We Like Iké: An African Artist in America

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In part it was *Soul Train* that prompted Nigerian-born artist Iké Udé (pronounced "eye-*kay* oo-*day*") to move from Lagos to New York in 1982. "We used to watch *Soul Train* all the time," he says. "People like Aretha Franklin, Stephanie Mills, and Melba Moore were huge in Nigeria. The Brothers Johnson, Shalamar, and Roy Ayers all played there. So how could you not want to come to the country where this was taking place? It seemed the logical step."

Now, 14 years on, Udé works in many media—painting, sculpture, photography, and performance—but making over *mass* media is his real passion. Those in New York can see his work (June 4–September 28) at the Guggenheim Museum's exhibit of African photography. The series that first brought him to my attention in 1994 was called *Cover Girl*, an elaborate satire/critique of popular magazine covers. A later series called *Celluloid Frames* took on movie posters as a subject, with witty attacks on O.J., Robert Mapplethorpe, and the film *Congo*.

The most prominent subject is Udé himself, sometimes in a gender-bender mode—Udé as a *Vogue* model, for example. (My favorite actually doesn't feature the artist at all: his takeoff on *Condé Nast Traveler* proudly displaying an aerial view of a slave ship. Talk about lancing a harpoon through the bloated fantasies of your modern imperialists.)

Brother Udé is also a magazine publisher responsible for an haute-savage joint known as *aRUDE*. In this quarterly, now on its third issue, you can find articles on established folks like Bill T. Jones as well as generous features on up-and-coming mugs. The title translates just like it sounds: "a rude" magazine.

In person, Udé is anything but discourteous, being, in fact, a quite stylish and courtly gentleman who's mastered the art of tossing off strong opinions without throwing shade. As in, "When I came to New York, I hoped Harlem would be my Jerusalem, but it proved to be a very hard and degenerate Jerusalem to deal with." As in, "Magazines like *Vogue* and *Vanity Fair* think they're mainstream, but they're not. They're really ethnic, because they don't have all kinds of people on their covers." As in, "Jean-Michel Basquiat is the best artist of his decade. All others pale by comparison. You see elements of his style in other people's work—unacknowledged." (When Udé was working at the now defunct club MK in Lower Manhattan, he once greeted Basquiat while wearing a monocle. When Basquiat quipped, "Is that prescription?" Udé responded, "Sort of. It's to improve my aesthetic vision.")

Udé credits his mother's and father's senses of personal style more than the great European masters with giving him an aesthetic vision to begin with. A large part of that outlook has to do with confronting sexual as well as racial stereotypes. In particular, Udé questions the American way of defaming men who don't flex machismo.

He says the most prized attributes for a Nigerian man are to be graceful in speech, conduct, and body language. "Those same attributes here in the West would be seen as a negation of masculinity. This is all well and good, but it does not carry a universal truth in it. In other societies, the more refined and graceful a man is, the more masculine he is. Here it's just the opposite. I imagine myself in the future going out with my wife and kids wearing makeup and looking fabulous. It doesn't make the way I appear sexually ambiguous. For me, I can't be more masculine than that.

"I also want to raise the point that I respect the female culture a lot, to the point of wanting to borrow some of their signs," he continues. "When a woman adopts male clothes and attitude to get a job, it's looked upon as a step up the ladder by patriarchal culture, but when a man adopts female style, it's looked at as a step down. I don't see female culture as lacking. I see it as very, very strong."

Iké Udé isn't in the business of pulling punches.

Udé says the impetus for *Cover Girl* was to recognize those who never made the cover of a magazine. "That's why you have the slave ship on the *Condé Nast Traveler* and the black woman pushing a baby carriage on the cover of *Parents*," he says. "At the end of the day, she's the *real* parent. My objective was to present history on the cover of mainstream magazines and make it visible and see that it doesn't get swept under rugs, buried, become like a myth almost." Asked whether he doesn't risk trivializing history by grafting it onto mass media imagery, Udé, a mass communications graduate from Hunter College, answers a resounding *no*.

"Mass media is anything but superficial. Mass media is real; it's too omnipotent to be trivial. The film and the fashion industries hold enormous sway over people's psyches, far more than the arts. One thing that a lot of African—and when I say African, I mean black—and Asian artists are dealing with now is the pain that emanates from mass media stereotypes. I also think that using mass media forms shows that anyone can make a magazine cover or film poster, that these images weren't etched in stone, that it was people who made them. So the main point is to *denaturalize* these images that oppress us and serve as a source of anxiety on a daily basis."

Not content with museum exhibitions and publishing his own rag, Udé also plans to open up an art bazaar in SoHo and begin publishing monographs of living artists. His media are getting sort of massive. Keep an eye out, yo.

Black-Owned

By Greg Tate