

*John Edmonds's Paragons of Style*

By Hilton Als

I first saw John Edmonds's work about three years ago, when he was a graduate student in photography at Yale. Like many other students, he worked in a small space, but John's was filled with what I will call blue wonders. 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—melancholy, and more authentic, somehow, than when I first walked into his room. After I took a look at his prints, John showed me a video called “Shotgun.” In it, two black men took turns blowing weed smoke into each other's mouths. I was startled and moved by the intimacy of the piece, and, while watching it, I was saddened by the fact that the movie John had made was unusual, in part, because it showed two black men being loving, close, and how unusual was that? John and I lost touch for a while, but he'd send me his pictures from time to time, and the emotion I saw in “Shotgun” played out in some of his other work, the do-rag series specifically, in which black men were shown on their own, like totems, but not lonely. John was seeing those guys, and their very specific style: do-rags as coverings that were male and not male, all at the same time.

On the occasion of the brilliant curator Paola Antonelli's new show at *MOMA*, “Items: Is Fashion Modern?,” John has photographed his friends—young men and women of color—in garments and sometimes wearing makeup that Antonelli, along with the curatorial assistant Michelle Fisher, have deemed among the past century's “paragons of style”: a white T-shirt, a pearl necklace, a biker jacket, red lipstick, Nike Air Force 1s, and the like. “Items” is the first fashion exhibition the museum has featured since 1944, and it's interesting to consider the suspicion that still surrounds fashion as an art. I think it's because fashion forces us to look at the transitory nature of our own lives: we shed clothes like skin, the better to be “fashionable,” or in synch with other people, and thus seen by our contemporaries in the contemporary world. But what does that mean? The contemporary world changes in the blink of an eye, and what was contemporary or on trend yesterday is passé today. By treating the work in “Items” as objects for use—as designs that are as indispensable as an apartment, or a car—Antonelli is digging away at the idea of fashion, its surface charms, to ask the questions that trend doesn't bother with, such as why we wear what we wear and how it affects not just the self but others. What do rouged lips or cheeks connote? Sex or defiance? Is there a particular look that goes into the making of a man, a woman? John's pictures fuck not only with gender but with presuppositions about race. In this suite of nine photographs, we see young people of color in the act of becoming through photography and clothing, both artificial mediums. But in the midst of all that—or because of it—one can find, as John and his models have found, a direct relationship to the self, vibrant and serious, self-respecting and vivid, with clear eyes, making much of dress and its spiritual opposite, undress, all in the same frame.