

art

To decorum and beyond

Iké Udé pushes the envelope

BY LAURA ADDISON Iké Udé casts an irreverent eye toward fashion, advertising, and Hollywood, and dismantles their ability to determine identity by revealing

that identity itself is a cultural construct, influenced in no small part by mass media. Difference and identity are two of the hallmarks of contemporary photographic practice. Many artists — among them Cindy Sherman, Carrie Mae Weems, and Yasumasa Morimura — have used photography to critique or make fluid the classifications of gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and class. Udé, a Nigerian-born artist working in New York City, choreographs the performance of identity in his photography, casting himself as the leading role and making ambiguous these once-fixed classifications.

The Institute of Contemporary Art's exhibition "Beyond Decorum: The Photography of Iké Udé" shows seven bodies of work spanning the past eight years. Udé's most well-known series, "Cover Girls," appropriates the visual codes of the fashion industry with mock magazine covers featuring the artist as the "cover girl." The masquerade in which Udé stars for the faux issues of fashion mags implicates the fashion and photography industries in the configuring of stereotypes and norms of gender, race, and sexuality. His parody underscores that gender is culturally

"Beyond Decorum"

At the Maine College of Art, Institute of Contemporary Art, 522 Congress St., Portland, through April 13. Open Tues., Wed., and Fri. through Sun. from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m., and Thurs. from 11 a.m. to 9 p.m.

constructed, one might say performed, not a natural or fixed state of being.

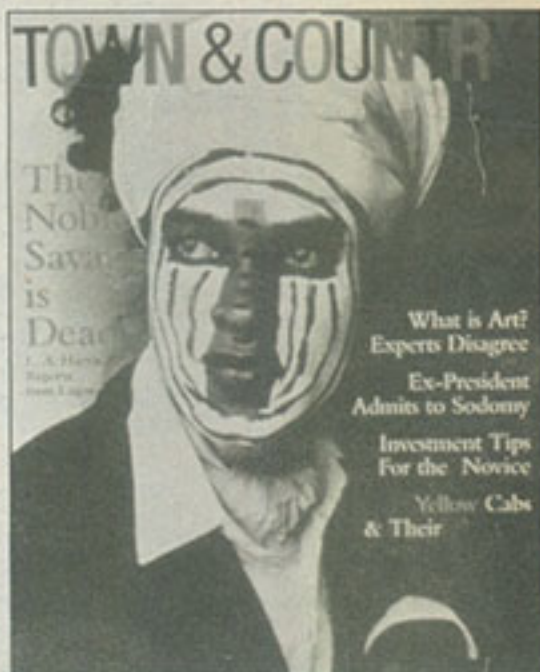
A mock version of *Town & Country* declares that "The Noble Savage Is Dead" while showing Udé in Igbo face paint yet dressed in definitively Western attire. Western "civilizing" efforts have apparently failed, as Udé wears the traditional maquillage in proud defiance of the assimilation of his African identity. With wit and irony, the magazine covers pose significant questions about how "self" and "other" are defined.

Udé has engaged in similar mass-media sabotage with his series on movie posters ("Celluloid Frames") and commercial billboards ("Billboards"). It seems that no issue is too controversial for Udé to take on. One poster — "Man in Polyester Suit" — quotes

Robert Mapplethorpe's infamous photograph by the same name. Many of the key actors in the long drama of federal funding for the arts, including "Newth Gengrich" and "Jessey Elms," are duly credited on the poster. A billboard features Udé as a soldier in fatigues and heavy make-up, calling to the American viewer's mind the ever-contentious issue of gays in the military.

The clever, challenging, and intelligently conceived works from "Cover Girls," "Celluloid Frames," "He," and "Uli" — the latter a black-and-white series that uses the human form as a vehicle for inscribing meaning, whether referencing tribal body painting or tattooing or surrealism's technique of automatic writing — will likely take a back seat to two other series featured in the exhibition, whose shock value will supersede the others. "Beyond Decorum," Udé's most recent series, transforms the front gallery of ICA into a simulated retail clothing space, with three jackets hanging in the front window and glass displays holding shoes and folded shirts with ties. Large-scale color photographs of these same items hang on the walls, as if promoting the new line for the season. Inside the clothing, either on clothing labels or adhered to the inner lining, are personal ads of varying degrees of explicitness, which suggest that clothing is merely an exterior shell that masks an unknown inner life.

Without a doubt the most memorable series in the exhibition, however, is Udé's



COVER BOY: Udé's mimicry of actual publications is so convincing that it requires a double take to confirm the parody at play.

"Project Rear." An assortment of toilet seats with ass prints hangs on the wall, as a video runs nearby to demonstrate the performance by which these works came to be. The video shows Udé employing his signature subversive tactics by leaving his own ass prints behind at such landmarks of high culture and commerce as Bergdorf Goodman and the Russian Tea Room.

Conceptual art should challenge its viewer and critique the accepted and naturalized truths held by a society, whether about politics or artistic practice itself. Iké Udé accomplishes this, and does so by engaging controversial topics and, in some cases, employing language and imagery not meant for the easily offended or faint of heart.

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