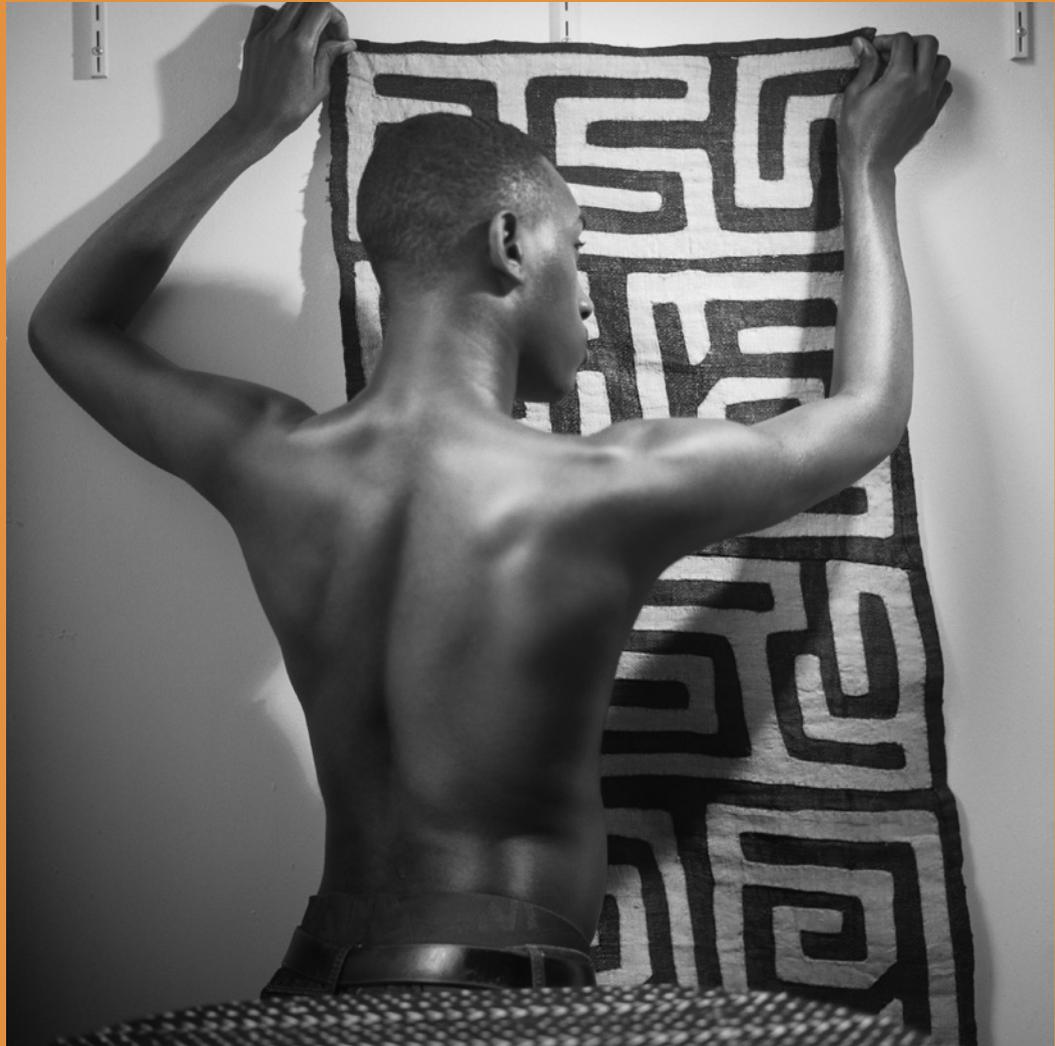
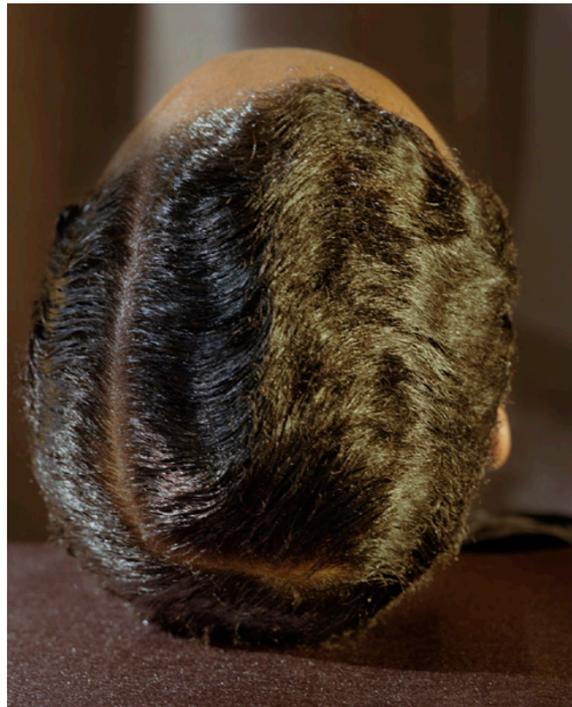
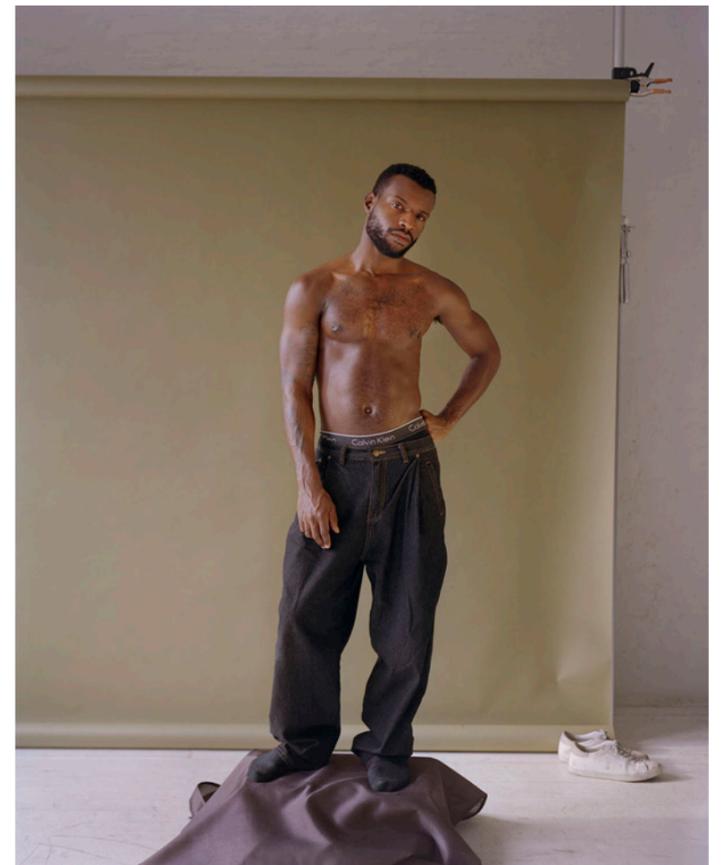


JOHN EDMONDS
A Sidelong Glance



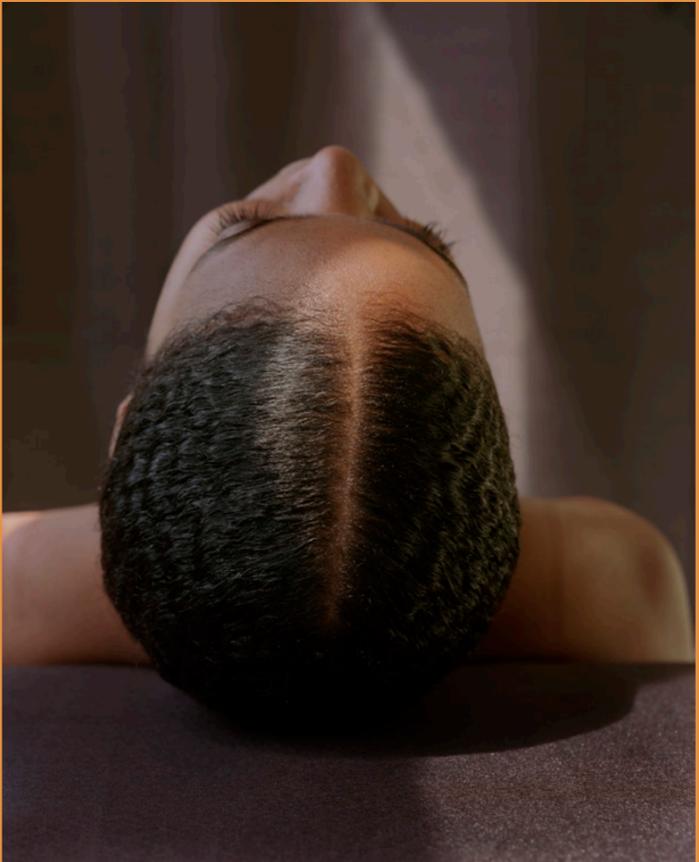












A Sidelong Glance



It is much easier to write about histories, referentiality, and iconicity, than it is to write about movement, about gesture and presence, about a hand tracing the topography of the skin. One is epic and the other is frivolous, we are told, but history is already a kind of touch, and touch is a history. We need both in order to collect and create narratives of origin, desire, space, ownership, dispossession, and dispersion. We might therefore fill history books with recollections of a final embrace or an embrace that never occurred, and we might value such melodramas equally alongside the self-consciously grand narratives of discovery and innovation. The rise and fall of strong chests is akin to the cyclicity of Time.

John Edmonds' figures, be they human or man-made, do more than reflect or critique or illustrate: they touch. In works like *Young man looking at a female sculpture (from the Senufo)* (2019) such touch is the kind we recognise and perhaps long

for, with eyes that penetrate even as they caress, eyes that look in you and through you but never past you. Edmonds' figures/collaborators touch and are touched and do not require us to witness those loving gestures, so engrossed are they in a fluid, unabashedly sensual exchange of histories and temporalities. No gaze but the gaze of each other, each Self, each Other, matters. We (depending, of course, on which we) might deem these agents, actors, subjects opaque. We wonder if the tautness of hair pulled tight feels like the tautness of the proverbial strings of the heart, but we cannot know. These figures should remain opaque if they wish to do so, but by the same token, they might expand endlessly into simultaneously new and archetypal proclamations of love and despair: for themselves, for communities, for lovers and places, for lost lives and stories.

Such intimacies and opacities in Edmonds' work are oppositional, to be sure, but we must be clearer about how. In

his critique of Linda Williams' foundational text on melodrama, Fred Moten argues that despite the centrality of both Blackness and gestuality to her formulation of the genre, she elides the possibility of Black gestuality at all. Instead, Blackness becomes only a metaphor or academic device, or only the non-sentient object of the progress promised by liberal rights-based discourses. Such is certainly the case in art history, wherein the interpolation of difference becomes not a marker of the plenitude of the Other, but rather the grand benevolence of the Master Narrative to allow itself to be touched (momentarily, to be sure) by the minoritarian body. A similar phenomenon is a play in queer art histories, wherein Black and trans are appended but never brought into corporeal proximity.

What to do, then, with Edmonds' photography, in which there is a lustful and delicate abundance of touch, in which time and skin and place and the accoutre-

ments of the studio converge and diverge? We might look to Moten, ‘Therefore, one way to think of Blackness-as-abolitionism is as the site where madness and melos converge. It’s the site of a kind of unruly music that moves in disruptive, improvisational excess—as opposed to a kind of absenting negation—of the very idea of the (art)work, and it is also the site of a certain lawless, fugitive theatricality, something on the order of that drama that Zora Neale Hurston argues is essential to black life.’¹ So we might indeed understand Edmonds’ work to enact a series of critiques of art history, the museum, the gaze, of whose imaginaries and loves and deemed worthy of imaging and imagining. Yet, following Moten, we cannot understand these photographs as performing the negative affects associated with critique and opposition, nor can we understand them to be at all times critical and oppositional. That Moten focuses on melodrama, a genre often considered retrograde and complicit, or, alternatively, reclaimed as always already latently critical, is telling. Ultimately, it is harder to talk about touch and gesture than art history or art criticism, at least as we practice them now,

because the former are neither critical nor complicit and they tend to exceed language and the image. Touch is a harbinger of love and violence simultaneously. It is nostalgic and it hopes for the future, that the loved one might someday come to reciprocate, that the movie might end as it should. Touch and gesture and love require rest and activism at different times or all at once. Touch and gesture and love and the photographs of John Edmonds unearth histories both public and private, even as they protect those histories from unobstructed or unmediated viewing. Edmonds’ photographs gesture insistently outwards, towards innumerable discourses, even as they gesture toward those histories that speak to nothing exterior, nothing grand—only to the possibilities of caressing, seeing, and attempting to know a loved body, a loved object.

— Text by William J. Simmons

1

Fred Moten, *Stolen Life*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2018), 111.

All images from the series *A Sidelong Glance* © John Edmonds, courtesy of the artist and Company Gallery

JOHN EDMONDS is an American artist and photographer who first came to public recognition with his intimate portraits of lovers, closer friends and strangers. He received his MFA from Yale University and his BFA from the Corcoran School of Arts + Design. His practice draws upon art historical representations of portraiture and figuration while expanding its roster to include individuals of his own creative community in New York and beyond. Incorporating everyday items of adornment and preservation while also juxtaposing these objects with sacred and spiritual sculptures from Central and West Africa, the artist has developed a distinct approach to photography as a critical tool for engaging with personal and collective history, commemorating the past and continually reshaping the present and future. In 2019, He was included in the 79th Whitney Biennial.

WILLIAM J. SIMMONS is an essayist, poet, and art historian. He is currently Provost Fellow in the Humanities in the University of Southern California’s art history PhD program. His work has appeared in numerous international magazines, edited volumes, and monographs. He is the co-editor of the Spring 2020 issue of *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*.