

Press Release

Brooklyn Museum



John Edmonds (American, born 1989). *Two Spirits*, 2019. Archival pigment photograph, 50 x 38 1/2 in. (127 x 97.8 cm). Courtesy of the artist and Company, New York. © John Edmonds

The Brooklyn Museum Presents *John Edmonds: A Sidelong Glance*

The exhibition is presented as part of the inaugural UOVO Prize for an emerging Brooklyn artist.

On view October 23, 2020—August 8, 2021

John Edmonds: A Sidelong Glance is the artist's first solo museum exhibition to date, featuring new and recent photographic portraits and still lifes of Central and West African sculptures that explore representation and Black identity in the African diaspora. For this exhibition, Edmonds engaged directly with the Museum's Arts of Africa collection, photographing select objects donated to the Museum in 2015 from the estate of the late African American novelist Ralph Ellison. As the recipient of the UOVO Prize for an artist living or working in Brooklyn, Edmonds's exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum is presented in conjunction with his large-scale public art installation on the UOVO: BROOKLYN facility's façade.

John Edmonds: A Sidelong Glance is curated by Drew Sawyer, Phillip Leonian and Edith Rosenbaum Leonian Curator, Photography, Brooklyn Museum, and Ashley James, former Assistant Curator, Contemporary Art, Brooklyn Museum (currently Associate Curator, Contemporary Art, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum).

Edmonds is best known for his use of photography and video to create sensitive portraits and still lifes that reimagine art historical precedents and center Black queer experiences. The exhibition starts with *American Gods*, a group portrait by Edmonds featuring three Black males wearing du-rags. The work introduces common themes seen throughout Edmonds's practice, including heightened staging of his subjects, stylistic references to art history, and the use of Black cultural materials as props. These strategies are found in Edmonds's ongoing series of photographs that often juxtapose friends and acquaintances from his creative community in New York with African masks and figures from various private collections, including the artist's own. Many of these photographs explore the ways that European and American modernisms have been implicated in colonialism and the historical reception of African art in the United States and Europe. The exhibition goes on to include other notable works from Edmonds's practice, including *Tête de femme*, *Whose Hands?*, and *Two Spirits*.

In conjunction with the exhibition, Edmonds created more than ten new photographic works featuring sculptures and masks donated to the Brooklyn Museum by the estate of the late writer Ralph Ellison, who is most well-known for his 1952 novel *Invisible Man*. Some of these new works by Edmonds document individual collection objects on shimmering golden backdrops, transforming the practices of museum photography by questioning its supposed neutrality; others depict models interacting with the sculptures, stylistically similar to the artist's recent body of work. Also on display will be a commemorative figure made by an unknown Hembra artist from modern day Democratic Republic of the Congo, an object from the Ellison collection that Edmonds photographed.

A Sidelong Glance draws its title from a phrase forwarded by scholar Krista Thompson, who used it to articulate the conflicted status of African art history within contemporary Black diaspora studies. Included in the exhibition, which is located in the Museum's Ingrassia Gallery of Contemporary Art, is a broadsheet that visitors are encouraged to take with them. This publication, made by the artist, features the image *Whose Hands?*, along with footnotes drawn from scholarly publications on Baule art. The exhibition will be on view from October 23, 2020 through August 8, 2021.

"The Brooklyn Museum has been following John Edmonds's career since he moved to Brooklyn in 2016, first acquiring two works from his *Durag* series in 2018, and we're pleased to now present his first solo museum exhibition," says curator Drew Sawyer. "As the Brooklyn Museum continues to look for ways to critically engage with its encyclopedic collection, we're particularly excited to have Edmonds integrating sculptures and masks from our Arts of Africa collection into his new photographic portraits and still lifes."

In both his portraits and still lifes, Edmonds uses a large-format camera to heighten the staging of his subjects and explore their sculptural potential. This evokes references to both religious painting and modernist photography. Edmonds's decision to highlight markers of Black self-fashioning and community—including hoodies, du-rags, and the aforementioned African sculptures—emphasizes individual style and shared visual language across time.

Edmonds is the inaugural recipient of the UOVO Prize for an emerging Brooklyn artist. As the awardee, he receives a solo exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum, a commission for a 50x50-foot art installation on the façade of the new UOVO: BROOKLYN art storage and services facility, and a \$25,000 unrestricted cash grant. Edmonds was selected independently by a team of curators from the Brooklyn Museum, and the prize is sponsored by UOVO. Edmonds's public mural, which is comprised of his 2019 photograph *Whose Hands?*, was unveiled in November 2019. It shows unidentified hands gripping an African sculpture modeled after a Baule maternity sculpture, and is accompanied by footnotes drawn from Susan Vogel's book *Baule: African Art, Western Eyes*. The mural calls forth questions of ownership, collection, and transmission of African art objects over time.

The UOVO Prize is made possible by



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