IKÉ UDÉ  STYLE & SYMPATHIES
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Exhibition, dedicated to my prince, Dorian Udé
In Sartorial Anarchy Untitled #4, artist Iké Udé poses for his own camera in a manner that appears casual: hand on hip, legs crossed, with one finger casually touching the brass Boy Scout bugle sitting on a stool to the right. He wears a Boy Scout shirt with a lacy black seventeenth-century necklace and a black cummerbund over a pair of tweed breeches with bright green and yellow Italian soccer socks and a pair of British Tricker’s bespoke boots. A vivid green, embroidered Afghan coat is draped over his shoulders. Perched on the top of Udé’s head is a boater hat bedecked with flowers in the style of Eaton’s June 4 celebration in honor of King George III’s birthday in which students of the exclusive school row in a boating parade. Of course his posture, like the motley ensemble he wears, is anything but casual. The vertical iris atop the boater hat echoes the arrangement of palm leaves on the stool on the right. The careless but knowing pose echoes that of John Singer Sargent’s enigmatic Madame X (1883–4). Casual and aloof, both Udé and Madame X turn away from us, refusing to meet our eyes directly. Udé creates an exquisite Sargent’s enigmatic but knowing pose echoes that of John Singer Sargent’s Madame X (Madame Pierre Gautreau), 1883-4 Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Udé’s citation of the macaronis—dandies avant le fétre—points to the way his own photographic performances question what counts as masculine in our supposedly post-racial, post-modern, global, digital age. Udé’s exploration of shifting modes of masculinity aligns him with the practice of the dandy. While the term dandy has taken on the generic meaning of a well-dressed man who attends to fashion or even a man who dresses ostentatiously, the original dandies were not simply stylish dressers. Udé uses the philosophy of the historical dandy as a jumping-off point, but complicates matters by engaging on a global scale, bringing questions of globalization, post-colonialism and post-modernity to the fore. In his own writing, Udé emphasizes the way in which the importance of the fashionable display: “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.” Udé places the act of dressing at the center of his art practice to illuminate dressing as an act of signification. Like Udé, dandies have historically used style as a creative act to critique the structures of society. Monica Miller points out Dandyism functions as a symptom of changing social, political, cultural, and economic conditions. Fastidiousness or ostentation in dress would seem to matter only to those keeping up with haute couture, but such choices are instead descriptive of radical changes in social, economic, and political hierarchies that result in new expressions of class, gender, sexual, national, and…racial identities.

Beau Brummell (1778–1840), whose singular sartorial style led to the coining of the term dandy in the early nineteenth-century, was the first in a long line of these radicals. His cultivation of an elegant minimal style, very much at odds with the ostentatious masculine style of the time, along with his cheeky wit, allowed Brummell to rise through the ranks of a society obsessed with titles and inherited status that he lacked as the son of a civil servant. His style and self-presentation, he claimed, “served the status of the aristocrats who surrounded him was also a matter of performance. In contrast, Charles Baudelaire’s (1821–1867) vision of the
As Udé’s engagement in dandyism suggests, style is the modern mode of approaching the signification of clothes and objects, Udé’s dandy draws attention to the incongruous pairing of the familiar…with relatively unfamiliar items…is where dandyism can be stoked, problematized, renewing and appreciated as a protean plastic artistry.

Yet, it is precisely in isolating the various parts that we see the ways in which color is read in photographs as an indication of social status. There is no such analogous position for a woman. Women who have been described as dandies were inevitably cross-dressing in one way or another, creating a perpetual observer who could read the modern decorum, which can these images of sartorial anarchy suggest a new way of dressing in our highly globalized world? Or is this presentation of difference working against the typical mortarmold, mimicking the academic hat with its blue tassel. What started out as a dissaray image of disparate sartorial elements suddenly evokes a very familiar and particularly British image of upper-class masculinity.

The resulting image is highly saturated, almost hyper-real. He gives the photographs their own unique color temperature through history and geography. In 2003 Udé, “Sartorial Anarchy.” Artist’s Statement, 2010.

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By referencing images within the popular imagination and exposing their construction through the use of different kinds of clothes and objects, Udé’s dandy twist to the right mimics the Chinese lion or dog figure observing and deconstruct the practice of the dandy. The incongruous pairing of the familiar…with relatively unfamiliar items…is where dandyism can be stoked, problematized, renewing and appreciated as a protean plastic artistry.

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