

WORKING PRACTICE

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# IKÉ UDÉ

*at Leila Heller*

A new show from the Nigerian-born, New York-based artist, dandy and highly discriminating aesthete examines the contrasts and complexities of what he calls “sartorial anarchy.”

by Carol Kino

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Ask the artist Iké Udé how he dreamed up the idea for his “Sartorial Anarchy” series, and he’ll explain that it’s part of his quest to save the world from what he calls “sartorial apartheid.” In an era renowned for globalization, Udé has always been struck by the “lack of global conversation sartorially,” he says. “People always tend to dress in a very segregated way,” hamstrung by the dictates of their own particular culture and time.

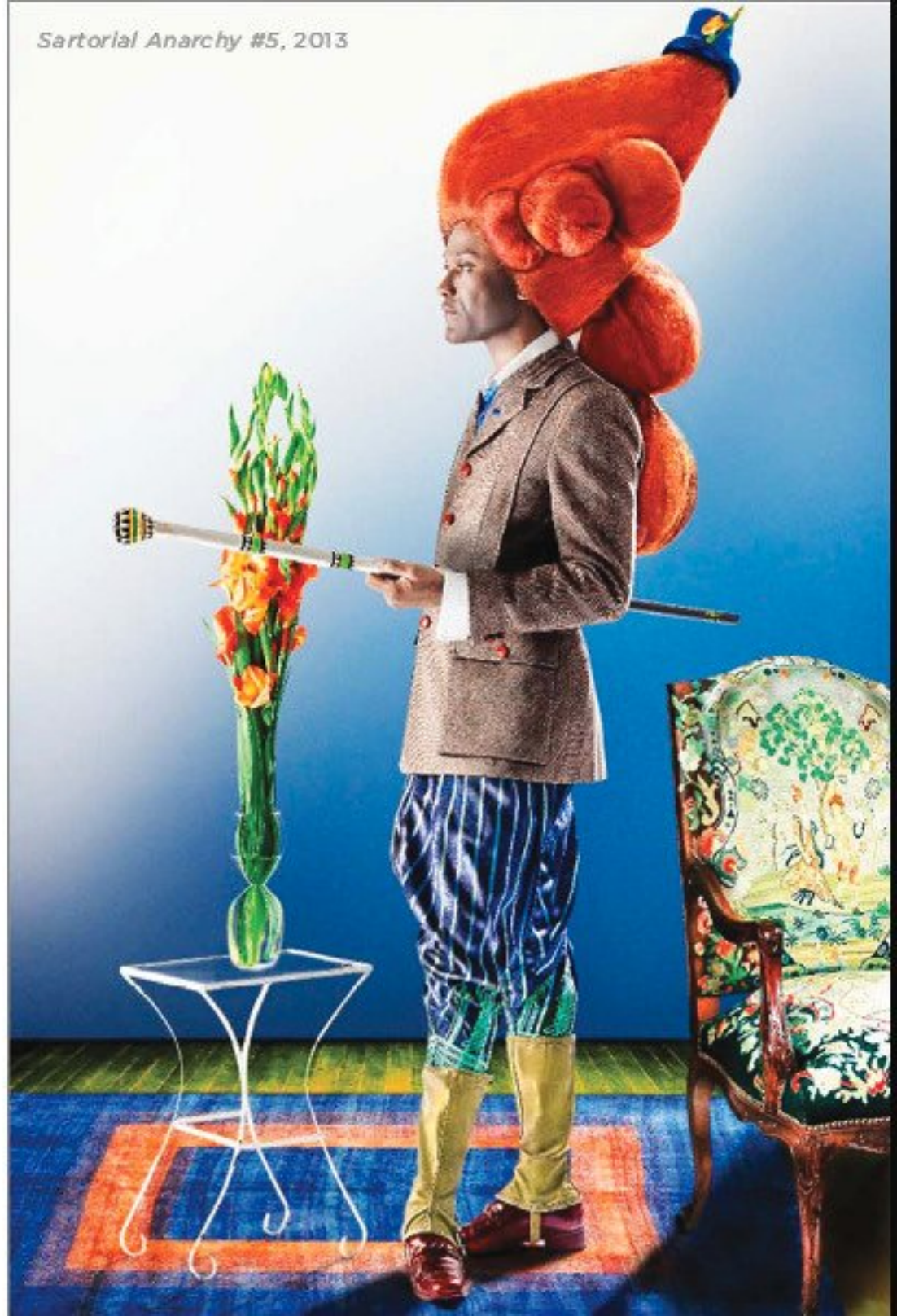
Yet Udé, a three-time veteran of *Vanity Fair*’s best dressed list — and a man who doesn’t shrink from pairing a repp bow tie with a silk-lapelled dinner jacket — is clearly the perfect person to put things right. “It’s not just enough to harvest all this stuff, you have to synthesize it,” he says. “It’s a balancing act. Not everyone can do it.”

*Sartorial Anarchy #20*, 2013, is one of 27 color portraits by the photographer Iké Udé on view at Leila Heller, in New York, from October 10 through November 9. Previous page: *Sartorial Anarchy #24*. All images courtesy of the artist and Leila Heller Gallery

**H**ow he does it will soon be on view in "Style and Sympathies," his latest New York exhibition at Leila Heller Gallery, in Chelsea (October 10 through November 9). It will include some 27 vividly colored portraits made between 2009 and this year, each of which shows the artist in fantastical guises and environments created with clothing and objects from different ages and lands. (Three of these images are being offered as a portfolio-sized triptych exclusively on **1stdibs**.)

In one shot, Udé preens like a dandy in 1950s Yoruba striped trousers and a 19th-century tweed Norfolk jacket, topped by

a huge orange Macaroni wig. In another, he affects a more boyish mien, sporting plaid shorts and a three-foot-high Medusa-like Afro while piping on an Indonesian flute like the god Pan. The show also includes more than one Orientalist fantasia, like the one where he poses in an Egyptian turban, curly-toed Arab shoes and a 19th-century embroidered Chinese jacket, puffing on a hookah and staring dreamily into space. (Selections from the series previously appeared in "The Global Africa Project" at New York's Museum of Arts and Design in 2010, and, earlier this year, in "Artist/Rebel/Dandy: Men of Fashion," at the Rhode Island School of Design Museum, in Providence.)





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**U**dé builds all these scenarios from the miniature costume library in his Chelsea studio, hiring a “paid hand,” as he puts it, to snap the shot, but for the most part working entirely on his own. He’ll spend days in post-production, amping up the colors and manipulating each image to draw attention to odd highlights, intensifying the glowing green eyes of a cat, for example, a detail that makes the creature look animatronic.

Several views of the costumes and accessories that fill the artist’s studio. Photos by Carol Kino

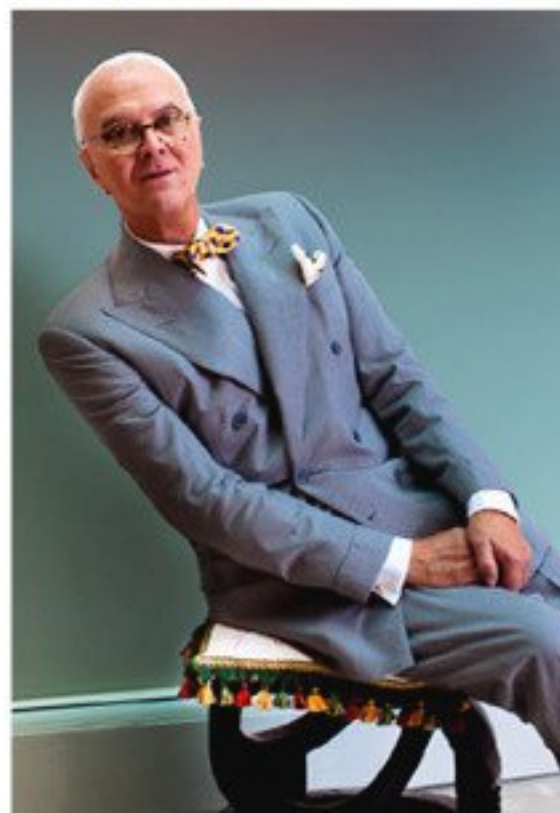
**H**e really is a magician, the way he presents light and color," says Heller, his dealer, who has had her own portrait made by Udé. The first time she saw his work, she recalls, she found herself thinking of Monet's paintings of haystacks and Rouen Cathedral. "I've seen him experiment with different rugs until he finds the right one to be the source of light for the figure." (Heller's portrait, along with several other commissions, will be on view in the gallery's back room.)

One of the most curious things about the portraits is how different Udé himself looks in each piece. "He's sort of like a chameleon who can transform himself," Heller says. Yet others might argue that Udé's many guises are just another way

of being himself; after all, his everyday attire usually includes an Edwardian-flavored suit and a curiously shaped Afro that suggests the curls of Beau Brummel.

"I think his persona is very much crafted to be an artwork," says Valerie Steele, the director of the Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology, in New York. Harold Koda, the director of the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, concurs. "Iké has really pursued a study of dandyism in a way that is probably deeper and richer than most scholars in costume," he says. "I think he's been a student of fashion and identity forever."

Clockwise from top left: *Harold Koda* (Curator-In-Charge of The Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art), 2011; *Amy Fine Collins*, 2010; *Leila Heller* (Gallerist), 2012; *Manolo Blahnik*, 2010





Uché has also had his champions in the art world. The Met's late legendary curator Henry Geldzahler was an early supporter, and African-American cultural studies theorists including Kobena Mercer have penned essays for his catalogs. But it's still his personal style that many seem to recall. The curator Lowery Sims, who organized "Global Africa" at MAD, first became aware of Uché during her years at the Studio Museum in Harlem, when he was "a standout presence at our openings," she says. Only when she finally visited Uché's studio a few years ago did she realize that "he essentially was personifying his own art practice in his dress. He takes the sense of elegance and dandyism to a whole new level that moves it into fashion and art and performance."

The eldest son of a wealthy family in Lagos, Nigeria, Uché recalls knowing he was an artist by the age of six. That's when he developed "a habit of firing at passers-by with a catapult when I disapproved of their walk or their way of dress," he says. One day his uncle caught him at it and scolded him. "He framed it as an ethical argument," says Uché. "But to this day, I see it as an aesthetic argument."

From left: more costumes in the studio of Uché; the artist at a recent Leila Heller opening. Photos by Carol Kíno



**A**fter many trips to London as a teenager with his classmates at a British-style Nigerian boarding school, Udé moved to New York in the 1980s and continued exercising his eye there. For a while, he worked the door of the uptown supper club M.K., surveying visitors through a monocle and allowing them entrance, he recalls, “based on their sartorial quotient or lack thereof.” Once Jean-Michel Basquiat asked him if the eyepiece was prescription or for effect. “I gently retorted that it was to improve my aesthetic vision,” he says.

In 1995, Udé created the *Interview*-like magazine *aRUDE*, named in homage to the Jamaican Rude Boys of 1960s London, which featured conversations with the likes of the Costume Institute’s Koda and *Vanity Fair*’s Amy Fine Collins. His book *Style File* (HarperCollins) was published in

2008. Today, he maintains the website Chic Index, where he examines the style of individuals including the philanthropist Jean Shafiroff and the designer Geoffrey Bradfield.

Along the way, Udé began making art, starting with paintings and drawings, and then moving on to performative and conceptual photographs. His “Cover Girl” series, begun in 1994, presented fashion magazine cover mock-ups with him as the model. (One *Vogue* cover shows him in a riding jacket, aiming a slingshot.) His “Beyond Decorum” series, started in 1999, matched photographs of pristine men’s shirts with salacious text taken from personal ads. Udé was “extrapolating the image of the whole man from that one detail, and, of course, for a costume person that’s fascinating,” says Koda.

*Sartorial Anarchy* #12, 2013

**T**hat series grew into a retrospective, which opened in 2000 at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Portland, Oregon, and traveled for the next two years to four more venues, including the MAK museum in Vienna. Then, Udé decided to take some time off. “I just wasn’t inspired,” he says. “I waited for a compelling idea.”

That idea finally arrived one day in 2004, when he was reclining on a reproduction 18th-century chaise longue and found the phrase “sartorial anarchy” floating into his head.

In his hands, however, anarchy has become harmonious. “Now more than ever,” Udé says, “we have access to all cultures and all sartorial endeavors. It’s time to harvest all of them, to embrace the all in one.”

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*Sartorial Anarchy #21, 2013, is one of three photographs offered as a portfolio-sized triptych exclusively through 1stdibs.*

