



Nollywood Portraits: A Radical Beauty

October 20 - December 23, 2016

Iké Udé, *Taiwo Ajai-Lycett*, 2014-16

Viewer's Guide

This guide serves as a viewer's supplement to the exhibition *Nollywood Portraits: A Radical Beauty* and contains information about the works on view, questions for looking and discussion, and suggested readings. You may download this guide from the museum's website at mocp.org/education/resources-for-educators.php.

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Contents

Introduction	3
West Gallery	4 - 7
East Gallery	8 - 10
Mezzanine	11 - 13
Further Research	14 - 15
Extended Resources	16



Iké Udé, *The School of Nollywood*, 2014 -16

Introduction

Nigerian-born, New York-based artist Iké Udé situates his practice at the intersection of art, fashion and popular culture. In October 2014, after three decades away, Udé returned to Lagos, Nigeria to photograph the rising stars and celebrity culture of the local film industry known as Nollywood. 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. 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 productions are the most frequently viewed films on the continent.

To celebrate this cultural reclamation, Udé has photographed sixty-four 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. His portraits fuse fame and theatricality with highly stylized articles of fashion, blending global sartorial sensibilities with forms of dress rooted in European traditions dating back as far as the eighteenth century. To create his signature style, Udé further shapes the appearance of his subjects through the use of elaborate constructions, props, costumes, poses, painted backdrops, and extensive postproduction.

At once serious tribute and pop celebration, conscientious document and lavish monument, Udé's work, like that of Nollywood itself, brushes off destructive, old tropes and stereotypes. Instead, the resolute determination of self-representation is paramount, with art serving as the vehicle for the transmission, reception and celebration of self-expression.

Natasha Egan

Executive Director

Museum of Contemporary Photography

In this gallery you will find large-scale portraits of Nigerian actors and directors from the Nollywood industry. Ask students to look closely at the works, describing their composition, scale and color. Can students tell when the portraits were created? How?

- Artist **Iké Udé** wanted to celebrate the bustling Nigerian film industry by photographing some of its well-known talents. His opulent compositions capture each star in an elegant pose and clad in bold colors.
- His photographs fuse theatricality, highly stylized articles of fashion and notions of fame. He shapes the appearance of his subjects using elaborate constructions, props, costumes, poses, painted backdrops and extensive postproduction.

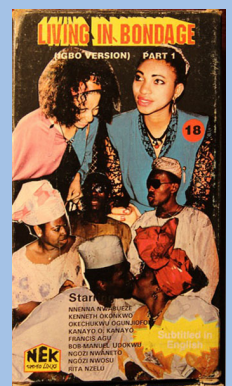


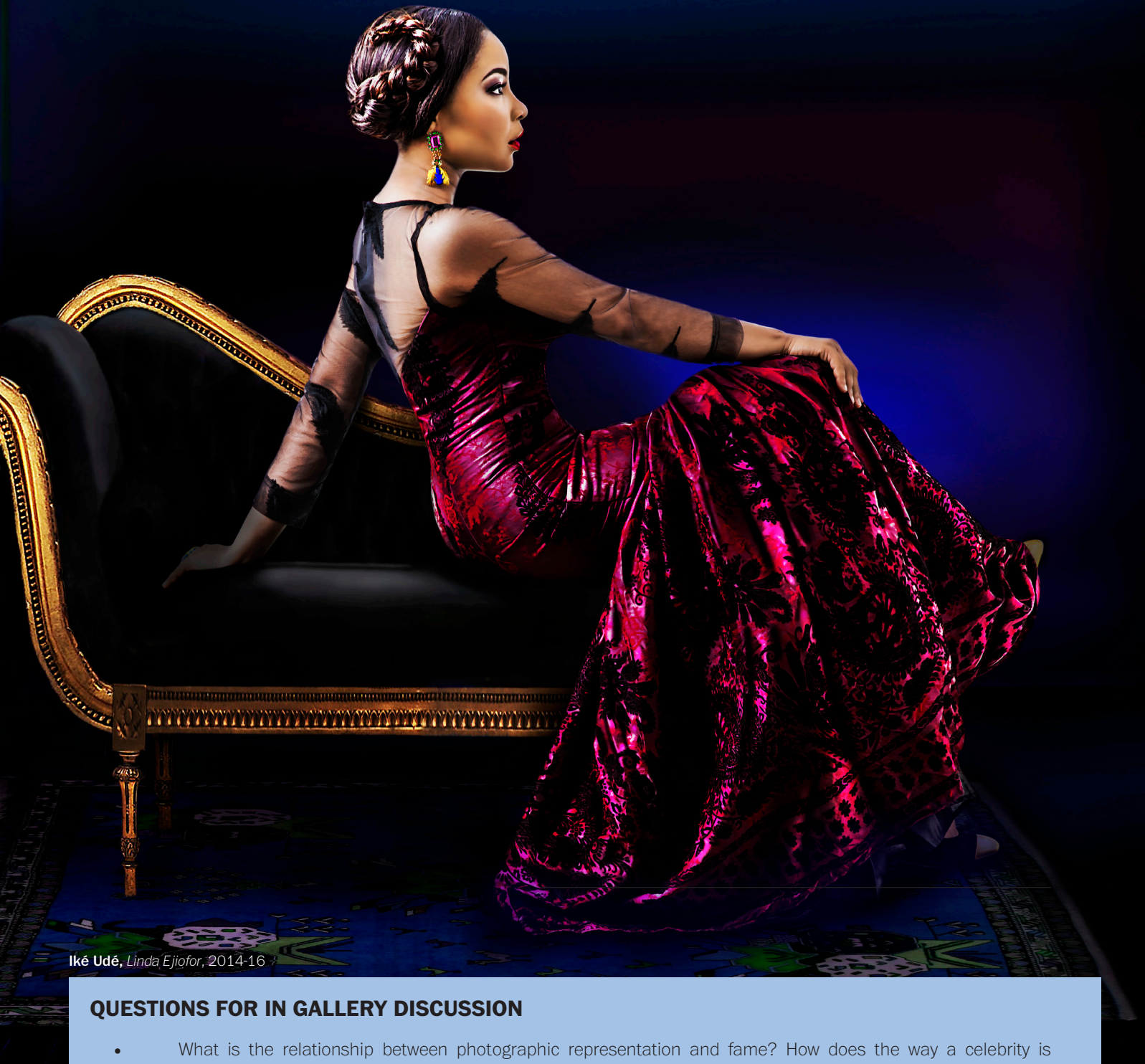
Iké Udé, Kunle Afolayan, 2014-16

About Nollywood

- o Named for cinema produced in Nigeria, the term Nollywood was coined in the early 2000s to describe a vibrant industry that grew out of the streets of Lagos.
- o Many scholars mark the beginning of Nollywood in the early 1990s when VHS camcorders became widely accessible to independent filmmakers. Prior to the 90s, most Nigerian films were produced in English (rather than native languages) using expensive recording and editing equipment. Early Nollywood films were low-budget and often edited in camera with action starting and stopping as the filmmaker pressed record.
- o The industry is now primarily a “straight-to-dvd” model, producing approximately 2,500 movies each year and generating \$600 million annually.
- o Nollywood is the world’s second largest film industry in terms of production, behind Bollywood and ahead of Hollywood.
- o The Nollywood film industry has become Nigeria’s fourth largest economic sector. This industry employs over one million people and is the second largest employer in the country after agriculture.
- o Nollywood films are now viewed around the world with some films being shown at film festivals in Cannes, Berlin and Toronto. Nollywood movies have come to offer the world a contemporary view of Nigerian life.
- o Artist Iké Udé created his photographs to celebrate Nollywood as part of a cultural reclamation in post-colonial Nigeria.

VHS cassette of the 1992 film *Living In Bondage*, directed by Chris Obi Rapu. *Living In Bondage* is widely accepted as the film that launched what came to be known as the Nollywood film industry.





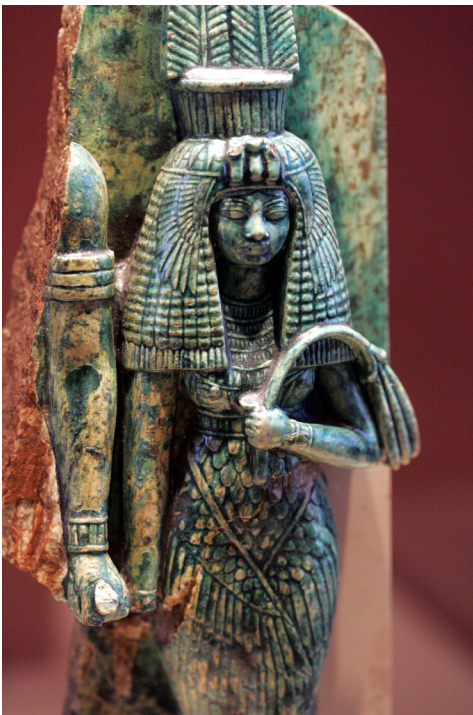
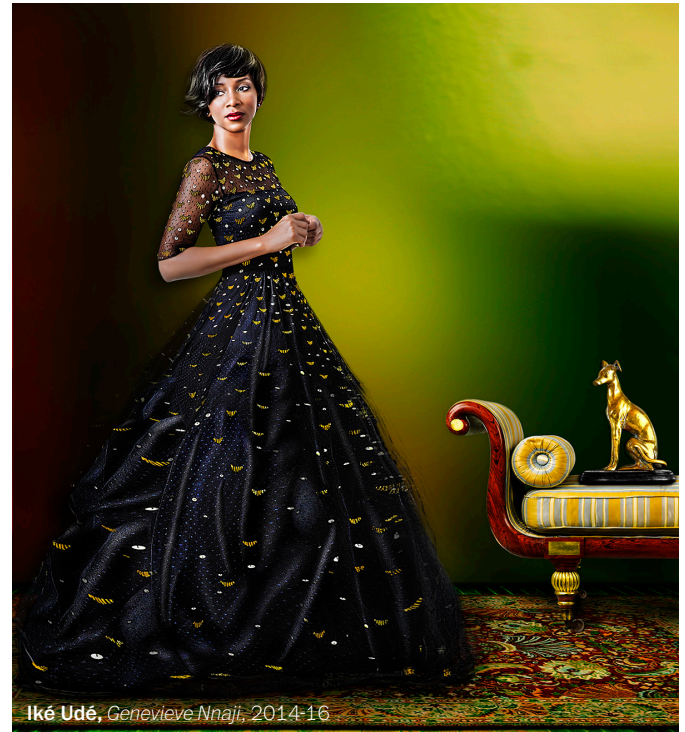
Iké Udé, *Linda Ejiofor*, 2014-16

QUESTIONS FOR IN GALLERY DISCUSSION

- What is the relationship between photographic representation and fame? How does the way a celebrity is photographed impact our perception of that person? What can we know about celebrities based on photographs? Can we understand celebrities as multi-dimensional human beings through images, or do photographs simplify and fictionalize the identities of subjects?
- Is the impact of the celebrities in Udé's photographs on global popular culture amplified through his imagery? How? What role does the portability and reproducibility of photography play in extending the influence of Nollywood celebrities and films?
- How do styling, props and theatrics affect the experience of viewing and interpreting Udé's works? Ask students to point out specific aspects of the images to support their answers.

Historically, styling and props have been used in portraiture to communicate aspects of subjects' identity, status and profession. Do students think Udé is using clothing, pose and props in a similar way?

- Udé's intention is to craft images that celebrate the fame of Nigerian stars through classic elegance. He styles each Nollywood star in clothing made from fine fabrics and poses them among items that exude wealth, stature and creativity—thereby transforming his sitters into seemingly iconic representations.
- The portraits also elevate subjects through Udé's use of compositions that are influenced by important historical works of art.



Unknown, sculpture of Queen Tiye, the Great Royal Wife of Amenhotep III, circa 1550-1069 BC. This work is housed at the Louvre in Paris. For additional documentation of the sculpture and further information, visit the museum's website at: <http://www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/queen-tiye>

Describing actress and singer Genevieve Nnaji's portrait, Udé states:

I was drawing from the grand, iconic African antique cultures of the Nile Valley civilization - from today's Egypt, Sudan to Ethiopia so as to imbue [[Nnaji]] with a certain stately Pharaonic calm grandeur. She's in other words the embodiment and the very presence of Egyptian queens such as Nefertiti, Cleopatra and my beloved Tiye - before the foreign invasion and occupation of Northern Africa—especially pre-Arab Egypt—which, undoubtedly, is the highest and best expression of the African genius that informed other younger, varied civilizations to come.

And just as well, there is a Janus-like moment whereby she motions forward while looking back, as it were, engaging both the past and the future.¹



Anonymous moneyer, Roman Silver Quadrigatus depicting Janus, the Roman god of beginnings, gates, transitions, time, doorways, passages and endings, 216-225 BC

- Do students see a relationship between Udé's works and these art historical references? What about other works of art? Images from popular culture?

1. From a prepublished draft of Sarah Nuttall's "Presence and Silence: This Side of Meaning in Iké Udé's Portraits" for the publication *Nollywood Portraits: A Radical Beauty* to be published by Skira, Milan, October 2016.



George Hurrell, *Gary Cooper*, 1937



Ike Ude, *Uti Nwachukwu*, 2014-16

There are also strong parallels between Ude's photographs and the style of classic Hollywood portraiture made famous by artists including George Hurrell. Three of Hurrell's original photographs are on view on the top floor of the MoCP during the run of this exhibition.

A 2007 article in *The Atlantic* described Hurrell's lighting techniques and heavy use of retouching as lending Hollywood stars a, "special aura of grace, mystery and perfection." The article goes on to describe his aim as, "not to humanize stars but to elevate them: These were not down-to-earth pals but idealized screen gods and goddesses."²

FURTHER DISCUSSION

Do students see similarities between Hurrell's works and Ude's? Has Ude worked to make his subjects approachable or idealized? How are Ude's techniques similar to or different from Hurrell's?

- o Exhibition curator Natasha Egan describes Ude's work as using "digital and dramaturgical tools...to forge new terrain in portraiture where ideal representations hover between reality and fantasy, between likeness and magic."

What technological and cultural changes have occurred in the over seventy years between the two artists' works? How is Ude forging new ground?

- o While students may come up with many answers to this question, it is worth noting that most 21st Century consumers are keenly aware that celebrity images are edited. Ude does not mask the manipulation of his photographs to the degree that Hurrell did. Rather, he leaves traces of his transformative process, and acknowledges that viewers are savvy media users who are aware that photographs of celebrities are manipulated, even if the actual processes used in postproduction remain mysterious and magical.

2. Virginia Postrel, "Starlight and Shadow," *The Atlantic*, July/August 2007, Accessed 10/1/16, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2007/07/starlight-and-shadow/305978/>.

Now move into the MoCP's East Gallery where Udé's piece *The School of Nollywood* (2014-16) is on display. Ask students to look closely at the image. How is it similar to the individual portraits in the West Gallery? How is it different? List words and phrases.



Iké Udé, *The School of Nollywood*, 2014 -16

This grand group portrait features 64 leading actors, directors and filmmakers from the Nigerian film industry whose images have been digitally stitched together from dozens of individual photographs.

The piece was inspired by Raphael's fresco *The School of Athens* (1509-11) and has been printed at the exact dimensions of the Italian painter's masterpiece, which is housed in the Palace of the Vatican in Rome.



Raphael, *The School of Athens*, 1509-11

QUESTIONS FOR LOOKING AND DISCUSSING

Though there are many similarities between Raphael's painting and Udé's photograph, there are some key differences. Ask students to compare and contrast the two works using the following questions:

1. Why might Udé reference a painting from the High Renaissance in his depiction of power players from Nollywood?
 - The two works play off each other and offer context (especially for Western audiences) to what Udé is trying to communicate in terms of the grandeur and respect the Nollywood film industry should elicit.
2. Raphael was an important painter during the High Renaissance and students can see some of the notable methods used by painters of the time period reflected in *The School of Athens*. The painting's symmetrical composition, use of linear perspective and figures (who represent great philosophers, mathematicians and scientists from classical antiquity) reflect a reverence for rationality, realism and order that were thought to be the cornerstones of the Enlightenment in late 15th and early 16th Century Europe. Ask students to compare Raphael's use of composition and realism to Udé's techniques. How are the artists creating an illusion of space similarly? What is different?
3. Udé leaves clues that his subjects have been digitally seamed together. Why might he have chosen to leave the collaged construction of his piece visible rather than conceal his handiwork, as Raphael did?
 - Casting his net of influences wider than Renaissance painting, Udé also draws inspiration from sources found across cultures and time periods. The flattened perspectival relationships in this image are more in keeping with an ancient Egyptian scene depicted on the walls or ceiling of a temple.
 - The use of multiple images within a single frame also evokes the prevalence of digital assemblages made using photo-editing software over the last three decades.

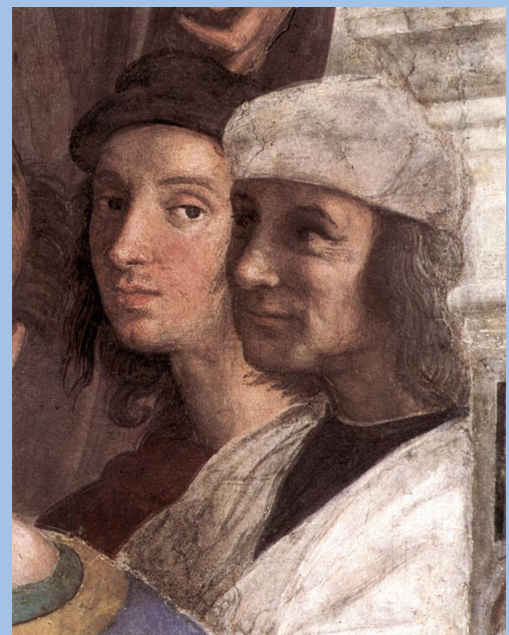


Interior view of Raphael's frescoes *The Parnassus* (left) and *School of Athens* (right) inside the Apostolic Palace of the Vatican.

4. Ask students to look at the gazes of the subjects in each artwork. Where are the subjects looking? What impact does looking play in each artist's piece?
- Note that most the subjects in Udé's photograph look out. In Raphael's painting, all of the subjects are at work or in dialogue with one another except for Raphael, who painted himself on the far right-hand side. Raphael is the lone subject who looks out.
 - Nollywood has become an industry that connects popular culture in Nigeria with global audiences. Udé's subjects meet the eyes of their audiences. *Of School of Nollywood*, exhibition curator Natasha Egan writes, "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."
 - Considering the role of colonialism in the production of Nigerian cinema prior to the 1990s, do students think this exhibition and Nollywood as a whole represent a type of cultural reclamation? Why is it important for a people to control the media and creative production of their country?
5. What is the School of Athens? Why are Raphael and Udé labeling groups of people as schools?
- In this context, the word "school" is meant to group people who have been influential in a particular intellectual or cultural tradition. By deeming Nollywood stars a "school," Udé elevates the creative work of the Nigerian film industry so that its significance is equated with the great Greek philosophical traditions.
 - Iké Udé can be seen peering out of the shadows on the left-hand side of *The School of Nollywood*. Why do students think that Udé and Raphael chose to include their own images among great thinkers and celebrities? Is the status of the artists within the histories they represent elevated? Is this a nod to the role of the artist in the creation of history?



Detail of Iké Udé, *The School of Nollywood*, 2014-16



Detail of Raphael, *The School of Athens*, 1509-11

In keeping with his Nollywood Portraits, Iké Udé's *Cover Girl* series reflects themes that have long interested the artist: fame and celebrity, fashion and self-representation, and questions of personal identity. In *Cover Girl*, Udé himself assumes the role of the supermodel gracing the pages of *GQ*, *Vogue*, *Cosmopolitan* and other high fashion magazines. Ask students to look closely at the covers in Udé's series, and read the text aloud as they do.

- What do students notice about Udé's recreations? Do they appear authentic? How do we know they are not "real" magazine covers? Why might those telltale details be significant?
- What do students make of the cover stories Udé fabricates? Ask students to find one cover that interests them and explain why. Why, for example, do students think Udé would concoct headlines such as "Conservative Skirts for the Working Man" or "The Art and Autobiography of Lying"?
- What might Udé be communicating about his own identity through these magazine covers? What might he be suggesting about celebrity and identity?
- How does Udé represent gender, sexuality and race? Why might he make these decisions?

According to gender theorist Judith Butler, identity is performative, coming into being through the repetition of actions that constitute the self. In *Cover Girl*, Udé plays at performing his identity differently for each magazine cover, blurring distinctions and subverting the gendered and sexual norms typically embedded in advertising. In so doing, he questions viewers' expectations, of which they might be unaware themselves, presenting a different and equally valid vision for how masculinity and femininity might be conceived.

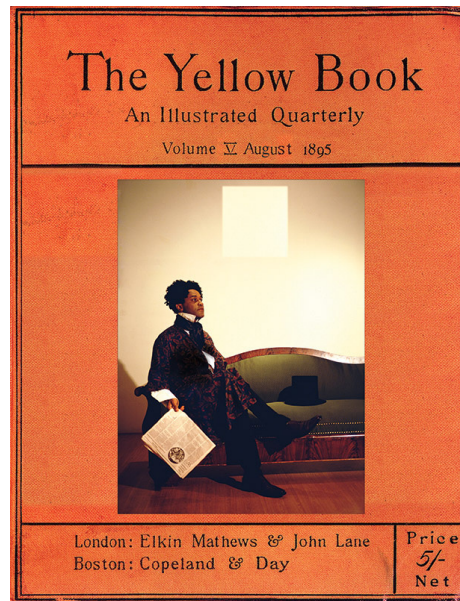


Iké Udé, *Cover Girl - Vogue*, 1994



Iké Udé, *Cover Girl - Bazaar*, 1994

Similar to his *Cover Girl* series, *Yellow Book* and *Savoy* reimagine the covers of two competing literary periodicals, both illustrated by Aubrey Beardsley and published in London during the 1890s, with the artist himself pictured as a leading figure within the arts movements of the era. Udé draws on the symbols of Aestheticism and Decadence as he takes on and transforms the persona of the fin-de-siècle European dandy.

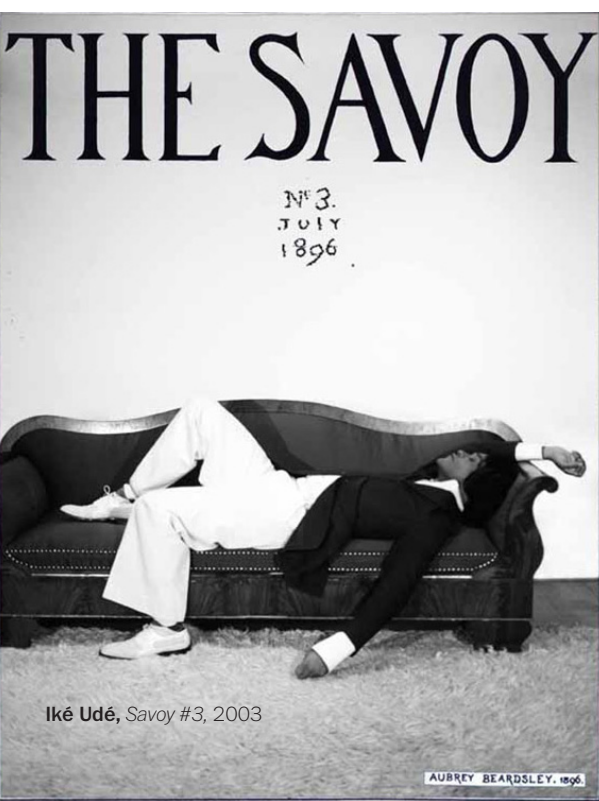


Iké Udé
Yellow Book #4, 2003



Giovanni Boldini
Count Robert de Montesquiou, 1897

- Aestheticism was a late 19th century art movement prioritizing aesthetic values or “Art for Art’s sake” over deeper meaning. Decadence, too, valued artifice over depth. Have students read about these movements and the artists associated with them. Can they identify some of the themes and symbols in Udé’s reproductions? How are the objects in his photographs or Udé’s own gestures associated with these movements?
- How might Udé’s *Yellow Book* and *Savoy* covers be examples of Aestheticism and Decadence?
- How would you describe Udé’s self-portraits? Are they theatrical, authentic, or both? What might the artist’s style and manner of presenting himself to the camera suggest about how he views identity?
- How are identities and subjectivities formed? Is it possible that Aestheticism and Decadence have shaped Udé’s sense of himself? Are his self-portraits performances?
- How does Udé in turn reinvent and reimagine the figure of the fin-de-siècle European dandy?



Iké Udé, *Savoy #3, 2003*



Ramon Casas, *Decadent Young Woman, 1899*

Now have students look at Iké Udé's self-portraits in his *Sartorial Anarchy* series. In these composited photographs, Udé merges masculine styles across vastly different time periods and cultures, subverting fixed conceptions of gender identity. Without resorting to drag, he pushes against the restrictions of men's fashion. In so doing, Udé creates a malleable global self.

Periods and Styles Referenced *Sartorial Anarchy #20*

- **HEAD GEAR:** Vintage/1930s Rawlings PL50 Boxing Wrestling Hockey Helmet Head Gear and Doctor Surgical style scrub cap, 2013
- **DRESS/GOWN:** Traditional Chinese men's dress 19th century to present (as worn in the movie *North*, 1994)
- **FIGURINE:** French Ormolu Boudoir Candelabra Lamp mounted with Geisha Figurine and Porcelain flowers, 1920s
- **OPERA GLASSES:** 19th century, French Abalone Shell Opera Glasses by Colmont with Lorgnette handle
- **SEMANIERS:** Louis XVI style Marquetry stacked Commodes or Semaniers, 18th century
- **SHOEHORN:** Vintage Etonic shoehorn, Mass., United States
- **CUFFLINKS:** Vintage Art Deco cufflinks, red Bakelite silver chrome modernism, 1920s
- **SHOES:** Belgian velvet loafers/slippers
- **BED:** 21st century
- **BEDSPREAD:** Patch-doll quilt with antique fabric, United States
- **CARPET:** Antique/traditional Persian
- **BOOK:** FEET-ISHISM, Hans-Jüfgen Döpp, Parkstone Press Ltd., New York, United States, 2001



Iké Udé, *Sartorial Anarchy #20*, 2013

- Compare and contrast Udé's self-portraits from his *Sartorial Anarchy*, *Cover Girl*, *Yellow Book* and *Savoy* series. What themes and ideas are constant? How do his aesthetic choices differ by series?
- What do our fashion choices convey to others? Ask students to consider what they are currently wearing or items from their wardrobe. What meaning can they glean from Udé's ensembles and arrangements? What about from their own clothing choices?
- Do students consider fashion to be metropolitan, regional, national or international? Why? What does a sartorial sensibility like Udé's indicate about culture, national borders and globalism?
- How might Udé's use of collage and elaborate postproduction reflect his ideas about the instability and malleability of gender identity?
- Do students find Udé's photographs to be painterly? How do color and composition function in his pastiches? Would students characterize them as still lifes or performances or both? Can students tell that they are collaged together? Why might Udé construct images in this way?



Bronzino, *Portrait of a Young Man*, c. 1530s



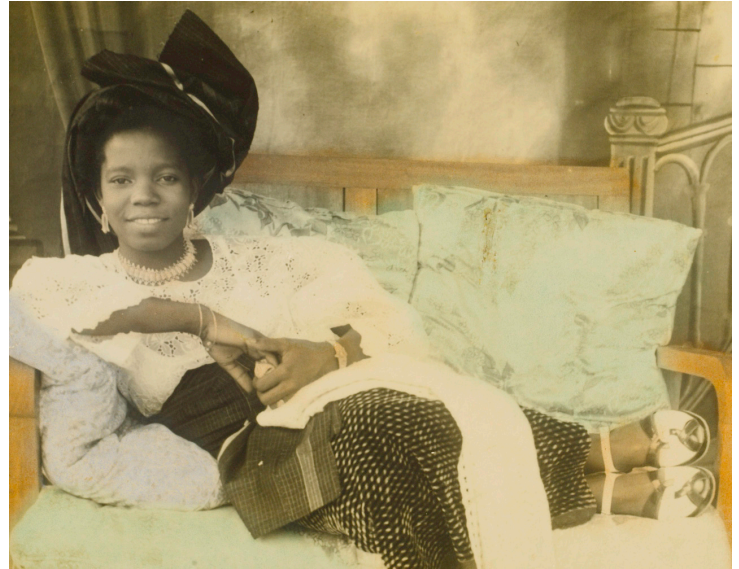
Iké Udé, *Sadiq Daba*, 2014-16

After leaving the museum, use the following prompts to extend student's understanding of Udé's works in relation to art historical styles and periods.

1. Udé studied painting and his extensive knowledge of traditions found in Renaissance European portraiture can be seen throughout his work. For example, there is a clear relationship between Bronzino's Mannerist painting *Portrait of a Young Man* and Udé's photograph *Sadiq Daba*. Ask students to locate a Renaissance period painting and do a comparative analysis with one of Udé's photographs, paying special attention to how concepts of gender, wealth and status are visually conveyed in the two works.
2. Modern-day Nigeria was colonized under British rule in the 19th and 20th centuries. As a result, many West African artists, Udé included, have focused on portraiture that blends the region's visual history with Western influences brought to the African content by colonialists. Some of these artists include painters Chief Aina Onabolu, Akionla Lasekan, Njideka Akunyili Crosby and photographer Chief Solomon Osagie Alonge. After viewing the exhibition *Nollywood Portraits: A Radical Beauty*, ask students to research the strategies for crafting portraits used by one or several of the artists listed. How does Udé's work compare to these artists? Have students pay special attention to each artist's use of pattern and garb. What could this attention to detail point to regarding approaches to representation used by the artists or their subjects?



Njideka Akunyili Crosby, *Predecessors (Left Panel)*, 2013



Chief Solomon Osagie Alonge, *Stella Osarihiere Gbinigie*, 1950

Njideka Akunyili Crosby (b. 1983) is a Nigerian-born visual artist working in Los Angeles, California. Akunyili Crosby's work combines collage, drawing, painting, printmaking, and photo transfers that negotiate the cultural terrain between her adopted home in America and her native Nigeria. Her work pays homage to the history of Western painting while referencing West African cultural traditions.

Akionla Lasekan (1916- 1974) is widely acknowledged as one of the pioneers of modern Nigerian art. Lasekan studied under Aina Onabolu who is regarded as the father of Nigerian Modern Art.

Chief Solomon Osagie Alonge (1911-1994) was a self-taught photographer and pioneer of Nigerian photography. He was the first official photographer for the royal court of Benin City, Nigeria.

Chief Aina Onabolu (1882- 1963). A self-taught painter and pioneering Nigerian Modern Arts teacher, Onabolu was an important figure in the introduction of arts into the curriculum of Secondary schools in the Nigeria.



Chief Aina Onabolu, *Portrait of a Man*, 1954

Nollywood Portraits: A Radical Beauty

October 20 - December 23, 2016

Extended Resources

Akpata, Gates, Nuttall, Oguiibe, Udé, *Nollywood Portraits: A Radical Beauty*, Skira: Milan, October 2016.

Matthew H. Brown and Nyasha Mboti, "Nollywood's 'Unknowns': An Introduction" *Journal of African Cinemas*, Volume 6, Issue 1, 2014.

Manthia Diawara, *African Film: New Forms of Aesthetics and Politics*, New York: Prestel, 2010, see Chapter 3, "Toward a Narratological Approach to Nollywood Videos."

Beth Harris and Steven Zucker, *Raphael: School of Athens*, Khan Academy, Instructional Video, <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/renaissance-reformation/high-ren-florence-rome/high-renaissance1/v/raphael-school-of-athens>.

Jonathan Hayes, *Nollywood: The Creation of Nigerian Film Genres*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016.

Monica L. Miller, *Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity*, New York: Duke Press, 2009.

Norimitsu Onishi, "Nigeria's Booming Film Industry Redefines African Life," *New York Times*, Feb. 18, 2016.

Norimitsu Onishi, "Step Aside, L.A. and Bombay, for Nollywood," *New York Times*, September 16, 2002.

P. Julie Papaionannou, "From Orality to Visuality: the Question of Aesthetics in African Cinema," *Journal of African Cinemas*, Volume 1, Issue 2, 2009.

Iké Udé, *Beyond Decorum: The Photography of Iké Udé*, ed. Mark H. C. Bessire and Lauri Firstenberg, Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2000.



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