



Iké Udé, *Taiwo Ajai-Lycett*, 2014-16

NOLLYWOOD PORTRAITS

A RADICAL BEAUTY / WORKS BY IKÉ UDÉ

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Nollywood Portraits: A Radical Beauty

Iké Udé situates his practice at the intersection of art, fashion and popular culture. Born in Nigeria, Udé became conversant with the world of haute couture and celebrity upon moving to New York City in the 1980s to attend art school. There, he would develop his signature style, blending global sartorial sensibilities with forms of dress rooted in European traditions dating back as far as the eighteenth century. In his portraiture, which fuses theatricality, highly stylized articles of fashion, and notions of fame, Udé further shapes the appearance of his subjects by drawing on elaborate constructions, props, costumes, poses, painted backdrops and extensive postproduction. A celebrated portrait photographer and stylist, Udé is one of the best dressed men in the world, earning a place on *Vanity Fair's* International Best Dressed List in 2009, 2012 and 2015 and included in a 2013 special feature on veterans of the *Vanity Fair* list. Using these digital and dramaturgical tools, Udé blurs time, place and geography to forge new terrain in portraiture where ideal representations hover between reality and fantasy, between likeness and magic. In October 2014, Udé returned to Lagos, Nigeria, after three decades away, and made perhaps his most ambitious works to date, which capture the rising stars and celebrity culture of the Nigerian film industry known as Nollywood.¹

Since the early 1990s, Nollywood has gained worldwide relevance as the second most prolific film industry by volume, with almost 2,500 titles released annually—ahead of Hollywood and behind Bollywood—with revenues topping \$600 million annually.² The industry employs over one million people and is the second largest employer in the country after agriculture.³ Historically, films in Africa had a European sensibility with scenes laboriously captured on expensive celluloid, owing to the colonial producers who presented the continent in ways palatable to Western eyes and appetites. Nollywood, by contrast, was a homegrown and largely organic affair. Capitalizing on the falling prices of recording equipment—video cassettes, camcorders, and VCRs—it has long been characterized by independent, DIY filmmaking that meets the demands of an audience seeking authentic, engaging stories that reflect their own realities: local actors playing scenes drawn from real events. Today, Nollywood films are the most frequently viewed on the continent.

Adding to their success and accessibility, Nollywood films are often produced in the indigenous languages of Igbo and Yoruba, can be created in a matter of weeks, and are frequently distributed as “home movies” within hours of being released. This allows plots to be based on current affairs, such as the 2013 film *Boko Haram* about a young man who comes to Lagos on a mission to detonate a bomb, and two films released in 2014 based on the kidnapping of schoolgirls from Chibok, Borno.⁴ Still, other films are rooted in African traditions and folklore. The 1992 film *Living in Bondage*, directed by Chris Obi Rapu, is often cited as the originator of the industry. With a cast of Nigerian actors speaking Igbo with English subtitles, *Living in Bondage* was filmed straight-to-video and distributed directly to the streets, bypassing elitist and more expensive commercial venues in the capital. The complicated, gripping thriller involving a Nigerian man who murders his wife in an attempt to get rich through a satanic cult, only to be subsequently haunted by her, was viewed by everyday people in their homes and in cafes across the country. The raw films of the early 1990s with relatively unknown local actors have since given way to an impressive global industry. With its international, award-winning Nigerian directors and actors, Nollywood has generated a vibrant celebrity culture.



Iké Udé, *Kunle Afolayan*, 2014–16



Iké Udé, *Linda Ejiofor*, 2014–16



Iké Udé, *Genevieve Nnaji*, 2014–16

In an effort to celebrate this cultural moment and phenomenon, Udé has photographed 64 of the industry's luminaries, including renowned screen icon Genevieve Nnaji, veteran actor Richard Mofe-Damijo, established actor and director Stephanie Okereke Linus, maverick filmmaker Kunle Afolayan and many of the next generation's rising stars. Originally trained as a painter, Udé makes portraits that are meticulously crafted through hours of postproduction and the layering of backgrounds and significant symbolic objects added to the final work. Appropriating the media of pop culture—fashion magazines and movie posters—as much as the canon of Western art, Udé's *Nollywood Portraits*, like his *Cover Girl* and *Sartorial Anarchy* series before them, recode and reinvent familiar signifiers, subverting them in the service of an ultimate self-expression for his sitters. His models become subjects, rather than objects, of a surreal gaze. Indeed, each subject in Udé's *Nollywood* series is, naturally, dressed exquisitely, with a mix of haute and basse couture. Udé pays close attention to all of the fine details of each figure, right down to how one's fingers are resting and the angle of one's neck relative to the camera. Each celebrity is represented in the timeless,

classic, style that has made the artist famous, using bold colors and a range of recognizable historical poses in portraiture dating from as far back as the ancient Egyptians and Renaissance painters, to early twentieth-century photographers.

In bringing these 64 celebrities together, Iké Udé has created what he refers to as a school—a group of individuals who collectively define a culture or movement.⁵ To underscore this effort, for over two years Udé has been at work digitally seaming together the individual portraits to create one photographic mural, *The School of Nollywood* (2014–16), inspired by Raphael's masterpiece *The School of Athens* (1509), which assembles many of the great philosophers, mathematicians and scientists from classical antiquity in one composition. Like Raphael's fresco, *The School of Nollywood* is monumental, measuring 16 feet, 5 inches in height by 25 feet, 3 inches in width. Although Udé places his subjects in a similar arrangement to those in Raphael's fresco, he departs from the classical linear perspective and instead flattens the viewpoint, keeping it more in line with an ancient Egyptian scene depicted on the walls or ceiling of a temple.⁶ And, rather than group his subjects in conversations with one another, each is treated individually, with the majority of them looking directly at the viewer and thus interacting with us, instead. The cumulative effect of so many eyes confronting our gaze becomes a powerful representation and expression of cultural ownership, of an Africa defined by successful, thriving and expressive artists for themselves and for us as viewers.

At once serious tribute, pop celebration, conscientious document and lavish monument, Udé's work draws on a historical genre to assert a formidable future, one envisioned by Africans for themselves and the world. Nollywood may take its name from other film industries, but in no way is it derivative. Instead, it brushes off destructive old tropes and stereotypes. Its industriousness and creative genius are purely its own. Its success is not only that of an economic industry with great power and still greater potential, but of the resolute determination of self-representation. So it is with Nollywood, and so it is with Udé's artistic practice. Here, self-expression is paramount, and art is the vehicle for its transmission, reception and celebration.

—Natasha Egan, Executive Director

1. Journalist Norimitsu Onishi helped coin the name Nollywood in an article he wrote about the Nigerian film industry, "Step Aside, L.A. and Bombay, for Nollywood," *New York Times*, September 16, 2002.
2. Onishi, Norimitsu, "Nigeria's Booming Film Industry Redefines African Life," *New York Times*, February 18, 2016.
3. Milena Veselinovic, "More Than Feuds and Dramas, Nollywood Is a Mighty Economic Machine," CNN website, August 27, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/07/10/africa/nollywood-mighty-economic-machine/>
4. From a pre-published draft of Olu Oguibe's "A Master's Tribute" for the publication *Nollywood Portraits: A Radical Beauty* to be published by Skira, Milan, October 2016.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.



Iké Udé, *Osas Ighodaro*, 2014-16