a 'cover girl' for i-d magazine

Austria Today: *Iké, the title of your exhibition was taken from your installation 'Beyond Decorum'. This work led many critics to compare you to Andy Warhol in terms of crossing cultural fields and addressing topics of the consumer society. Did Pop Art and Warhol really influence your work? Can you explain which interests you pursue with 'Beyond Decorum'?*

Iké Udé: I share fraternity of spirit with the greats who inspire me: Pushkin, Benjamin Disraeli, Warhol, Whistler, Cocteau, Man Ray, Colette, Fela, Mishima, Oscar Wilde, Miles Davis, Basquiat are all a continuing source of inspiration in my life and work. In general my work, such as 'Beyond Decorum', is post-pop in its investment of critical content and context. As the title 'Beyond Decorum' clearly indicates, I sort of reframe popular and ubiquitous ciphers of identity – shirts, shoes, ties – in disclosing dialogue with the humanity behind them. 'Beyond Decorum' is about disclosure and allure of secrecy in a secretive age.

AT: *In 'Beyond Decorum' you present worn-out high heels and shirts with ties that carry labels providing words of sexual desire and pornographic content. What importance would you*

give pornography in this installation?

IU: Pornography is definitely the most candid industry in regard to human relationships, desires, depravities and taboos. Consider that it is still scandalous, almost taboo, to do a Hollywood movie with, say, an African man kissing and making love on the silver screen with a European woman, a European man making love with an African/Asian woman, a homosexual couple doing likewise or a woman engaging in sexual intercourse with a dog, horse, etc. Yet, in reality all these sexual acts are practised daily, behind 'civilised' doors and hypocrisy of decorum.

AT: *To me, there is a simmering intimacy in your photographs, particularly in your 'ULI Portraits' series, where seemingly simple patterns on body parts create a hauntingly beautiful yearning. How did this work come into being?*

IU: I began 'ULI Portraits' in 1993 when I painted and photographed celebrities such as Debbie Harry/Blondie, Marianne Faithful, Quentin Crisp, Bill T. Jones and artist Andre Serrano. Then I took a two-year break from it and devoted my time to Conceptual/Installation art, which came in full vogue by the mid-90s.

From 1995 I continued again, to the present. I don't work in a strict linear manner-meaning that each series of my work is open-ended and I'm bound to revisit, reframe, re-contextualise, relearn and augment from where I last left off. 'ULI' is a good example of my revisiting a former work. When I revisited 'ULI' in 1995, it dawned on me that besides the celebrity value of the 1993 'ULI Portraits', they did not have much to offer me. This is what prompted me to execute the new 'ULIs' with 'simmering intimacy', as you perceptively phrased it. More importantly I have various degrees of intimacy and relationships with all the girls who I used in the new 'ULI'. That explains why they so generously gave me their full attention, patience and cooperation. The female body in its best form, is perhaps the best of our species. It's such an aesthetic treat, so sensuous, so tempting, so dangerous and so different from the male.

AT: *In your 'Cover Girl' series, you mimic and mock the mass media. Can you describe your attitude towards the mass media and the idea behind dislocating the relation between the text and the image on covers?*

IU: A big part of the issue,

among other things that I may not be aware of, in my 1994 'Cover Girl' series is gender. I could have easily treated gender in a straightforward photographic approach or with text of canvas or paper. Instead I chose to unite text and image in a popular, familiar glossy framework, namely fashion magazines, in order to imbue my interrogation with a critical intervention couched in a purposeful superficiality. I love mass media with a relative degree of ambivalence. This ambivalence is made manifest in 'Cover Girl' in the way that I revelled, parodied, critiqued and demystified the various publications.

AT: *The mask is a recurrent motif in your work. How do you employ it?*

IU: I generally employ the masks to deny/serve, reveal/conceal, confuse/articulate various objectives. Without a mask, content can become too shrill and, as a consequence, thought too factual and boring. Ultimately the plethora of masks is at the service of my pleasures and purposes in life/art.

Beyond Decorum: 13 Dec. to 4 February, in Vienna's MAK. For more information call: 01/711 36