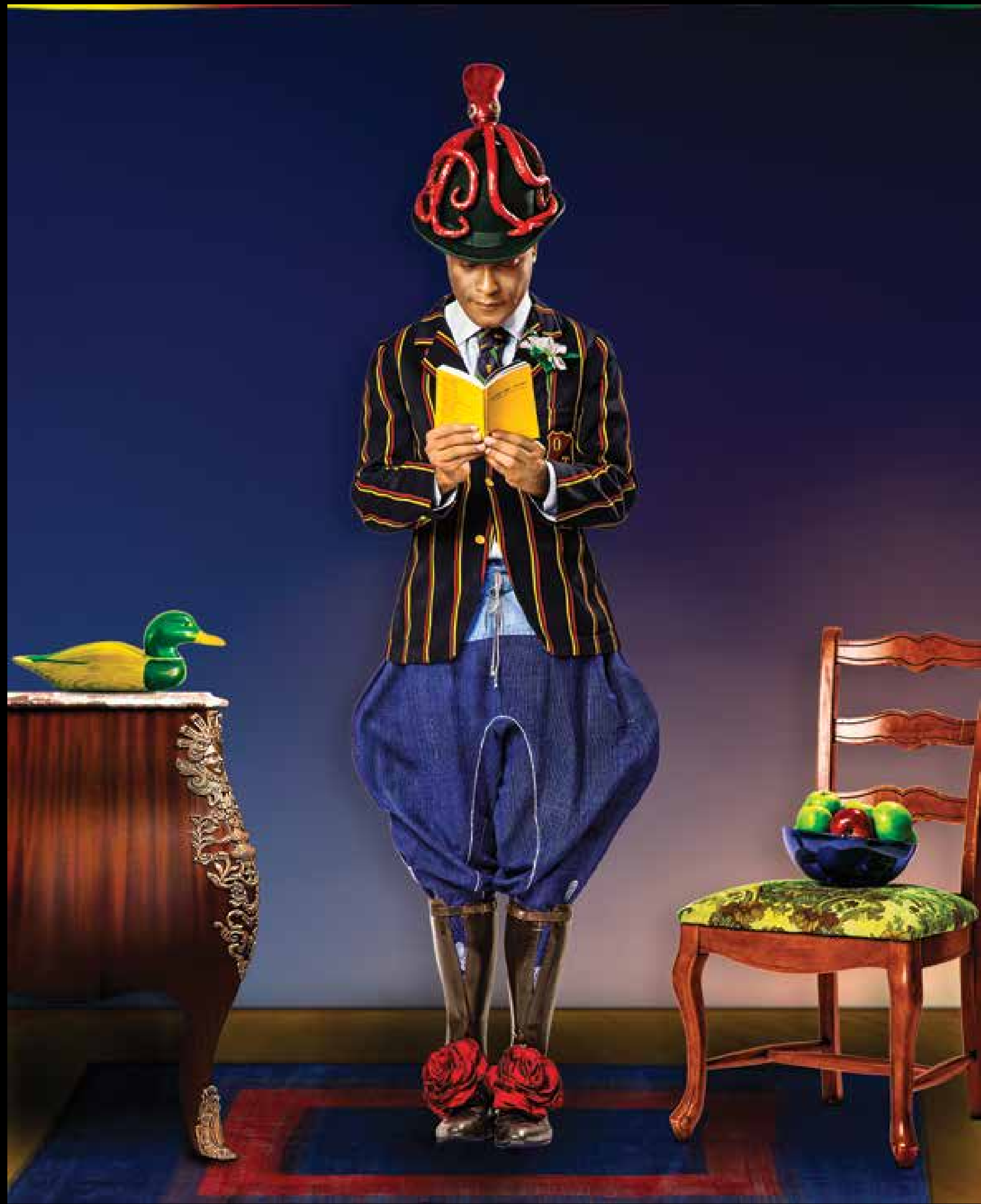
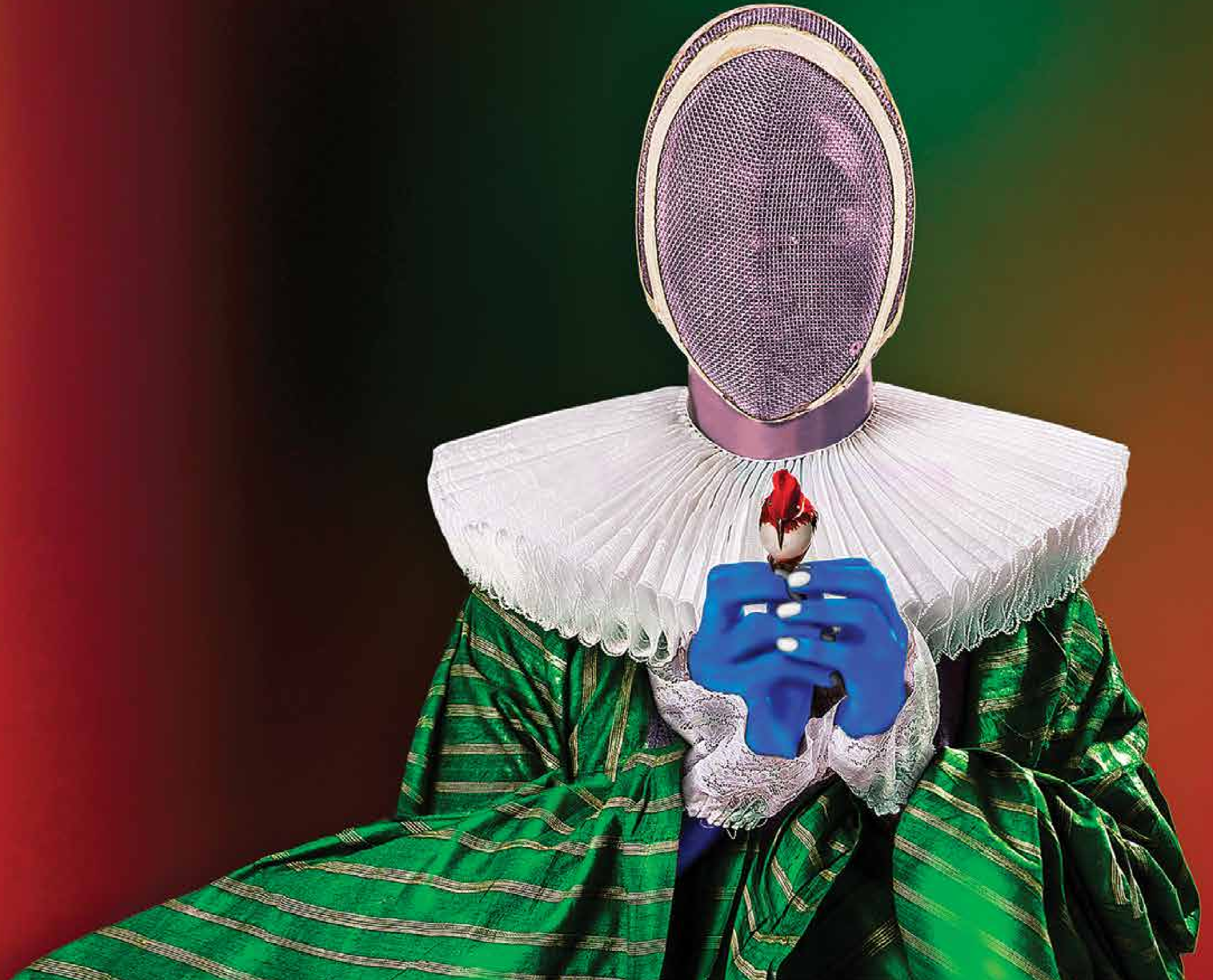


IKÉ UDÉ

STYLE & SYMPATHIES

New Photographic Works

SARTORIAL ANARCHY #23 (detail), 2013



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IKÉ UDÉ
STYLE & SYMPATHIES
October 10 - November 9, 2013
Leila Heller Gallery, New York

Cover:
SARTORIAL ANARCHY #21, 2013

IKÉ UDÉ

STYLE & SYMPATHIES

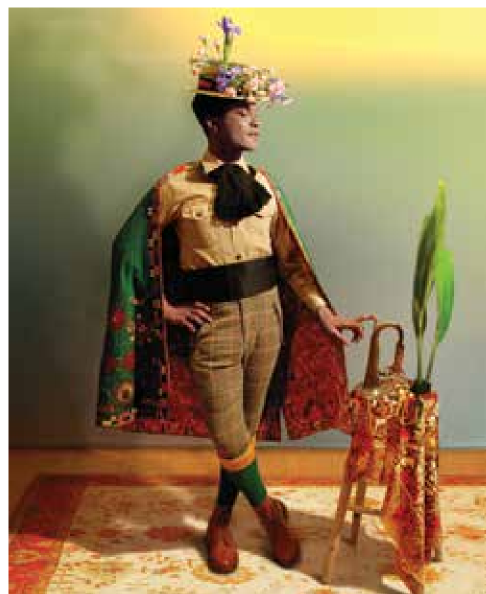
New Photographic Works

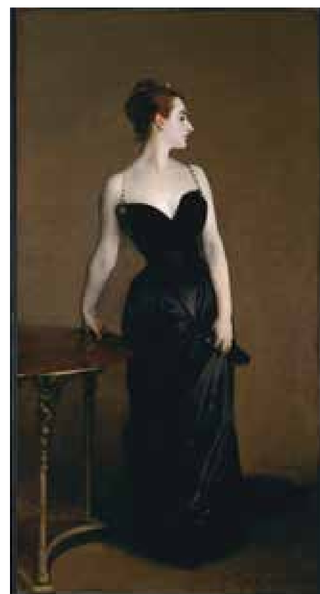
Exhibition, dedicated to my prince, Dorian Udé

VICTORIA PASS

STYLING GLOBALIZATION: IKÉ UDÉ'S SARTORIAL ANARCHY

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 necktie 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 Afghani 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 color harmony between the greens of the palm leaves, his Italian football socks, and the Afghani coat. This is coordinated with a suite of burnt oranges, khakis, and beiges, in the rug, tablecloth, coat lining, Boy Scout shirt, and tweed breeches. The backdrop of the image, hand painted by Udé, echoes these colors in softer tones. In his series of photographs *Sartorial Anarchy*, Iké Udé adopts the pose of the dandy, fashioning images of himself that destabilize masculinity as well as the trope of exoticism in fashion.

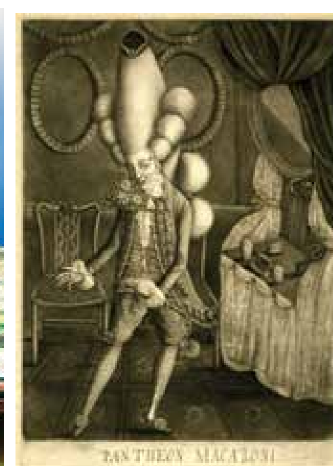

Iké Udé, *Sartorial Anarchy #4*, 2010
Pigment on Satin Paper
40 x 36 in / 101.6 x 91.4 cm


John Singer Sargent, *Madame X (Madame Pierre Gautreau)*, 1883-4
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Eschewing the androgyny and gender bending of some of his earlier images such as those in the *Cover Girl* series, in *Sartorial Anarchy* Udé dresses only in men's clothing and wears no makeup. The exclusive use of menswear in this series is in part a response to Udé's own frustration with the ways in which art centered on identity politics in the 1990s increasingly reinscribed the dichotomies that Udé sought to reveal as false.[1] In a statement on *Sartorial Anarchy*, he 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."[2] For example, in *Untitled # 21*, a surgeon's cap with its strings untied, hanging down Udé's back and topped with a boxer's helmet, two garments associated with violence and gore are made elegant by proximity to a red silk Chinese gown. In this way, masculinity is exposed as a construct in time and space, varying between the primal expression of violence referenced by the boxing helmet to the elegant gentlemanly luxury of the silk gown, rather than being reinscribed as a stable position through the adoption of drag. In *Untitled #4*, he combines articles associated with British masculinity with articles that have signified masculinity in other cultural contexts. While the lacy necktie, flowery hat and lavishly embroidered coat would seem to be at odds with the contemporary utilitarian boots and khaki uniform shirt, they all work together to create a harmonious and striking look. The harmony that Udé creates in these works suggests that these various aspects of masculinity, whether delicate or rough, ostentatious or uniform, can coexist, resisting the notion that the traits of masculinity are fixed or easily defined.

In *Untitled #5*, Udé cites a historic group of men whose sartorial style exposed the performative quality of masculinity: the English macaronis. In this photograph Udé wears a wig from the 1750s, recalling English men whose enormous wigs rivaled the excesses of their female contemporaries. Macaroni style embraced foreign fashion from France and Italy and resisted the more sober turn that English dressing was taking in the mid-seventeenth century. These exaggerated wigs, topped with miniature French hats, functioned as symbols of masculine power, but in their excessiveness also suggested conspicuous consumption and luxury, which were associated with women and foreigners in eighteenth-century Britain.[3] Peter McNeil argues that the flamboyance of the English macaroni emphasized the performative nature of masculine identity.[4] This self-conscious construction of a style defied long-held conventions about who was entitled to wear what, and where. One of the most famous macaronis was Julius Soubise, a Caribbean-born former slave who was a companion to the Duchess of Queensberry in England and distinguished himself as a fencer and musician. Monica Miller observes that the way that Soubise distinguished himself as part of the British macaroni scene demonstrates the ways that all macaroni performances questioned what counted as authentically British, upper class, and masculine.[5]

Iké Udé, *Sartorial Anarchy #5*, 2013
Pigment on Satin Paper
54 x 36.11 in / 137.2 x 91.72 cm



Philip Dawe, *Pantheon Macaroni*
3 July 1773, British Museum

Udé's citation of the macaronis—dandies *avant le lettre*—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 with men's style 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 dandy exposes the importance of 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."[6] 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.[7] 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.[8]

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.[9] 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 made it clear that the status of the aristocrats who surrounded him was also a matter of performance. In contrast, Charles Baudelaire's (1821–1867) vision of the

dandy in his 1863 essay "*The Painter of Modern Life*" was as a *flaneur*, a perpetual observer who could read the modern world as a detective reads a mystery's clues.[10] This dandy affects a blasé attitude, but in fact is deeply enthralled with and sensitive to the populations of modern cities. His talent for reading visual cues foreshadows the increasing importance of the visual in the modern world.

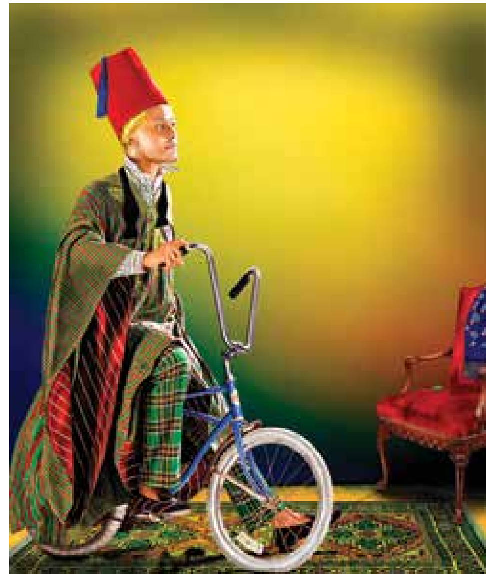
Udé's works embody both aspects of the dandy and often directly refer to its various historical incarnations. In 2003 he recreated a series of late 19th century British magazine covers—*Yellow Book and Savoy*, respectively—with portraits of himself as a modern dandy, with clear references to English dandies Oscar Wilde and Aubrey Beardsley at the turn of the previous century. The aesthetic movement's delectation over visual images and attentiveness to the harmony of dress and interior design is a key part of Sartorial Anarchy. For example, in *Untitled #18*, Udé's pose and blue coat, red trousers, and turbaned Lord Byron mask mirror the pose and ensemble or the Russian soldier figurine from 1830 that sits on the nineteenth-century cabinet on the right. In *Untitled # 17* Udé's twist to the right mimics the Chinese lion or dog figure that sits at his feet. In *Untitled #21* the bulging silhouette of his indigo-dyed Yoruba trousers tucked into leather officer's leggings from World War II echoes the graceful curve of the nineteenth-century Louis XV bronze-mounted Kingwood Commode. Udé's compositions are filled with these kinds of visual rhymes of form or color.

Udé, however, aims to move beyond simply dressing elegantly, posing perfectly, and creating a composition that a turn-of-the-century decadent would drool over. He wants to deconstruct the practice of the dandy.

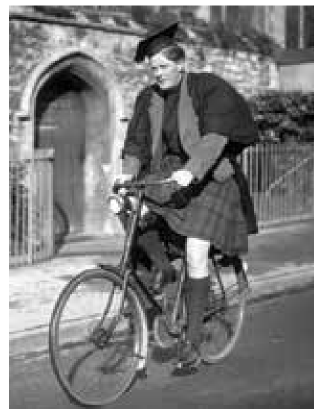
Yet, it is precisely in isolating the various parts that we see the overall process and resultant composition of a dandiacal machine. The incongruous pairing of the familiar…with relatively unfamiliar items…is where dandyism can be stoked, problematized, renewed and appreciated as a protean plastic arts.[11]

By referencing images within the popular imagination and exposing their construction through the use of different kinds of clothes and objects, Udé's dandy draws attention to the often unconscious forms of collage and pastiche that populate the post-modern world. This dandy attends to the history and significance of each object and its place of origin, offering a new modern mode of approaching the signification of style.

As Udé's engagement in dandyism suggests, style is the substance of these works. The harmonious combination

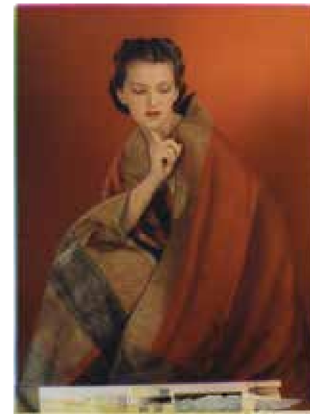


Iké Udé, *Sartorial Anarchy #8*, 2013
Pigment on Satin Paper
48.13 x 40.05 in /122.2 x 101.7 cm



Circa 1939: Scottish undergraduate A I Bell, cycling in Oxford. (Photo by Hulton Archive/Getty Images)

of seemingly incongruous elements, the familiar with the unfamiliar, draws the viewer into his images. While the Yoruba trousers and the Zulu fighting stick in *Untitled #5* may at first glance seem unfamiliar to an American or European viewer, they quickly resolve themselves into the breeches and walking stick of the macaroni. Udé's image of difference morphs into familiarity, working against the typical exoticization of African and Asian garments in western fashion as an exotic spice to bland mainstream white culture, to paraphrase bell hooks.[12] In *Sartorial Anarchy #8*, the combination of a Nigerian men's gown, skull-embellished slippers, a contemporary button-down shirt, and Scottish tartan trousers has deeper implications than compositional effect. It is an explosively colorful play on British academic dress, complete with a bicycle to speed through the cobbled streets of Oxford. The Nigerian gown Udé wears replaces the dark, flowing academic gown with its long open sleeves, worn in this case over a more colorful version of the typical suit worn underneath. The lavishly embroidered collar takes the place of the hood lining that indicates the rank and discipline of the wearer. The glorious red fez stands in for the traditional mortarboard, mimicking the academic hat with its blue tassel. What started out as a dissonant image of disparate sartorial elements suddenly evokes a very familiar and particularly British image of upper-class masculinity.



Edward Steichen, *Woman Draped in Voluminous Red Shawl*, ca. 1935
© Estate of Edward Steichen

The photograph exposes academic dress as ethnic or tribal, at the same time connecting a Nigerian garment to one worn in Britain. Indeed, *Untitled #8*, reminds us that European and American fashion has significant archaic elements more often associated with the cultures in Nigeria and Turkey that Udé references here. Academic dress, which is, after all, derived from medieval styles, is exposed as being just as traditional as the Nigerian gown.[13] The ways in which European, American, African and Asian forms of dress are blended and mixed to create images that are at once familiar and foreign reveals that the exotic is a construction within fashion.

Udé describes his work as "trafficking" through history and geography.[14] This movement through time and space is not only achieved through the sartorial elements in each photograph, but also through the striking use of color in each work. Udé's painterly approach to color in these photographs creates another layer in the historical bricolage of these photographs. He gives the photographs their own unique color temperature without a solid connection to a particular period. The second set of four images (#5–#8) employs a high-key palate that has a futuristic digital look—cyans, blown-out whites, bright green, blue, yellow, and red—in contrast to the historical elements in the photographs. The first four images, on the other hand, use an earthy and painterly color palate that echoes early dye-transfer color photographs by Edward Steichen in *Vogue*.[15] Printed on satin paper as opposed to a glossy surface, these photographs take on the appearance of an old magazine page. This painterly attention to color brings the viewer's attention to the ways in which color is read in photographs as an indication of history. Udé's engagement with color accentuates the ways in which the clothes and objects in these photographs "traffic" through history and geography.

Udé's photographic practice as a dandy makes the familiar strange and the strange familiar. In his photographs, American and European garments are made as exotic as their African and Asian counterparts. He levels the playing field and suggests a way in which the trafficking of fashion through time and space can avoid trite and chauvinistic notions of the primitive or traditional juxtaposed with the modern. Can the images that Udé creates be translated into wearable fashion? Can these images of sartorial anarchy suggest a new way of dressing in our highly globalized world? Or is this presentation reserved for the dandy, that privileged figure observing and critiquing society from the margins?

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1. See for example his unpublished essay "Magnificent Futility," which he wrote in response to an invitation to participate in a special "Queers of Color" issue of the *Village Voice*, but which the magazine refused to publish. Iké Udé, "Magnificent Futility," in *Beyond Decorum: The Photography of Iké Udé* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000), 124-25.
2. Iké Udé, "Sartorial Anarchy" (Artist's Statement, 2010).
3. Peter McNeil, "Macaroni Masculinities," in *The Men's Fashion Reader*, ed. Peter McNeil and Vicki Karaminas (Oxford: Berg, 2009), 56.
4. "Macaroni Masculinities," in *The Men's Fashion Reader*, ed. Peter McNeil and Vicki Karaminas (Oxford: Berg, 2009), 70.
5. Monica L. Miller, *Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 70.
6. Udé, "Sartorial Anarchy."
7. The dandy is a position that has always been gendered as masculine. This points to the potential limitations of this position since, in some sense, it is the fact that a man (rather than a woman) is attending to taste and style in a serious way that suggests it should be taken seriously. 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 (examples include Coco Chanel, Georgia O'Keeffe, Romaine Brooks, and Marlene Dietrich).
8. Miller, 8.
9. Ian Buruma, "Tell a Man by His Clothes," in *Anglomania: Tradition and Transgression in British Fashion* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2006), 17.
10. See: Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life, and Other Essays*, trans. Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon, 1964), 5-12.
11. Udé, "Sartorial Anarchy."
12. bell hooks, "Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance," in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 21.
13. See Joanne McCallum, "Academic Dress," *A-Z of Fashion* (2005), http://ezproxy.mica.edu:2085/view/bazf/bazf00009.xml.
14. He used the word "traffic" in describing his practice in these images a lecture at the Reginald F. Lewis Museum on 15 April 2012, Baltimore, Maryland.
15. In the additive process, the photographer makes three separation negatives, one for each color (magenta, yellow, cyan). The negatives are printed successively on top of one another, allowing the photographer a tremendous amount of control over the color quality. The resulting image is highly saturated, almost hyper-real.

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