

Contact Sheet #197, *Light Work Annual 2018: John Edmonds*

By Jessica Bell Brown

*Ascent* (2017) is a dreamy photograph of a black figure adorned in a common protective head covering, a du-rag. Scanning from top to bottom, the image transitions from sharpness to blurry obfuscation. The rag's tail cascades onto a furry overcoat draped over the figure's shoulders. In this ethereal image, John Edmonds creates the illusion of a head seemingly floating amongst clouds. Reminiscent of medieval Christian iconography of saints and angels, there is something at work in *Ascent* in excess of visual experience. For his new *Du-rags* series, of which *Ascent* is a part, Edmonds employed the innovative strategy of printing images on Japanese silk, a luminescent textile that echoes the satin-like materiality of his subjects' headscarves. In fact, the subtle wrinkles and waves of this hanging photograph, which Edmonds renders in gradations of white, nearly camouflage the subject's body as indistinguishable from the fabric, allowing the artist to stage a thrillingly elusive encounter with the figure. *Ascent* is among other images that hang loosely. Edmonds' choice of silk heightens the figure's spiritual presence. *Ascent* brings about a transfixing meditative calm. The subject divinely stands unaware of the gaze of any onlookers. At once, the figure is both vulnerable to a gaze and unpossessed by it. So what would it mean to manipulate the circumstance of how viewers come to expect specific modes of labor from black figures? Edmonds does so by rendering his subjects as heavenly bodies, sometimes faceless, nameless, out of time, genderless, ageless, and—markedly—unascertainable. In this series, the artist is playing with our desire for certainty. He allows his figures to luxuriate in anonymity.

Before the *Du-rags*, Edmonds' early photographic practice consisted mostly of portraits of young black men, often friends and lovers, whom he captured in the most intimate and private of settings: bedrooms. In his early works, he established himself as a part of the legacy of a generation of black postmodern imagists arising in the late 1980s and 1990s including Lyle Ashton Harris, Lorna Simpson, and Carrie Mae Weems, all of whom used conceptual photographs to reclaim the black body and call attention to the ideology of the gaze. In his recent work, however, Edmonds hones fashion garments popular in black culture—hoodies, du-rags, and other coverings—as mechanisms to explore the psychological dynamics of self-making and unmaking. In some cases, he even offers his own jackets and hoods to his subjects, conflating the personal and political, and implicating himself as the arbiter and interrogator of the constructed image. His photographs help us to slowly and mindfully disentangle perception from reality. For example, if clothing is inevitably a tool for self-expression and self-constitution, work such as Edmonds' *Hoods* series (which he began in 2016) unfolds the ways in which these garments function as screens for public projection and consumption of black bodies and, especially, queer bodies. In the age of viral news coverage of black youth dying senselessly, often at the hands of police, Edmonds does not shy away from the sometimes contradictory associative powers of

dress both as symbols of potential threat or assertions of individuality and freedom. Obvious is Edmonds' challenging of rigid notions of black masculinities, but beneath the surface of his images, the artist opens up space for softness, intimacy, love, and desire to sit together a little more comfortably. His pictures are not rebuttals of stereotypes about black and brown men, nor are they objective "documents" of black life. Rather, they are radical alternative propositions of how we can *behold* anew.

As much as Edmonds is challenging the conversation about how publics come to define masculinity, he is also pushing his audiences to reconsider male beauty. Take *The Prince* (2017), in which Edmonds tenderly portrays a crowned figure in profile with only the soft contours of his bare back revealed. Curiously, Edmonds presents this figure as one of the few in the suite whose face he partially reveals to viewers. Using shades of gray, Edmonds evokes the masterful shadow play of African American photographer Roy DeCarava. The effects of his gentle camera-work are quietude, care, and safety. Perhaps the picture suggests he caught the sitter in a private moment not meant for the viewers' eyes but for those of an admirer. The artist here holds space for black bodies to exist in a state of extreme vulnerability and visibility. He wants us to know that these regal people pictured are loved, desired, and revered, on par with the most divine beings celebrated throughout the course of human history.