

*Foreword from “Higher”*

By Dr. Aaron Rosen

It doesn't seem entirely right to call John Edmonds a photographer. To be sure, the works in this volume are all photographs. And yet his sensibilities are consummately painterly. As a child, Edmonds recalls visiting the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, and standing enraptured before Annunciations and Nativities by the Old Masters. There are echoes of these early artistic encounters in Edmonds' *Du-Rags* (2017) series, in which his subjects' satin headgear ripples like folds in the Virgin Mary's mantle. And throughout Edmonds' work—beginning with his first mature series, *Immaculate*—there is an abiding homage to Caravaggio. Much the way the seventeenth-century painter plucked his models from the streets of Rome and Naples, Edmonds found his first models whilst riding public transport around the nation's capital. And like Caravaggio, Edmonds lends people on the margins a deep, radiating sense of dignity, often conjured through *chiaroscuro*.

Edmonds is of course not alone in lacing his works with canonical touchstones. For many contemporary artists, this takes on a rather tedious character, effectively turning critics into doctoral supervisors, scanning dissertations for appropriate citations. Edmonds does something entirely different. He operates *de profundis*. As the Psalmist would put it, Edmonds makes “deep calls to deep,” (Psalm 42:7) plumbing the wellsprings of tradition rather than skimming the surface. He doesn't impose artistic parallels so much as discover them, lying latent, for example, in the unguarded gaze of an adolescent, or the regal profile of a young man. The authenticity of such canonical connections comes, I think, from the fact that Edmonds does not regard art history as merely *art* history. He has a profound appreciation for the religious worlds from which the vast majority of Western masterpieces sprung. Edmonds is refreshingly unabashed in his desire to channel pre-modern modes of religious viewing, in which art shaped devotional practice and disclosed spiritual realities. In a recent exhibition at the Columbus Museum of Art, for example, he arranged his photographs like a polyptych that would be placed behind an altar. In a contemporary world, which Max Weber aptly diagnosed as “disenchanted,” Edmonds steadfastly searches for the sacred, using every means at his disposal, both past and present.

When Edmonds finds the sacred, it is—more often than not—in the bodies of young black men. In both his *Du-Rags* and *Hoods* series, very little of his figures' flesh or hair is visible, emphasizing the degree to which white Americans construct—and sometimes dangerously invent—African Americans. These images speak to presumptions and prejudices that can turn fatal in an instant, in the midst of something as seemingly innocuous as a traffic stop. And yet it would be a mistake, I think, to read these works, and their subjects, as bounded by politics. Their claim is “higher”—to take the title of this monograph—than the assertion that “black lives

matter.” In Edmonds’ photographs, black lives are *holy*. This holiness takes on different forms in the artist’s works. If the figure in *Ascent* seems seraphic, regarding humanity from the heavens, the boy in *Marcus With The Sacred Heart* holds humanity and divinity in tension, with piercing vulnerability. He may have a Superman tattoo on his chest, yet it feels—as Edmonds notes—more like the palpating Sacred Heart, which Jesus offers to humanity in Catholic devotional pictures. It is no wonder that Edmonds has kept this image on his wall during difficult times, and still returns to it as a keystone for his practice.

The first decade of Edmonds’ oeuvre might be seen, in part, as an effort to muster the resources and devices of Western art to present a counter-narrative, to sanctify the black bodies so often excluded or demeaned in that tradition. And yet, even this vast enterprise does not feel sufficient to Edmonds. In his most recent series, *Tribe* (2018), Edmonds turns his attention to African decorative arts, asking whether they might serve as an alternate source of dignity and power for people of color. It quickly becomes apparent, however, that the concept of “Tribe” is hardly simple or intuitive. African decorative arts cannot be easily disentangled from the colonial ideologies that historically dominated their acquisition, display, analysis, and reproduction in Europe and America. Edmonds’ photographs act out this tension rather than resolve it. The African American subjects in the photographs use their bodies to think through and define their own relationship to a heritage that is both foreign yet familiar. The studio becomes a transactional space in which meaning is created in a cooperative, creative interplay between artist, model, and object. In the interchange between these variables, everything is possible—the artist suggests—from *Alpha* to *Omega*. And, appropriately enough, this is just the beginning for Edmonds.