

*John Edmonds: Anonymous*

By Shane Lavalette

In his exhibition, *Anonymous*, artist John Edmonds combines two distinct series of portraits—*Hoods* (2016) and *Du-Rags* (2017)—both of which conceal the identities of their subjects. Through a deceptively simple approach, Edmonds unveils the complex symbolism and meanings that are inherent in our wardrobe. Edmonds shows the power of hoods and du-rags as personal and cultural statements of protest, beauty, and pride.

“All the work that I make is from a very personal place,” says Edmonds of his process. “It starts with me.” *Hoods* comprises striking formal studies of individuals wearing hooded sweatshirts and jackets on the street, photographed from behind. Edmonds further embeds himself in these works by photographing his subjects wearing his own hoodies. With few visual clues to guide us, we may only learn from the artist that the obscured individuals in fact vary in race, gender, and age. And, despite the anonymity of their subjects, Edmonds’ portraits are photographically anything but nondescript. Made in the bright daylight that provides clarity and detail of fabric, these images offer a sense of closeness and elicit in the viewer the sensation of approaching a stranger from behind. While acknowledging that his work begins from a personal place, Edmonds also emphasizes how necessary the viewer is for the completion of any image.

The experience of looking at Edmonds’ *Hoods* as framed photographs hanging on the gallery wall may bring to mind artist David Hammons’ *In the Hood*, at the Mnuchin Gallery in New York City in 1993. For that restrained installation piece, Hammons had crudely torn a single black hood from a sweatshirt and nailed it to the gallery’s white wall. Severed, and hanging, the piece evokes lynchings, and its stark, shadowy form calls forth feelings that many young black men wrestle with when much of the prejudice and fear in the country distills them to stereotype. Edmonds’ works convey how palpable, and unresolved, these concerns still are. For Edmonds, the personal is political. He says, “I hope my work can reflect the reality of this country right now.” Indeed, we can quickly read his suite of images as a statement on the unjust deaths of individuals such as Trayvon Martin as well as the systemic issues of racism, safety, and injustice in America.

In contrast to the charged public space that Edmonds considers with these pictures, a second series of portraits celebrates blackness and beauty through private and sensual pictures of men wearing du-rags. Once again, Edmonds photographs his subjects from directly behind, depriving us of a view of their faces. We can trace the du-rag’s origin to the head-wraps that female slaves wore during the antebellum period, and later used to preserve hairstyles, but today both men and women wear du-rags as a symbol asserting cultural pride. In these portraits, a subtle melancholy underlies the majestic and spiritual quality that also comes forward and calls to mind totems and

religious iconography. A softness and warmth emanates from the colors and folds of the cloth. Edmonds exhibits these portraits on a larger-than-life, monumental scale that implies both nobility and strength, but prints these images on delicate, flowing silk.

After graduating from Yale in 2016, Edmonds decided to move to New York to begin his career as a working artist. In January of 2017, he participated in Light Work’s residency program, and spent the month in Syracuse scanning film from previous portrait sessions, editing images, making test prints, and photographing a number of new portraits for his *Du-Rags* series. It was at Light Work that he perfected the idea of printing these works on silk. “The impetus behind that decision was to give the same sense of experience in seeing men and women wearing du-rags in Crown Heights,” he says. “When I first moved here, I would always see the trains of these du-rags just moving in the air, never seeing the face of the individual. I wanted the works to replicate that same type of nuance... to provide the viewer with that same sense of beauty and sensuality.”

Hilton Als, Pulitzer Prize-winning theater critic and staff writer for *The New Yorker*, has affectionately referred to Edmonds’ works as “blue wonders.” Following a studio visit, Als recalls, “There were prints on the walls—photographs of black men and women—that memory has tinted blue. That was the mood the pictures conveyed, and how they made me feel.” In an article on *TIME*’s website suggesting twelve African-American photographers to follow, former Light Work artist-in-residence and MacArthur Fellow Carrie Mae Weems says, of an artist who has just turned 28, “John Edmonds is a gifted young artist with a penetrating eye.”

Edmonds takes an intimate approach to portraiture as a means of exploring of symbols of black culture and the body. Through his pictures he poses larger questions about viewership, desire, and power today, engaging us in conversations about visibility in society. What he conceals leaves much to the viewer’s imagination, revealing both how complex these images are in themselves and how significant are the preconceptions we bring to them. “At the heart of all of my work,” says Edmonds, “I want to leave people with something that is more human—despite the facade—and to open up feeling and empathy.”

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