

Iké Udé's Beyond Decorum: The Poetics and Politics of Fashionable Selves

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Gaston Bachelard suggested that "A wardrobe's inner space is also *intimate space*, space that is not open to just anybody."⁽¹⁾ The richness of this text resonates throughout Iké Udé's newest project, *Beyond Decorum*, where clothing presents itself as a charged, poetic space for a dialogue of identities. Worn shoes, coats and pressed, neatly folded shirts with businesslike ties fabricate male and female surrogates that border on modern fetishes. Presented and enshrined in department store cases and mirrored by companion photographs, the clothing and shoes appeal to our consumer mentality to construct identity through outward appearance. In the space of an installation reminiscent of a department store, *Beyond Decorum* gives new resonance to an aphorism made famous by Barbara Kruger, "I shop, therefore I am." Yet, as we examine these potential purchases more closely, we see that the designer labels are replaced by unexpectedly raunchy personal ads. In creating a space for a critique of both fashion and pornography, *Beyond Decorum* declares the power of fashion to reveal and conceal.

Each day we negotiate decorum through our performance of a public self. Reaching into the depths of our closets, we pull out our persona of the day as we construct and reconstruct, through clothing, the self we will present to the world. We are, after all, what we dress. According to Iké Udé, "The way we dress, where we live, the car we drive says everything about us. It's all about appearances. Every society extols its 'exemplary' virtues and condemns, or at least appears to condemn, its unmentionable vices." Through garments and shoes we construct and even *perform* our facade; as Udé proposes: "Clandestinely, we manage somehow to yield to temptations, attend to those importunate desires that belie our decorum. What we try to hide on one hand is revealed on the other. In fact, our obligatory mask of 'regular guy' or 'girl next door' that we preemptively perform provides us with a slippage with which to deny though not rid ourselves of the embarrassing desire that refuses membership in the world of decorum."

Yet, what is concealed beneath our public surface? What do we hide in the depths of our wardrobes? Our public persona may or may not reveal our hidden desires, secret longings or dark transgressions. As Udé notes, this is part of the politics of display and interpretation: "Can we actually recognize, let alone trust a person based only on appearance?" Concealed in the closet, hidden away, our clothing signifies our absent selves.

In the context of *Beyond Decorum*, who are these absent wearers? The objects are gendered male or female as much by the highly personal labels as by gender stereotypes of clothing. High heels construct femaleness in our imagination, which is perhaps most powerfully felt from the perspective of cross-dressing. The label on a pair of electric blue, raw silk shoes with flat bows on the front and signs of wear at the heels, proclaims this voice: "I'm Sheila. I'm a transvestite, not passable. I'm looking for another effeminate gay or bi TV or TS who would like to instruct and help me along in feminization. Please call." Heels and women's shoes manufacture female gender as much as the shirts and ties construct masculinity. As Udé has suggested: "When a shirt has a tie on it, it becomes a masculine icon...Women, from George Sand to Marlene Dietrich have been known to wear ties, yet [on women] these are always androgynous."

The worn shoes, shirts and coats signal absence. As Udé has suggested: "The wornness is to account for the presence and absence of the wearers...The shirts have a voice or authorship because of their used quality, which validates and authenticates the absence of the beloveds who once occupied those spaces." It is only through the absence of the wearer that interiority and identity are revealed in the clothing articles. For it is the imagined body that fills the shoes and fills out the neck, body and arms of the nicely folded shirt to conceal the labels. We are only privileged to the inner depths of the concealed labels by the sheer absence of the body. The labels both mark the absence and celebrate it as they expose aspects of constructed selves. As viewers we are privileged to the private, welcomed to delight in the titillating transgressions of decorum that label the absent wearers as