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Sunday, April 23, 2017



## IKÉ UDÉ: THE MAN AND HIS WORKS

Iké Udé is a photographer and performance artist, among others, who has made a name for himself with the uniqueness of his works, globally. In this interview, he opens up on how it all started.



Writers from Kenya, Nigeria and Ghana storm Ebedi for residency

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# Iké Udé: The man and his works

Iké Udé is famous for his unique style of photography and became a household name in Nigeria with his Nollywood portraits. The artist spoke to *Daily Trust on Sunday* about his works and what motivates his creativity.

Adie Vanessa Offiong

**How did you get exposed to photography?**

Very early on as a child, my family had a practice of commissioning a professional photographer to execute family portraits. It became a visual diary and marker of varied developments, memories and benchmarks in our lives and in relation to family, no less the society at large. It furnished an opportunity or if you like, an agreeable excuse for my siblings to don on their latest made clothes for the camera.

**What does photography mean to you?**

Photography, unlike painting or sculpture, is a wonderful light medium. As such a medium, it now enjoys infinite possibilities with the new digital tools and some of the analogue tricks of yore. It is perhaps the most exciting medium to work in.

**How important is it for you to connect with your subjects to bring out their true self?**

I don't ever look for my subject's true self, because the more you purposefully look for it, the more it eludes you. If the true self is felt in a portrait, it is by default. Human beings have an uncanny ability for deception, especially in front of the camera. So what really obtains is a mask, a persona-which isn't exactly the same as the true self. That said, it is immeasurably important that I put each and every one of my portrait subject at ease-there is no overstating it. The connection needn't be verbal-in fact most of it is non-verbal. I have done wonderful commissioned portraits of Arabs in Dubai, of Italians, Russians, French, Japanese, etc. who weren't necessarily fluent in English and still got exactly what I wanted. Most of what transpires during the photography session is non-verbal. Photographers who instruct or talk too much to their sitters during the shoot, only succeed in intimidating and distancing their subjects.

**Locations and weather conditions seem to be a crucial aspect to a successful picture. How do you handle these unpredictable factors?**

For the most part, I'm against nature, I rarely venture in the wild. I don't feel comfortable in public spaces (especially in the day time). I'm terrified by the presence of too many people-I guess it's a form of Agoraphobia, hence, I rarely go outside-except if need be. Most, if not all my

works, are done in the safe, controlled environment of the studio. However, I do not rule out the possibility of engaging nature for art's sake. I've seen some really fantastic postings of varied Nigerian landscapes on Instagram and the internet in general. I see a huge potential to do a body



■ Colours can go wrong if not lovingly harmonised



■ Some works of the artist

■ Iké Udé

of works comprising sublime Nigerian landscapes. In much the same way that Turner did and in effect popularized the English landscape we so admire today!

**Colour vs. black and white. Why one over the other, and is the photographic process different?**

Black and white often succeeds in photography because it is much simpler. Within the range of the black and white, and in the in-between shades of grey within the opposite spectrums, it's hard to go wrong. So, black and white photography is safe and easy. Colour is far more tricky, demanding and often can go wrong if not lovingly harmonised in chromatic values, distribution and structure. When handled well, when it succeeds, colour photography is vastly superior to any black and white print. I have done both colour and black and white photography. In fact, a keen understanding of how black and white photography works, makes it much easier to understand and compose successful, chromatically harmonious colour pictures.

**Among your works, which one is your favourite and why?**

I would say that *Sartorial Anarchy, Nollywood Portraits: A Radical Beauty* and the 1994 *Cover Girl* series are among my favourites. *Sartorial Anarchy* was a breakthrough work, in that it was the first time that I found a wonderful equilibrium between the profoundly beautiful and the hard-edged conceptual photography; *Cover Girl*, because it was a marvellous, consequential intervention that immediately became a part of the University curriculum in the United States and all over Western Europe until this day; *Nollywood Portraits: A Radical Beauty* because it's a homecoming of sorts for me and rounds my Nigerian and African identity beautifully.

**Whose work has influenced you the most?**

French post-modern theorists were very impactful in my thinking and the conceptual bent in my work. Pictorially, the Italian Renaissance painters and the Dutch Golden Age masters had an indelible influence on my picture-making ambitions and approach.

**What is the one thing you wish you knew when you started taking photos?**

Nothing! Because the best place to start anything ambitiously radical is from a tabula rasa-a blank slate. So to knowingly know nothing is fundamentally important, as it's radical.

**Has any one photographed you satisfactorily?**

I have been the subject of many photographers and artists. They are mostly conventional or traditional photographers. I respect their various interpretations of me in their works but none anywhere close to my self-portraits.

**What was the idea behind the Dandy series?**

It was a part of a series of work that I was commissioned to do for a 2003 exhibition, *Make Life Beautiful: The Dandy*

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in *Photography*, a Brighton Photo Biennale project at the Brighton Museum and Art Gallery, in Brighton, England. The exhibition included portraits of artists and writers such as Noel Coward, Andy Warhol, Cecil Beaton, August Sanders; portraits of the Countess of Castiglione, Claude Cahun-women who had appropriated the role of the dandy. In homage to the "yellow" 1890s, I employed the leading avant-garde journal of the time, the *Yellow Book*, which was closely associated with the aesthetic and decadent movement. Aubrey Beardsley was the Art Editor of the publication. After the demise of *Yellow Book* due to the Oscar Wilde's sodomy scandal, Aubrey founded *The Savoy*. Not unlike the *Cover Girl* series, for *Make Life Beautiful*, I decided to use the covers of these two journals as a diachronic framework for my self-portraits.

**Beyond being a work place/ station, what does your studio mean to you?**

It is my sanctuary; like being in the womb again - immune from the ugliness and nastiness of the outside world. I sometimes work and not leave my studio for a week and on a few occasions, I didn't leave my studio for about almost two weeks, with curtains totally drawn to block out the

daylight. I once learned that we had snow here in New York when a friend called me from Paris to check how I was coping with the snowstorm. I had no idea we had had snow in New York. Even though I'm on a 3rd floor loft building with huge, tall windows and high ceiling, I fancy my studio like an underground bunker-totally shut off from the outside world so that I can live in peace, give my imagination free reign and loose myself in reverie and other fancies of a boundless, wild mind.

**If I walked into your studio what would be the most unusual thing(s) I would see?**

I collect all sorts-from tinny bottles, porcupine spines/quills, antique Fulani head dresses/hats, antique fabrics of the Yorubas, Ashanti, Ibos, etc., as well as antique and vintage shoes and costumes and rare first edition books and beautifully bound books; a collection of pressing irons that range from the 19th century to mid - 20th century.

**For your costumes, you use Nigerian tailor(s). Is this a deliberate message or a chance thing?**

This is a relatively new development, that began on my second trip to shoot the Nollywood portraits. And I only use Nigerian tailors when the occasional opportunity comes due to shipping problems. That

said, I grew up in Nigeria. My dad used amazing Nigerian tailors. So I know firsthand that we have incredibly talented tailors and clothing manufacturers in Nigeria - especially in Aba. Then, most of them were British trained. I also want to support our tailors and craftsmen and women as I am often photographed in highly publicized events here in New York. It is an excellent way to advertise them.

**How do you source materials for your costumes?**

I have a vast network of dealers all over the place. When some things aren't available, I research and locate talents who can reproduce them beautifully for me.

**What's your favourite costume item and why?**

Among my favourites are: an original 1800 American handmade black frock coat with tails; an antique dinka (Sudan) men's corset, circa 1800s and early 20th century Fulani double-faced cotton hat, spotted with beads and bits of tinny metallic beads rings, a 1900s Greece fustanella/kilt, worn by the Greek Palace Guard. (Fustanella kilt is made from 30 metres/98 feet of white material, with 400 pleats, representing the 400 years of Turkish occupation).

**Why 'Sartorial Snarchy' and 'Cultural Promiscuity'?**

*Sartorial Anarchy* series is



■ Udé: 'I'm inspired by my wild, anarchic fancies ...'



■ I am an anarchist in the purest sense of the word

shorthand, an artistic/aesthetic and philosophical manifestation of my anarchist temperament. I subscribe to anarchy and I am an anarchist in the purest sense of the word-in the sense of an absolute freedom of the individual, regarded as a political ideal. *Cultural Promiscuity* is basically my philosophy of being open-minded to quote from whatever cultural imports that excite and appeal to my artistic sensibility, development and desire for perfection. Employing a plurality of relevant cultural references, inspirations and influences, have far more depth and gravitas than without. It's like seeing things from multiple perspectives and not just one habitual perspective.

**One of my favourite images is Sartorial Anarchy #5. Please tell us about it.**

That's a perfect example of cultural promiscuity. By jettisoning originally assigned cultural or period meanings or assignments, I am able to concurrently, within each picture/ensemble, collapse boundaries of differences across time/periods and geographies/cultures. Hence, in the mix, across time/periods, the sartorial/fashion tropes of say, Asia, Europe, Africa and the Americas become indexes for their respective cultures but united into iconoclastic wholes irrespective of their original cultural subjectivities and meanings. For instance, in *Sartorial Anarchy #5*, you find an English Macoroni wig (17th century) in transition with a 20th century French shirt, Yoruba/Nigeria trousers (1940s), American loafer shoes (20th century), Zulu fighting stick, (19th/20th century) and West European WWI spats (circa, 1914-1918). They are all

in transitional states, dislocated, relocated and redeployed as iconoclastic indexes of culture.

**How do you educate yourself to take better pictures?**

Very often, I do this optical exercise whereby I look at various pictures very intently and study how they were made, deliberate on the tangibles and intangible values that I find in them and then recall them from memories to the degree that they become part of my subconscious terrain of visual language.

**You have been listed as one of the 10 Masters of Self-Portrait along with Van Gogh, Rembrandt and Andy Warhol among others. What does this mean to you?**

It is indeed encouraging to be acknowledged as such. But I eventually want to out-rank everyone on that list. Even then, I doubt I'll feel satisfied. I think that I'm cursed with a terribly insatiable appetite for bottomless achievements. It's a form of wilful insecurity with an upside that propels me to keep going and without which I'll instantly die of acute ennui.

**When you go on one of your travels, what are you likely to take with you?**

I travel with one or two of my favourite authors. Reading them while on board the plane or at my hotel suite gives me the feeling of being in my studio - it's as if I never left the studio. And I also travel with my favourite Penhaligon perfume, Violetta, now sadly discontinued.

**What inspires you?**

My mad, wild, anarchic fancies, boundless poetic imagination and insatiable desire for ideal beauty and existence.