

John Edmonds: *Between Pathos and Seduction*

Illuminating the Enigmatic and Ecstatic

New language beckons us. Its dialect present. Intimate. Through my eyes focused as pure, naked light, fixed on you like magic, clarity. I see risks...

—Essex Hemphill, *Between Pathos and Seduction (For Larry)*, 1986

i.

The planes of the back are dappled, increasingly illuminated with sunlight. The shadow of a cluster of leaves creep across the bare shoulder. The speckled fronds forge a delicate pattern, stretching diagonally downwards to nestle at the small of the back.

A golden metallic sheen dominates the stiff fabric upon which a rigid sculpture stands. It also appears in the warmth of an intimate interior scene—highlighting the umber planes of his shoulders, which extend ecstatically upwards, an offering and an enclosure.

Sinuuous lines of arms reach downwards, veins providing visible lines of continuity from forearms to clenched fists. A teeming mass of human hands, they grip the appendages of a sculpted maternal figure. Despite this physical duress, her gaze is undisturbed and fixed directly ahead, she endures the restraints of possession as her child remains untouched, laying prone centrally on her lap.

An illuminated female nude emanates divine force, paralleling the adinkra *gye nyame* symbol emblazoned repeatedly across the textile upon which she is perched. A recapitulation of the Grand Odalisque or perhaps one of Malick Sidibé's reclining *Vues de Dos*, the accouterments of the studio space around her are blindingly present.

ii.

In formal engagement and material inclusion, John Edmonds' *Between Pathos & Seduction* considers how intimacy can be illuminated or occluded photographically, in concert with the human subject and the sculptural form. Subsuming Man Ray's attunement to precision alongside the enthralling alchemic spirit of Rotimi Fani-Kayode, Edmonds' figural studies revel in the drama of the photographic studio as well as the unassuming terrain of domestic interior spaces. The resulting compositions divulge elements of ecstasy and exposure, deferral and refusal.

Rendered in varying stages of undress and visibility, Edmonds' subjects engage in an ongoing play with light and shadow. A cadre of African, Caribbean, and African-American artistic creators in their own right, here their gestures consciously oppose photographic objectification, a conceptual closure that has plagued the representation of Black individuals and their bodies throughout the history of the medium. In kind, these images operate simultaneously as an indulgence in corporeal presence and a refusal of photographic capture. The subjects' averted glances and obscured visages wage an implicit insistence on subjectivity, complexity, and agency—embodying techniques of ecstasy that transcend the sharp boundaries of the frames within which they are temporarily contained.

From bodily expression to abstracted forms, figural representation is sustained and transformed through the Central and West African sculptures also portrayed in these images—culled from

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Edmonds' personal collection, which has been growing extensively since the spring of 2018. Whether isolated centrally amongst sheets of dazzling gold, or clustered in a tender dialogue with a seated figure and rendered in monochrome, these sculptures are staged in a manner predicated on intimate relation within the frame, not solely for external visual consumption or material possession.

Carved from wood and varying in patina, texture, and style, these sculptures engage modes of artistic production that have informed not only aesthetic and sociocultural values throughout Central and West Africa, but also garnered interest as curios in nineteenth century Europe, and ignited a veritable explosion of European and North American modern art during the early twentieth century. Considering this multivalent context, Edmonds' visual strategies resonate on another level—harkening to Harlem Renaissance 'dean' Alain Locke's call for the recognition of African sculptural art as "masterful over its material in a powerful simplicity of conception, design, and effect."¹

Indeed, in *Between Pathos & Seduction*, the shadow of the Black Atlantic looms large, emphasizing the continued importance of this "zone of cultural transmission and translation through which the African diaspora, its labor, and its radical traditions dynamically shaped modernity."² What is at stake is more than a matter of the formal or aesthetic. In the incorporation of these sculptural forms alongside such enigmatic and ecstatic instances of bodily expression, what does it mean for Edmonds to generate a field of vision that is so startlingly beautiful, transcendent, and transfixing? In this current moment of increasingly amplified calls for restitution and reparation, what might it mean to envision the seams of rupture and repair in such a manner? While recuperation may seem far from possible—or even reasonable to consider—in this context, the acts of care embedded in Edmonds' illuminations remain. These subjects are quietly insistent, requiring our careful attention.

– Oluremi C. Onabanjo, 2019

¹ Locke, Alain. 1925. "The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts." *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*. 258.^[1]_[SEP]

² Bourland, Ian. 2019. *Bloodflowers: Rotimi Fani-Kayode, Photography and the 1980s*. Duke University Press: Durham and London. 4.