From Black to Gold and Back
Strategies of Being in Kevin Amato's Bronx Aesthetic

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I PHENOMENAL BLACK

One is all, all is one.
Heraclitus¹

‘In the beginning there is Black.’² For French philosopher François Laruelle, this Black is prior to light, to the substance of the Universe, having escaped the World before the World. It is the creative matrix from which all forms and thoughts emerge, the fertile ground for any possible future. As origin-myth signifier Black is all encompassing, occupying inside and out. In fact, there is no distinction: ‘Black is not merely what man sees in man, it is the only “color” inseparable from the hyper-intelligible expanse of the Universe.’³ This phenomenal, cosmological Black is not the black that classifies and divides humanity based on race, skin colour or ethnicity. Rather, phenomenal Black ‘entirely fills the essence of man’⁴. It re-connects us to an ur-being; a primal soup of undifferentiated Oneness. My definition loosely follows from Laruelle, submitting a universalised phenomenal Black, aloof to finite, scientific categories insisting YOU are either this race OR that one, YOU must check ONE BOX ONLY.

After the Fall, however, or, as Laruelle puts it, ‘after the World is born into light, Blackness dissolves’. Here science and division are born and distinctions, separations, difference and categorisation emerge. Phenomenal Black precedes this Fall. This article speaks in the service of phenomenal Black, to our most ancient ‘univocity of being’ as Spinoza put it or Heraclitus centuries before him. But in order to do so, we must first carve a path through the thicker terrain of post-Lapsarian, small-b ‘black’.

BLACK WITH A SMALL ‘b’
Even though the article esteems the work of artists from Latin, African-American, Irish, and various other mixed-race backgrounds, this is not an article about ‘ethnic’ art, implying the search for some essence therein. But it does begin in the world of divisionary colours, with a small ‘b’ and small ‘c’. These are unfortunate divisions but also helpful qualifiers in addressing the systemic racism, stereotyping and socioeconomic injustice in contemporary culture – ultimately obfuscating everyone from phenomenal Black. So, while small ‘b’ and ‘c’ are important, they are limited as classifications and forms of division and as such, they are only ever secondary to a broader, cosmological Black.

In the wake of Barack Obama’s election, the United States celebrated the nation’s so-called ‘triumph over race’ but in light of current discussions surrounding a new president, things seem to have become
worse. With a significant number of young black men in major American cities being locked behind bars or labelled as felons for life, who could claim victory? According to the 2011 US Bureau of Justice statistics, black American males are six times more likely to be incarcerated than white males, and 2.5 times more likely than Latino males. With this rate of criminalisation continuing, one in every three black American males born today can expect to go to prison in his lifetime, as can one in every six Latino males (compared to one in every seventeen white males). Racial and ethnic disparities among women are less substantial but they remain prevalent. Prison populations are now sixty-seven per cent higher than they have ever been, but even more horrifying is finding support for this growth on behalf of white Governors like Arnold Schwarzenegger who in 2007 signed legislation to spend $7.4 billion to build 40,000 new prison beds and 13,000 new county jail beds.

But one cannot simply blame white politicians and their legislation. All Americans, especially white Americans, bear responsibility. According to the Research and Advocacy for Reform’s 2015 analysis, white Americans consistently overestimate the proportion of crime committed by people of colour, and associate people of colour with criminality. This, coupled with the fact that it is often these same Americans who are making policy and law, returns us to a vicious and ever-expanding systemic abuse of power. American artist Jenny Holzer once wrote, ‘abuse of power comes as no surprise’. Certainly this is true, but it does not mean we can ignore it either.

While this article is not about criminal law or policy, it is about the power of appearances. How and in which ways do surfaces seduce and manipulate – for better or worse – through their sparkle, glitter and fetish shine? How does Black become black, neglecting all the other colours in between? At the same time, the article is also concerned with undermining superficial conceptions of colour, shine and illusionary seductions. In this way it is concerned with transcending the surface. But surfaces, I insist, might also offer authenticity and genuine shine – through which we can also return to a cosmology of Black in this historical moment, reconnecting to what it means to be human at our most ancient and contemporary.

After introducing Kevin Amato and his work in the next section, I analyse key images from his online and offline publications. Gold is also in this article but its definition is best left for my discussion of commodity fetishism in part three. In the fourth and last sections, I offer some concluding thoughts on Amato’s work and link it to related trends in New York City. So, while the focus is New York based art and fashion, within the context of US policy and legislation, the principles at the heart of this article speak across social and geopolitical borderers (to the Black that binds back).

II KEVIN AMATO

*I love to see people that are creative, expressive and informative – that show their uniqueness, individual freshness and a sense of humor that is palpably optimistic.*

Kevin Amato, 2016

A graduate of the School of Visual Arts in New York City, Kevin Amato has worked for over a decade as a photographer, stylist and former Hood by Air model scout. Today he is commissioned by a
number of notable labels and New York catwalk shows including VFiles, Band of Outsiders and Kith. He is also known for his publications in the US, Europe and Asia, and featured in international fashion and lifestyle magazines like Interview, Flaunt and Dazed & Confused. His first book, Cozy (2015) is a compilation of ten years of personal work, sprinkled with commercial photographs and a general atmosphere of being ‘so comfortable’, he explains, that you ‘just don’t give a fuck’. More recently Amato published the shiny, gold-covered The Importants (Phaidon, 2016), also a mixture of personal and commercial work (Chris Brown and Travis Scott appear in its pages). I will return to this book shortly.

His shoot-from-the hip style is comparable to the work of Larry Clark, Nan Goldin and Terry Richardson: full of nudity, illegal drug use and underage or normatively transgressive sex. But unlike these precursors, Amato’s images do not come off as cold, abrasive or even objective. Rather, they relay a gentle courteousness that speaks more from the heart than the head, tangential concerns with a moneymaking camera eye aside. Alix Browne describes his style as one that is ‘wrapped in a warm blanket’. The metaphor is a touch infantile to my mind, but it is a case in point. Examples can be identified throughout his work. Beginning with early decisions to photograph and cast Alexis Jae and Luka Sabbat, both of whom he met on the streets of New York City.

He met Alexis on Mercer Street in Soho and took an immediate liking to her ‘self-made style, soft exterior and tough interior’. He cast her in shoots for Urban Outfitters, Kate Spade and Adidas among others. ‘Ms Jae is my pixie angel,’ Amato says, one of his ‘first borns’ who continues to find ongoing success in the world of fashion from the pages of Seventeen magazine to playing the muse for the ‘incredible epic mama’ stylist, Pat McGrath.

When Amato met the-then eighteen-year-old Sabatt on the street, he was primed for success in the fashion world. According to Emilia Petrarca, Luka had been ‘crying [in the] front row at fashion shows since he was three – long before North West hit the scene’. After getting a start with Amato, Sabatt also continues to find success and is regularly cast by the likes of Kanye West (most recently for his

*THE BOOGIE DOWN BRONX*

Born in Long Island, New York, Amato currently resides in the South Bronx which is, in his words, ‘pure, uninhibited, and overlooked’. The Bronx is also the least travelled to boroughs in Manhattan, especially by tourists or, as Browne puts it, the ‘least loved borough in New York City’. Much of this results from decades of systemic social and economic marginalisation of the South Bronx (high rates on unemployment, under education, poverty etc) making it home to some of the poorest and most challenged working-class neighbourhoods in the country. The borough underwent especially charged racially inflected tensions during the Civil Rights Movement when, in the 1950s and 1960s, middle class citizen fell victim to ‘white flight’ and remaining children of colour were controversially ‘bussed’ out of their neighbourhoods to go to school in other districts, often in the suburbs. In the 1970s and 1980s, decreasing property values and increasing vacancy rates in the South Bronx led to further urban decay, fuelled in part by the completion of the Cross Bronx Expressway in 1963.

Now indispensable to the New York area transportation system, the CBE has also been compared to Hell. The Bronx entrance is also the location where Tom Wolfe’s fictional character Sherman McCoy and his Southern belle girlfriend, Maria Ruskin, kill a black man after taking a wrong turn at the beginning of *Bonfire of Vanities* (1987). The timely release of Wolfe’s novel spoke directly to these growing racial tensions in the city, where, in the Bronx in the 1970s and 1980s, there was a loss of 300,000 residents and the (often deliberate) destruction of entire city blocks worth of buildings.
(building owners would often make more money lighting their buildings on fire and selling the empty lot or alternatively, claiming insurance money than they would in actual business or rentals). And herein emerged the phrase, ‘The Bronx is Burning’.

The Bronx was not going to hell in a hand basket, rather, it was the hell, gates and wasteland in one.

In recent years it has become possible to see the South Bronx as also overlooked as a creative innovation hub. A number of artists have found inspiration in the Bronx and developed unique styles there that in turn, return to impact on mainstream taste. Home to graffiti and hip-hop, as depicted in Netflix’s recent TV series *The Get Down* (2016), the Bronx is also the birthplace of accomplished musicians, artists and actors from Jennifer Lopez to Woody Allen, Lauren Bacall, Grandmaster Flash, Slick Rick, Fat Joe and Robert Altman among others. What then is the unique-Bronx inspired aesthetic that Amato brings to the table?

*It’s all about love.* And by love, I really mean love in the universal ‘One is All’, *agape*, sense of the word. Respect, mercy, justice, and brotherhood radiate from his work. This is how phenomenal Black thrives in our culture. Whether he pictures day-old soggy doughnuts or half naked black youth, all his subjects are attended to and cared for. Some critics mock his approach as a hippie-dippy ‘free-to-be-you-and-me theory’ of Bronx-inspired ‘street casting’ but at the end of the day, his methods have, among other photographers and stylists in the twenty-first century, had a positive and concrete effect in destabilising racial and gender stereotypes and, in the world of commercial fashion, fixed ideas of what black men in the public media or male models in general should look like.

Amato’s aesthetic is now in increasing demand in the commercial fashion world, sought out by high-end labels and brands as a ‘conduit between the runway and the real world’. His fresh outlook is in demand because he currently pushes an edge, which, politically speaking merits esteem but from the point of view of the capitalist, offers yet another frontier for exploitation and aesthetic appropriation. And without a doubt, within the next decade, Amato and others who work on this edge, will reach a saturation point, flat-lining into a cultural homogeneity. But for the moment, his images continue to make powerful interventions into the stereotypes and prejudices of our visual culture, and for this they demand elaboration.

**TRUST AND ACCESS**

Like many artists today, Amato, holds both commercial and personal portfolios, though his signature style can be read across both. Namely, this involves the mix of the toughness and edge for which the South Bronx is known, coupled with a gentleness, loyalty and deep respect for the people he photographs. How does he accomplish this balance? The secret, he explains in a recent interview is based on trust and access.

‘Trust and access are Amato’s f-stop.’ With them he establishes rapport, people feel comfortable and open up, showing us something subjectively unique. Because a number of the people and lifestyles he features are still marginal relative to the hyper-conservative tastes of mainstream fashion and visual culture, for many people his images appear unfamiliar and may therefore also make them
uncomfortable. But his images are not meant to shock or stun viewers (as say the photography of Robert Mapplethorpe or other queer or S&M-identity political artists from the 1980s) rather, they are simply about showing us another way of life, living, and loving that might not be our own, or even one normatively featured in mainstream fashion and mass media. But again, love is love. It does not divide or judge.

Two examples from The Importants include ‘Flower Boy’ and ‘Krispie Kid’. Both convey toughness mixed with a soft intimacy. In ‘Flower Boy’, a young black man with tightly cropped hair and naked torso (save for a small tattoo on his left pectoral) looks steadily but gently at the camera, posing with three pink and white flowers slightly drooping off his bottom lip. The pose alludes to classical portraits of typically female icons with flowers in their mouth (recent mass media examples include images of Rihanna and Beyoncé). The motif goes back to antiquity, however, but it is normatively a passive, feminine pose, destabilised through racial and gender displacement. Even the ‘Flower Boy’ title alludes to this history of feminisation, not to mention the now cliché symbolic link between flowers and female genitalia.

‘Krispie Kid’ involves a similar strategy. A slightly older black man faces the camera, standing naked, save for a box of Rice Krispies that he holds with his left hand, casually covering his genitals. The pose also alludes to classical portraits of female nudes, generally naked save for a cloth or bouquet of flowers covering the genital area. Where classical female images of this sort typically lay horizontally on a couch or bed, made passive and inert, these men stand erect. They are softened, through the illusion to the classical female imagery but they are not stripped of power; tenderised, not victimised. Standing upright, proud, sporting tattoos, jewellery and slicked-back braids, they brazenly return the camera’s gaze.
Moreover, in the classical pose, the covering up of female genitals suggests a kind of modesty or sexual and moral reticence, stereotypically expected of women in Western culture. But here, in contrast, this modesty is aptly dismissed, replaced by a young, virile black man, casually holding a box of sugary and in-no-way-nutritious cereal. One gets the sense that the box is only accidentally there too, one moment later he may want to eat more and the box would just have easily covered another part of his body (though this would have made the image too-raw, crude even, and not in Amato’s style). Krispie Kid’s casualness pokes fun at the iconic imagery, and with it, the now seemingly bizarre sexual norms and moral ideals it references.

Amato brings otherwise tense and heated sexual and racial politics into a play. Destructive sexual, racial and gendered stereotypes are undone not with a sledgehammer, but with levity, love and respect. These stereotypes are not replaced with crudeness or aggressive sexuality – consider for example how the meaning would change if, instead of a box of Rice Krispies, the man held the box of Krispy Kreme doughnuts in front of his genitals. Here, respect for the person, any person, as an individual, breeds an openness to ambiguity and ultimately, an inability to classify a living being into a box or stereotype. Taking only the problematic stereotype of the association of young black men with danger and crime, in these two examples – these associations are the last thing one can read into them. In Amato’s work, black turns to gold on its way to Black. Each sitter is their own dynamic being, living gold, and this is the true face of the work’s transgression – its invocation of a love and respect that cannot be bought or sold in the marketplace or on the catwalk.

Seen alone, these images may not seem to transgress or disrupt much. But put in context – in relation to similar images from fashion media and visual culture, or in the overwhelmingly racist and patriarchal history of visual art and photography – their destabilising function becomes clear. More work of this
nature is urgently required. We all benefit in freedom from problematic stereotypes, informing us how we should behave, how a gay man should look (white, clean cut, moderately ripped), or how a young black man should behave (tough, angry, looking like a criminal etc).

Harmful misperceptions are perpetuated by all of us, in conjunction with the media industries. From the latest hip-hop video to Hollywood feature films and social media platforms where racial and gender stereotypes are either directly and ignorantely perpetuated on hate blogs or adopted as cool cultural codes, packaged and sold to predominantly white American youth (illegal sex, guns and drugs, as the prerequisite gateway to autonomy, empowerment, and adulthood in America). This is the real horror of our culture. Naïve and uncritical media consumption plays a powerful role in shaping our psychic lives and in turn, the way we treat and live with one another. And, as also noted above, these prejudices become especially dangerous when the same media-consuming public, fully formed with prejudices against anything ‘other’ or different, step in to office – the White House – or other positions of power to form law and policy. Rather than further develop this much-needed critique of systemic racism here, I return to the single goal of this article: to celebrate the inverse; people and images that actively and compassionately undo these prejudices. For Amato, his primary technique has been giving the middle finger to anything that smacks of harmful chromatic distinction.

**F*CK THE GOLDEN YEARS**

Saying fuck you to the golden years is one such method. The expression comes from Amato’s grandmother, Marie, who passed away in 2011 but was a ‘tough cookie, always hustling and funny as fuck’. ‘Fuck the golden years’ was her way of saying embrace and live life to the fullest, be true to yourself and ‘never let a day or minute pass you by’. Marie’s philosophy has tie-ins with Zen Buddhism and Julius Caesar (carpe diem), but for Amato, it presented a philosophy for pursuing his photography in his life and community. Marie’s middle finger asserts a transgressive passion for being alive, for living gold as fluid as life is, and not as concretised gold, or a lust for attaining inert commodity forms (the definition of gold, as defined by the market). This distinction between commodity gold and gold as the well-lived life requires a detour through Karl Marx’s theory of commodity fetishism.

**IV MARX’S SECRET**

*So far no chemist has ever discovered exchange-value in a pearl or a diamond.*

Karl Marx, 1867

Over a century later, many still believe that value is intrinsic to a pearl or diamond, naturally occurring in the commodity form. This delusion, Marx asserts, set up the mystique of commodities, permitting them to accrue fetish value.

A fetish object – whether a cut diamond, synthetic bling or any hyped-up new fashion item – appears animated, alive with ‘metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties’, but for Marx, this is a false appearance. For him, rigorous historical and material analysis reveals that the value of a commodity is instead the result of a much more complex process, typically obfuscated from consumers as they have
long been objectified in the form of alienated social relations, homogenised labour power and abstracted exchange value.\textsuperscript{33}

In Marx’s pivotal three-volume \textit{Das Kapital}, he pioneers a humanities-based critique of the ever-expanding capitalist machinery. In an early section, ‘The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof’,\textsuperscript{34} he eloquently decodes this mystification process as follows: an able-bodied worker goes to the market to sell his potential to work, as labour. But the capacity to work is an intrinsic \textit{quality} of all human life. In and of itself this \textit{capacity} is not a quantifiable thing, until it is exchanged on the market as a quantifiable and standardized thing called labour, set at rates of exchange determined by market laws supply and demand.\textsuperscript{35}

When, as is the case in industrial societies, production consists of producing goods \textit{for} market exchange, then all labour contributing to the process becomes measurable in the abstract and objective terms set by the market.\textsuperscript{36} For Marx, this is one of the first steps in the alienation of our species-being. While labouring, workers only assume a social character \textit{through the production of a product}. In a work place, whether industrial factory or postmodern office space, workers work individually, estranged from each other and themselves, coming into contact only during product exchange.

Once a commodity has been produced and sold on the market, its social value it ‘valorised’, retroactively determining the exchange value of the labour that produced it. Put differently the exchange value of a commodity, determined \textit{after} production by market relations, works backwards to set a value on the labour that initially went into its production.\textsuperscript{37} Because of this inverted chain of events, the value of the commodity at first appears to be ‘easily understood’, but as you can see here, it is in fact the ‘result of a complex concealment of the quantity of living labor necessary to produce it’.\textsuperscript{38} Thus the commodity appears as a mysterious fetish, a ‘social hieroglyph’ laden with ‘theological niceties and mystical subtleties’ that have magically allowed it to generate value from thin air.\textsuperscript{39}

It is not so much that Marx is concerned with understanding commodities as he is with critiquing the exploitation and alienation of human life in capitalist paradigms. The mystical character of the commodity, which ‘does not arise from its use-value’,\textsuperscript{40} but instead from \textit{human power} sold as labour, in the early stages of the production process, becomes an ideological critique of capitalism, leveraged in the humanitarian pursuit of Black.\textsuperscript{41}

\textbf{ALL THAT GLITTERS IS NOT GOLD}

Building on Marx’s discussion of commodity fetishism, we can now align it with gold.\textsuperscript{42} The progenerative potential of capital, Marx writes, attains value because it has ‘acquired the occult quality of being able to add value to itself. It brings forth living offspring, or, at the least, lays golden eggs’.\textsuperscript{43} Common sense, and science, confirms that golden eggs do not naturally exist. Rather, the illusion or ‘occult quality’ of fetish-valuation, create the conditions under which gold eggs appear to ‘bring forth living offspring’. This kind of cold is cold bottom salt on the market: gold jewellery, solid gold, etc. It is also the way in which commodities that are not materially gold nonetheless achieve value that meets
or exceeds the current gold standard set by the market. The classic example is the inflated blue-chip art market where a painting by Jackson Pollock or Andy Warhol sells for millions of dollars.

Another kind of gold is phenomenal gold, gold more akin to the nebulous and cosmological Black than to market standardisation. Cosmology and phenomenology must also be understood as clearly distinct from mysticism and theology. Where the former speaks to concrete, material and embodied physiological and sensory responses to the lived world and space; the latter speaks to abstractions, divinities and religiosity as a system of power and control. Moreover, as a phenomenon of the senses and aesthetic experience, phenomenal gold is not necessarily visible either. It may speak to the heart and head, or to the skin and senses and ignore the head altogether. It may also be highly visible, spectacular and brilliant, appearing in the form of pure gold, gold-leaf, gold-plate or simply gold sequence or cubic zirconia (and they also alluding to market gold), put regardless, phenomenal gold still always already speaks in the language of communion, brotherhood, respect and love.

Proposed here is a kind of gold – a gold hip to contemporary aesthetic developments – that might also include gold as an authentic value. That is, how can art – inclusive of fashion, design and other creative industries – genuinely and sincerely produce non-judgmental, nonracist and generally phenomenal social relations between human beings? All creative industries inevitably work from and come into contact with market relations – in an age of late capitalism such luxuries do not exist – but instead of articulating relations between humans as abstract equivalents of values between things, how can these relations be more related to Black than black?

This would be gold as Marie saw it, a life well lived. This is true transgression because, as of yet, there is no way to quantify, standardise, or sell a well-lived, well-enjoyed life. Andy Warhol caught wind of this secret perhaps around the same time as Marie did, also already suspicious of those who tried to shape him otherwise:

Some company recently was interested in buying my ‘aura’. They didn’t want my product. They kept saying, ‘We want your aura.’ I never figured out what they wanted. But they were willing to pay a lot for it.
Gold painted hardcover of Kevin Amato’s *The Importants* (2016)

**IV BACK TO BLACK**
The one thing that being in the Bronx has taught me is that people are all the same at the end of the day. We are unique in our own ways, but regardless of race, social class, sexual orientation, gender, we all just want to be recognized and respected.\(^{47}\)

Kevin Amato, 2016\(^{48}\)

*Candy-Coloured Doughnut Baby*
One of the least healthy foods available, doughnuts are nonetheless cheap, fun to buy and eat, and largely iconic. Featured in a nameless, colour, double-page spread in *The Importants*, one encounters four soggy doughnuts left at the back of dozen-sized box.\(^{49}\) The four chocolate glazed doughnuts have multi-coloured M&Ms on top, but they are offset by a pink sugary liquid leaking out through the bottom (this is how we know they are leftovers). In the bottom right of the double page spread, there is another image in black and white of a man’s bare torso with his face covered by a kinky Afro hairstyle. What is the relationship between the two, and why is this image so important as to be featured so early on in a book of the same name?

Doughnuts in *The Importants*
Doughnuts on Kevin Amato’s Instagram

A variation of the doughnut image appears in Kevin Amato's Instagram feed. Here, the electronic image is more visually enticing, as are all images viewed on luminous screens. In the online version, a piece of wax paper rests in the bottom left-hand corner of the image, covering the majority of the male model’s torso and body. On top of the waxed paper sits a fresh doughnut. This doughnut is also more visually enticing, fresh in a rich pink sugar glaze, with blue, yellow, red and white sprinkles on top. The addition creates spontaneity, not to mention a confirmation of Amato’s doughnut eating habit. Nevertheless, both versions have associations beyond the obvious ones, perhaps because they feature *soggy* doughnuts.50

Soggy doughnuts are subversive doughnuts. Consider the relationship between the young black man, his face covered by funky Afro frizz, appearing in black and white, stylised as is typical of fashion photography, and Amato’s band of it in particular. As a signifier of cutting edge fashion he is further juxtaposed with the sugar-coated, candy-coloured doughnuts, cheap and trashy whether new or old. But the two worlds collide across class and commodity lines: both are loved, subject to admiration and handled with care.

They also appear together on the same low-resolution, thick but newspaper-quality-colour paper stock used throughout the book. The book, sold for forty-nine dollars through Phaidon press is, to be clear, a commodity, a commodity that appears in gold nonetheless. Shiny surfaces presuppose value and equally shiny and valuable contents – but not so in this case. For one, the thick matte paper stock used to print the book images could not be less shiny (they absorb all colour to the point where the colour images lose any boldness or saturation that the artist may have initially intended). Second, upfront and centre, are soggy day-old donuts. This is how soggy doughnuts undermine the glistening shine of freshly glazed doughnuts that appear in a typical doughnut store advertisement. In turn, the model undermines stereotypes of and expectation for clean-cut, crew-cut, stiffened male models with upright heads, strutting down a flashbulb-laden catwalk. Both subvert normative market expectations for commodity fetishism and the valuation of commodities therein, whether black or gold, upfront and centre we see instead a big ‘fuck you’.

‘Fuck you’ is Amato’s way of getting us back to Black. Both doughnut and model are real, with histories, lives and embedded social contexts. This moment for Amato is akin to the one first encountered by Larry Clark, Nan Goldin or Terry Richardson, as they began photographing subject matter that related to their personal experience and social lives. Rooted in a kind of unmediated, documentary rawness, together their work spoke to life as it was lived rather than contrived or dressed up for the media imaginary. One key difference, as also noted above, is that Amato’s subjects tend to words of softness and in turn levity – doughnuts are homely things, what anyone’s countertop (or hair) may look like after a night out.
By the same token Amato’s work is sexier than his precursors. It is easier to look at, ‘softer on the eyes’ and soul as it plays with gender and sexuality with a freedom and lightness of spirit that is perhaps only possible after the seriousness of the disturbing images of underage and alternative sexuality in the work of Larry Clark and Nan Goldin several decades earlier. Pioneers pave the way for future generations, and for this reason Amato’s work is indebted to them. This is phenomenal gold, intrinsic to the human spirit and its persistence through creative form.

It would be naïve, however, to think these loved and lived images are not somehow un-exploitable to the capitalist. This Black is not a-cultural or a-historical. The images and books are literal commodities, objects that accrue surplus value based on the profits they generate for the publisher. Amato’s sexy, gold-plated work undeniably exists within the paradigm and spirit of consumerism, competitive desire, and spectacle-based fetishism that is the art book market, fashion industry and reality of contemporary life as such, but it also still manages to connect back to Black, through a gold that affects the heart, mind, and space in between; some call this kith.

**KITH**

Defined as a coterie of acquaintances, friends, neighbours or like-minded persons living in the same locality and forming a more or less cohesive group, these days ‘kith’ appears less as a term to describe community and friendship and more so as a reference to the hip New York-based sneaker shop of the same name.

Founded by Queens native Ronnie Fieg, Kith is a street-gear retailer selling trendy but casual footwear, clothing and accessories. Kith’s most recent addition is their downtown mecca, established in conjunction with Nike on Bleecker Street and Broadway in Lower Manhattan. The downtown store bears the much buzzed-about installation of ceramic Air Jordans hanging from the ceiling, a cereal bar, backdoor patio, and several closed rooms of highly stylised sneakers, clothing and related paraphernalia. While the original Brooklyn store felt like an ‘outpost’, Fieg explains, the Manhattan store ‘feels like one complete vision… several different rooms and vibes all under one roof’.

The store is – as is the case with almost all commercial stores – founded on the economic values of capitalism: the fetish value of the new, the spectacle, the latest fashion sneakers, sports icons, sports media industries and sports branding in particular. As a brand Nike has achieved its own surplus value so in teaming up with Kith, a double valuation accrues to their products.

Kith also generates actual community, people gather at the downtown store for events and openings, during and after work hours. This, at least at first appearance, is phenomenal gold, a return to Black.

Looking like an average, middle-aged white female professor (no makeup, casual non-brand specific clothing) I walk into Kith’s Broadway store. I am greeted with enthusiasm but I suspect it is only because I am also sporting shiny, brand new blue and silver metallic leather and metal-studded high-top Bárbara Bui sneakers. Had I not been wearing them I don’t know if I would have received the same warm reception, or had salespeople following me around the store. My instinct tells me no.
Is it possible that this kith (the one that refers to community) only forms on the terms of commodity exchange? Is the prerequisite for belonging contingent on being on trend? If so, this helps draw a distinction between emergent fashion that aims primarily and perhaps exclusively to sell, versus push boundaries, provide inclusion, or articulate other humanitarian values. Amato’s kith as discussed above is no different: he takes photographs for industry, sells them to fashion brands, publishing companies, scouts and markets his models, etc. But it is also distinct. Fieg’s Kith would never sell or advertise itself using soggy cereal, nor would it advertise to its largely heterosexual, sports driven consumers an image of a 95% naked and highly vulnerable black man with flowers in his mouth.

It is important to note that the two goals are not mutually exclusive. Moreover, in some cases, the latter set may play a pivotal role in someone’s work, as I have argued here of Amato’s, but not necessarily exist as a conscious or deliberate strategy on the part of the artist. I have also been clear to indicate that all the work discussed exists within the paradigm of late capitalism and consumerism. At the same time, I have also noted that all the examples discussed here, at the very least, point to other forms of community and belonging (loosely analogous to what I have been calling phenomenal goal and phenomenal Black). The kith example drives the point home, because it brings into resolution the contradictions and problems with authenticity and belonging in an age of pervasive consumer marketing. What permits one to participate in Kith’s kith is cold hard cash. Kith’s kith may work across gender and racial lines but it is largely dependent on socioeconomic distinctions of class and status. One can either buy into the fashion and lifestyle, or one cannot. Check the box, or move on.

And to be fair, real friendships, acquaintances and networks develop and emerge through Kith’s commodity-kith (just as friendships emerge after waiting in line for four hours on Lafayette Street in the Blazing sun to catch a twenty-four dollar T-shirt from the latest Supreme drop). This is why there is no simple or clear way to critique the paradox of commodity fetishism, it offers the real human value of being – in one way or another – and surplus value of kith. It is all-in-one, one in all, black in Black.

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1 ‘One is all /all is one’, Heraclitus, fragment 50
3 op cit, p 2
4 ‘Man’ is here to include all humans, ibid.
The New York Times

September 2015

Kevin Amato is looking for on Instagram

Kevin Amato Casts New York Fashion Week’

Kevin Amato, The Important, Phaidon, 2016, p 16

Another artist who works in a similar style is New Jersey born Ryan McGinley who also shows raw and literally naked young individuals, but like Amato, a kindness and gentleness emanates from his camera’s eye.

Alix Browne, ‘Say Cheese,’ op cit, p 15


Off-White designer Virgil Abloh introduced Luka to Kanye West just days before the Adidas show not as a model but as a ‘young creative’. He was cast on the spot.


Browne, ‘Say Cheese’, ibid, p 15. ‘Say Cheese’ is also tattooed on Amato’s forefinger.


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5 Elizabeth Hinton, Crime: The Making of Mass Incarceration in America, Harvard University Press, 2016. Hinton also explains, under Richard Nixon welfare programmes fell by the wayside as investment in policing and punishment expanded. Anticipating future crime, policymakers urged states to build new prisons, introducing law enforcement measures into urban schools and public housing. As a result, they turned neighbourhoods into targets of police surveillance.

6 US Bureau of Justice Statistics, Prisoners in 2011, 8 tbl. 8, December 2012


8 Crips and Bloods: Made in America, director, Stacy Peralta, 2008, USA, 1 hour 33 minutes


11 ‘Whether acting on their own implicit biases or bowing to political exigency, policymakers have fused crime and race in their policy initiatives and statements. They have crafted harsh sentencing laws that impact all Americans and disproportionately incarcerate people of color,’ in Race and Punishment, op cit, p 4

12 Hood by Air is actually Amato’s casting agency, a fashion brand mixing street and couture, punk rock and hip-hop, the feminine and masculine. He also founding Mothermgmt (pronounced ‘Mother Management’) to promote the talent he finds.


14 Kevin Amato, The Important, Phaidon, 2016, p 16

15 Another artist who works in a similar style is New Jersey born Ryan McGinley who also shows raw and literally naked young individuals, but like Amato, a kindness and gentleness emanates from his camera’s eye.

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20 Off-White designer Virgil Abloh introduced Luka to Kanye West just days before the Adidas show not as a model but as a ‘young creative’. He was cast on the spot.


22 Browne, ‘Say Cheese’, ibid, p 15. ‘Say Cheese’ is also tattooed on Amato’s forefinger.

25 Attributed to Howard Cosell, referring to the arson epidemic in the South Bronx during the 1970s.
26 Street casting is ‘industry parlance for finding and choosing models outside the established agency system’, in Schneier, op cit.
27 Ibid
28 For example, several decades ago the first images of Kate Moss in British Vogue made people (and the British Press in particular) uncomfortable, now such pixie-thin figures are de rigueur for female and male models. Browne, op cit.
29 Interview with Steven Thrasher for Village Voice. For upcoming show, F*ck the Golden Years, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fZi5hY5H5Zs. F*ck the Golden Years was conducted in conjunction with his then upcoming show at the Casa De Costa Gallery in New York (F*ck the Golden Years, March 2012, Casa De Costa Studio Gallery).
30 F*ck the Golden Years was also the title of a book produced by the artist and an interview held with Steven Thrasher for Village Voice.
33 The fetish, as proposed by theorists from William Pietz to Freud, is an inert object invested with mystical, godlike powers. The term entered Western scholarship through anthropologist studying African cultures so it brings with it this ‘exotic’ aspect of ‘Otherness’.
34 See Karl Marx, ‘The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof’, op cit
35 ‘What the worker is selling is his labour-power… the substance and the immanent measure of value’, in Marx, op cit, p 677
36 Marx’s concept of Exchange-Value of Labour is ‘the past labour embodied in the labour-power and the living labour it can perform’. The ‘value which the labour-power valorises’ aka ‘variable capital’ or ‘labour-power in action’, in Marx, op cit, p 300, p 317, p 315
37 The capitalist pays for labour power only after it has been performed and moreover, the ‘immanent drive of the capitalist’ lies in increasing the productivity of labour, in order to cheapen commodities [because this makes him more competitive on the market– [see riddle]… [which] cheapens the worker himself” Marx, op cit, p 437, p 278.
38 Marx, op cit, pp 676–677
39 Hence Marx’s famous expression, ‘all that is solid melts into air’. The solid matter being human bodies, life, and its transformation beginning with labour sold on the market.
40 See Marx, ‘The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof’, op cit, p 164
41 The ‘trick’ of ‘transforming money into capital’ is herein resolved.
42 Intentionally skipping over the direct references to gold from the three volume manuscript, I speak here of gold only to bring it into the discussion of commodity fetishism.
43 Marx, op cit, p 255
44 For example there is currently a trend for producing ‘fake’ fashion sneakers and running shoes from gold dyed leather and in the world of publishing, the cover of books like Amato’s or the gold lettering featured in Jeremy Scott’s 2015 release from Rizolli.
45 A dirty word in the Academy these days, to be sure.
46 Andy Warhol, The Philosophy of Andy Warhol: From A to B and Back Again, Harcourt, Orlando, 1975, p 77
47 ‘Say Cheese’, p 17
All of the pictures in the book are printed on a thick matte stock devoid of shine or gloss, in stark contrast to the hi-gloss, extra-thin paper used in a typical magazine or luminescent backlit advertisements seen on many billboards. Even the shiny gold cover of the book seems odd in relation to the newspaper quality reproduction of the colour images.

The book’s images are visually engaging (and certainly more sexually provocative) but it is less playful and free than the Instagram one.