

LEILA HELLER GALLERY.

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## AN INTERVIEW WITH IKÉ UDÉ

In January of the year 2014, Hazed talked with Nigerian born New Yorker IKÉ UDÉ after the completion of his 2013 Solo exhibition, *Style and Sympathies*, at the Leila Heller Art Gallery in Chelsea. A man unmalleable to the notions of gender held by many in society, confident, detached and critical, Ike Ude is an artist.



Self portraits commissioned, 2013, by Max Kibardin/Bruno Magli

**“ I prefer the sympathies of a hundred individualists to the obscene hysterical adoration of millions. ”**

**HAZED:** Let's say it is 2080 and a collection of your work is being studied in an Art History course, and the question, "Who is Iké Udé?" is being discussed. What is the answer to that question.

**IKÉ UDÉ:** *The kids at various universities from Harvard, Cornell University, Yale, NYU to Central St. Martins College, London are already studying my work since 1994. And a fair bet to your question is that by then the answer will have a more romantic bent all the more alluring.*

**What kind of child were you?**

*Very independent; observant; curious; a reader; thinker; spoiled; yet respectfully obedient to my elders and seniors and moreover, valued sound criticism—then and now.*

**Tell me a bit about your family, the basic structure, who was the head of the household, any brothers/sisters?**

*My dad came from a land and plantation owning family but opted for a leisurely, lighter job in the Nigerian Railway Corporation. My mother came from a business family that also comprised of educators as well as politicians and playboys.*

**What was an average evening in your household in Lagos?**

*There were often conversations between my parents and siblings but I often absconded or simply excuse myself and retired to my room. I lived and still live the life of the imagination and this demands that one is left completely alone and undisturbed by the quotidianity of life.*

**How did you picture your adult self to be like when you were younger?**

*I was never aware of being young in the literal sense of the world. I've often liked the company of elders and select smart, clever kids who saw things slightly differently from the norm and had an attitude.*



*Iké Udé*

*SARTORIAL ANARCHY #23, 2013*

*Pigment on Satin Paper*

*45.7 x 36.5 in / 116.1 x 92.71 cm*

*MASK: Fencing mask, France, 1940s*

*COLLAR: 16th century Western European ruff-collar reproduction, in white lace/cotton*

*CUFF: Lace-cuff, Britain, 18th century, a vintage reproduction*

*GOWN: Nigerian massive mens gown with embroidery, 1940s*

*ANIMAL: Bird, Woodpecker*

*TROUSERS: American golf trousers, classic/contemporary, 1998*

*SHOES: American, classic/contemporary, 2010*

*VASE: Large Pumpkin shaped Royal Bonn vase, 1880-1920*

*ANIMAL: Antique Murano glass fighting rooster, circa, 19th century*

*FURNITURE: Antique/Vintage chair, date/place unknown*

*CARPET: Persian Gabbeh Oriental Rug*

**Does the image fit the reality of who you are now? If not, what are the variations?**

*I'm not particularly aware of any image of myself. I have always and basically fashioned myself particularly to please my innate artistic, poetic disposition. If some perceive this as image making, as the contemporary phrase allows, it only betrays their own cynicism and vulgarity of mind! But I can't be otherwise and couldn't careless.*

**When did this sense of individualism originate? Is it innate or has it been influenced by situations from your childhood?**

*I can't quite put my finger on it, but my guess is that it is largely innate. I think that certain individuals have an insatiable need to be almost always alone, in the comfort of their own company and only occasionally in the company of other people. This is certainly the case with me.*

**Tell me about your journey from your birth in Lagos, Nigeria to the establishment of New York City as your residency?**

*Very simple, I wanted to get out and away from my extremely strict father who policed me as much as I was policed in the Victorian-like boarding school that I attended.*

**How did you get to the place you are in life?**

*I still fancy myself as much a student of life and as such still have much to learn and accomplish. I don't see myself as having arrived. And to be sure, I'm more interested in the journey, more invested in the process of arriving than the arrival. What else is there after one arrives to that place, see? For me, then, the perfect place is to be in the threshold of arrival and expand that threshold intensely, flame-like!*

**From birth to this date, what are the most memorable landmarks in your life that have helped sculpt who you are? The landmarks could be: triumphs, failures, obstacles...**

*I don't have such landmarks. For better or worse, each moment of life collectively counts.*

**Some people search all their lives to find their true calling in their professional lives, while you have been doing this for more than two decades, when did you first realize that being an artist was yours?**

*I can't quite recall exactly. It must have been too long ago and very early on.*

**You moved from Lagos to New York city, why did you choose NYC, and why did you move away from Lagos?**

*To be as far away as possible and not reachable by nosy family members.*



Iké Udé  
 SARTORIAL ANARCHY #5, 2013  
 Pigment on Satin Paper  
 54 x 36, 11 in / 137.2 x 91.72 cm  
 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

**Did you start painting while you were in college or did it start when you were younger?**

*After I'd disengaged with college.*

**What do you consider your first work of art? What was the inspiration behind it?**

*I frankly cannot remember but I'm sure it wasn't in line of exactly what I'm doing now.*

**Is there a specific piece of art that allowed you to transform from Iké Udé to Iké Udé, the New York based artist?**

*It's really hard to say, but most art-critics and historians would probably say that it's my Cover Girl series, 1994. I don't know if I particularly agree with such an assessment but I'll leave it at that.*



“ Cover Girl is an interrogation of the aesthetic politics of gender, race and class apropos of the currency of the “mainstream” magazine. What is mainstream within the media context? Is mainstream a measure of fact or ideal representation? By who, and for whom? How, when and where? These questions may appear as a kind of “who’s on first,” but the context for my contention is real. One need only read any “mainstream” magazine to see its hypocrisy of inclusion and practice of exclusion. ”

Ike Ude's commentary about Cover Girl published on [Thresholds: Viewing Culture](#)

**Among the different portraits that you have done, do you have a favorite? If you do, which one is it, and why is it your favorite?**

*I do not have a favorite, but Sartorial Anarchy #4, 2013 ranks high among my favorites.*

**I read once that part of Leonardo Da Vinci's success in so many fields was his skill of observation and detailed note taking of those observations. Do you have a similar pattern? Do you meticulously catalogue ideas for your next great piece of work?**

*He is a great hero of mine and a constant source of inspiration. He overcame extreme odds—having been born a bastard, denied formal education—yet he turned these disadvantages to strength and extraordinary advantage. And yes, I subscribe in the power of observation for all the answers are there if one keenly observe on things.*

In one recent interview you said that wherever you went, you are regarded as a stranger or someone who is foreign, whether it's in New York, Berlin or Lagos, but where do you feel at home?

*I feel at home whenever I'm alone and surfing the rich, inexhaustible world of the imagination.*



*Iké Udé*  
SARTORIAL ANARCHY #4, 2010  
Pigment on Satin Paper  
40 x 36 in / 101.6 x 91.4 cm  
HAT: A boater with flowers for "Fourth of June" (inspired by the traditional Eton/Oxford College boat-race celebration for Queen and Country, started in 1829, held annually since 1856)  
COAT: Green Afghanistan traditional coat American Boy Scout shirt 17th/18th century men's neckwear, cummerbund, vintage, Anglo-American  
BREECHES: Early 1990s Matsuda/  
Japanese-designed tweed-knee breeches  
SOCKS: Italian football/soccer socks, 1960s to present  
BOOTS: Brown boots by Trickers  
BUGLE: Antique American Boy Scout Brass Bugle

*evolution of what I'm already working on. More doesn't interest me at any rate. Work wise—more than a quote—my stoic disposition ensures that no stone is left unturned in my pursuit of the impossible.*

**What is the first thing you do when you wake up?**

*I lie perfectly still and give my thoughts free reign to wonder as far afield as possible then I reach for a volume of poetry nearby and afterwards, I prepare and drink some tea; then choose the one song to listen to over-and-over again—for the whole day, non-stop. I'm particularly partial to the Spanish Romantic guitar composers such, Francisco Tárrega, Joaquín Turina, Isaac Albéniz and I especially love, love love Enrique Granados music. And Joaquín Rodrigo's 10 minutes-or-so composition ranks among the best ever composed.*

*In each of the portraits of the Sartorial Anarchy series, the protagonists don eclectic clothing that have emerged from various parts of the world and time periods. What is the unifying trait among these different characters, or are they all a single protagonist on different days?*

*I'm nobody in this performances and this allows me to be the everyman that is imaginatively possible.*

**What does Sartorial Anarchy #4 have in common with your other favorite works?**

*It's a winning combination of conceptual clarity, compositional virtuosity, poetics of color, finely wrought form and materiality of concept.*

**You said that the answer to "who is Iké Udé?" will hopefully have a "romantic bent" to it. Please clarify.**

*I'd prefer to leave it at that; sometimes the less said, the better.*

**Please describe what success means to you?**

*Having a peace of mind and a peaceful existence—if possible 99% or 100% of the time.*

**Is there an element of luck in success?**

*In my own context there isn't an element of luck needed because one has it within oneself to realize it. It is a within and not a without matter.*

**What advice would you offer an aspiring artist in New York?**

*Depends on the type of artist; artists come variedly. But the best advise is probably no particular advise.*

**What are your thoughts on Frida Kahlo, Lady Gaga and Oscar Wilde?**

*I understand how Frida Kahlo has such an attraction for some, especially among women with feminist bent but I find her overrated, utterly boring and uninspiring. I think that Diego Rivera is certainly the more interesting, heroic artist and probably underrated presently; Lady Gaga remains a curiosity, I have no thoughts on her, but a brilliant, thoughtful friend of mine told me that she is actually talented and I love that she'd inspired the sartorially tedious hip-hop generation of girls to dress up a bit; Despite some of his flaws, Mr. Wilde was clever, brilliant and had the courage of his convictions—I admire that immensely.*

**Do you have a favorite quote that inspires you to create more, work more, and be who you are. If so, what is it?**

*I'm not interested in creating or working more; rather, I'm invested in the*

**An interesting conversation or an interesting book, which one do you prefer?**

*A book. A thorough engagement with a book—say an author—is the ultimate mode of conversation.*

**If you are going to be remembered for anything, what do you want to be remembered for?**

*I personally do not care. I don't care for public opinion of myself and I don't much care for the public at large. I prefer the sympathies of a hundred individualists to the obscene hysterical adoration of millions.*

**Regret, does the word mean anything to you?**

*Regret is perhaps the worst mode of narcissism; it is a vain, worthless, exaggerated sentiment or self-indulgent. Not for me!*

*Hazed will like to thank the artist IKÉ UDÉ for providing the Cover Girl and the Bruno Magli pictures and taking the time to do the interview. Hazed would also like to thank the Leila Heller Gallery for providing the Sartorial Anarchy portraits.*