



MMRMS Studio, Goodas, Image by SABB ADAMS,  
Model: YAGAMOTO, Styling: CHANEL BAKER, Art Direction: SHAQUILLE KEITH

# Institute

## — Fashion, Status, Masculinity

Semiotics, the study of how meaning is created and communicated through visual and linguistic signs and symbols, reveals how no images are neutral - artworks and media images rely on a shared cultural language that they tap into. The way signs are used, accepted or rejected indicate the tastes and desires of wider society. Viewing historic artworks through 21st century eyes, London College of Fashion Menswear graduate, Thomas Harvey, and art historian, author, and lecturer, Elizabeth Kutesko, explore the changing social norms of masculinity, visual cultures, and decolonisation in response to portraits in the collection.

**ELIZABETH KUTESKO:** Can you tell me about yourself, and the inspiration behind the brand MMRMS Studio, which you say is inspired by what you've called Queer Romanticism?

**THOMAS HARVEY:** I was born in Jamaica, and then moved here when I was four. All my earliest memories are of Jamaica. We'd go almost every year for Christmas or summer break - I learned to ride a bike there, I remember climbing up waterfalls, I only have good memories. There'd be street parties or someone would always be having a barbeque. My uncles are really funny, they'd be making jokes with me. I don't have any bad memories about Jamaica at all. So I grew up in a Jamaican household, and my mum will never let go of being Jamaican. That's been part of my upbringing - don't forget who you are, don't forget where you came from - which I think is in part reflected in my work. I often think British culture is about other cultures. When you ask me what's British culture I say, it depends where you are - places like Brixton or Dalston in London have a rich Caribbean culture and those are the places I grew up around, so that is being British for me.

When talking about blackness it's often reduced to the body; in that sense it's important for me to make clothes that visually represent my body, my physicality. I want to continue to make this type of work so that people who look like me can be celebrated. So people can say, "I look like him, he's doing really well, and his body is beautiful." That's what the MMRMS (pronounced Ma-ro-mas) brand represents. Expanding notions of what 'black fashion' is.

**EK:** When we talk about 'black artists' or 'women artists' it's as if we're recognising them based on their identity rather than their art...

**TH:** I think, perhaps more so in America, when you talk about blackness, people tend to jump to music - rap and hip hop - which creates strong links to the idea of 'urban'. Blackness is always linked to urbanism, and this comes through in

certain kinds of fashion too. Muscular, posturing bodies are typical in rap videos, for example, so when you put certain types of clothing on a certain body-frame you get people making assumptions about who that person is or what they represent. But what I've tried to do with MMRMS is putting clothes on a black male body that shows black males in a different way. Blackness is not one thing, or one body.

If you go to Jamaica, you might see guys in really tight jeans, really tight tops that are too small for them - almost cropped - and if you were to have that here, that would be considered a femme way of dressing. It's so effeminate. And in places like Nigeria too, many people dress so flamboyantly - bright colours, tight suits. I want to challenge this reductive association between black male bodies and the urban.

**EK:** So when you set up MMRMS, what was the aim, what were you trying to do? How did it fit with your then design partner, who started the brand with you [although you're both now working on your own collections]?

**TH:** With my design partner at the time, who's Spanish, it was always so interesting, because we're both part of the LGBT community. We always had these interesting but slightly weird conversations about race - he had no idea, you know. Working together was a learning experience for him, as well as him becoming a lot more aware of and interested in a culture that isn't his own. Geography, experience, and what knowledge you have access to, is so relevant. For a long time, we've been taught to value certain types of cultures that exclude black and, until recently, queer bodies. This is where we worked really well together, contesting what's held up as having value and beauty.

**EK:** We talk about this in Cultural Studies, where we draw on American writers. To be exploring masculinities through fashion is one way to engage with the post-colonial landscape, decolonising through fashion. Disciplines such as European Philosophy, Art History, Economics, have very conventional and conservative approaches. They also come with status and privilege - these are the things that have been devalued in black people; assumptions about class, ability, interests, are prescribed to you by white systems of knowledge.

**TH:** Looking at the portraits I've chosen for this resource, the portrait of Charles Tudway MP, Portrait of a Man in Armour, and the portrait of Charles and Captain John Sealy - their styles are so different to how we think of masculinity today. Yet, a lot of the poses and stances that we do when we're shooting fashion are very similar to these poses from historic art - they're all quite flamboyant and fun, whereas

you're used to seeing black bodies represented as tough and strong.

**EK:** About the artworks you've chosen, the Charles Tudway portrait is painted by Gainsborough as a landed gentleman. Everything about his pose, clothing, gaze suggests ease, elegance and authority. The landed estate can be seen in the background. With the Sealy brothers portrait, everything about it – from the dress, pose, the neoclassical setting – is about status and hegemonic, white heterosexuality. The palm trees in the background are a tiny bit of exoticism, hinting at the subjects' superiority as British colonialists; we're a more ethnically diverse culture today.

**TH:** The problem is, people say, "we need diversity, let's just put some people of colour in there." I've noticed in fashion there'll be an all white cast in a catwalk show, people complain, so the next season they'll put a couple of black people in there - but only because people have complained. It's important that whenever you have the platform to do something as a person of colour, you make sure you use that to implement positive ideas of diversity. People of colour (POC) who are in power need to support those who aren't supported – you want to bring other talented people of colour into the workforce if you're in position of power.

Lots of my friends are doing good things; we've formed a community and have built a network of photographers, stylists... so whenever they're doing a shoot and they need clothes, I can help, or if they need help with assisting for styling, they'll come to me, which supports my brand too. [Vogue editor] Edward Enninful is doing great things. And then once the big houses see that POC are spending money on clothes or into certain looks they put more POC in that place to help them make more money. For corporations that's the bottom line – that's the only way people will naturally start bringing more POC in – because it's good for business.

**EK:** So it's diversity as a business model?

**TH:** But why shouldn't POC contribute to discourses about French 19th century painting, or a sculpture from the 1800's? To assume – as we're taught – to only be aware of and only ascribe value to Eurocentric cultures, we're failing in our mission to foster a global culture.

**EK:** You're so right. Kobena Mercer writes about how afro hair, or black hair, for example, is a sign of resistance – but then it's also the sign by which people have been categorised as black. So people are competing for the same symbols creating this complicated terrain.

**TH:** It's reductive. Where do your own ideas about fashion as resistance, or decolonising fashion stem from?

**EK:** I suppose I'm interested in identity and ethnicity. I always think that ethnicity is very situational, in the sense

that it depends who you are and who you're with, and the construction of identity through the body always involves both insiders and outsiders – I'm very interested in that. Any idea of national identity or blackness or whiteness or whatever it is, involves both sides of the debate. That's what really fascinates me.

**TH:** The British empire is a common or shared history, I suppose. Yet, it's because of empire that you're only black in the sense that you're not white – blackness is always in negation to whiteness. And you're white because you're not black.

**EK:** Here at The Courtauld I teach an occasional course, Fashion & Photography, a history of fashion photography over the last 100 years but in a global context. So I really try to get students to think about really famous key practitioners, like Edward Steichen or Louise Dahl-Wolfe, or Richard Avedon or Corinne Day, but then also to ask, what are the fashion cultures that exist beyond western Europe and the USA? What's happening in Latin America, or what's happening in the Democratic Republic of Congo, fashion cultures there but also how they're documented by both European photographers and by local Congolese photographers. I also teach at Central St Martins, which has made me realise that when you have a very international cohort of students, who have these incredible histories that they come from, to just be teaching a very traditional history of fashion, it really just doesn't sit. You can't get away with it any more, nor would I want to. There are these incredibly rich histories to uncover through talking about fashion, and how people have constructed their identities.

And, I suppose really this is about a post-colonial notion of trying to listen to voices previously silenced, learn about histories that we haven't heard, and turning it on its head. So instead of looking at fashion and images about fashion from the perspective of the metropolis, or London or New York, or Paris, think about it from Rio de Janeiro, or Sao Paulo, or from Brazzaville, or Kinshasa. De-centering the Eurocentricity of fashion and all of the hierarchies embedded in this huge industry. If you think about fashion seasons, spring/summer, autumn/winter, they're fashion seasons for the global north that the rest of the world slots into. But also thinking, OK, what are the hierarchies embedded in the way that we study fashion, and the way that I teach fashion history to my students?

**TH:** People are now coming of age with this awareness and these ideas, and the tools and platforms are there to talk in more productive ways about blackness, masculinity, equality, identity...

**EK:** Can you tell me more about your vision behind Queer Romanticism – what are you aiming for in terms of the clothes?

**TH:** Queer is a word people have reclaimed over the years,

particularly in the UK, because of course it was a slur in the past. We wanted to create this concept of how a guy might look who's very in love, he's queer, in touch with his feminine side, and how can we show a male figure in the most attractive, seductive way without looking like a man in women's clothing. The clothes needed to be outright male and masculine, but with really delicate detailing, fine stitches with lots of seams and pleats, soft sensory fabrics like cashmere, buttons hand cast in sterling silver.

**EK:** Where did you do the photo shoot with Jordan?

**TH:** We found a bar in Shoreditch made from shipping containers and we loved it and felt it t the brand – it looks a little like Jamaica; you'll find these big shipping containers in Jamaica, and oil drums which are used in Jamaica to jerk chicken etc. This London bar had lots of oil drums around so it resembled areas of Jamaica that we wanted to call to mind.

**EK:** The way you're describing how you situate models for shoots is so much like a portrait – because in all of these Courtauld portraits here it's all about the pose, the dress, but also the setting – like the Tudway portrait with this guy standing next to a neo-classical pillar, all of this is constructing his identity as a white, wealthy, male. I really like that in your own work, the attention to detail, down to place.

**TH:** In lots of shoots of people in Jamaica will have models wearing big brands, Gucci or whatever, with beautiful, expensive garments juxtaposed against a background that's dirt, or cement, or slightly industrial looking places. There's a slight humour to the contrast and that's something we wanted to explore too. Yet the stance in this image of Jordan here is very powerful...

**EK:** And his gaze...

**TH:** And his gaze. Yes.

**EK:** How did you choose Jordan for the shoot?

**TH:** I first met him at a QPOC dancehall party in London. Dancehall is a huge part of Jamaican youth culture. Jordan's shoot is based around this idea of celebrating the body, fashion, beautifully dressed people in sometimes less salubrious surroundings.

**EK:** It's not just the collection, the clothes, but also the pose; and the whole setting that's communicating this idea of queer romanticism, which taps into ideas of Jamaican identity too. And it's so interesting because the notion of status, in all of these images, is shared by the way that they're dressed but it's also setting. So especially those two portraits, Tudway and the Sealy brothers, with the neo-classical architecture - you just get a little hint of power, wealth, knowledge, just enough to reinforce the status of



PORTRAIT OF CHARLES TUDWAY, MP, 1765

Thomas Gainsborough (1727 - 1788), Oil on canvas, 227.4 x 156.7 cm

© The Samuel Courtauld Trust, The Courtauld Gallery, London

these men, the subject.

Richard J. Powell, is interesting in this regard – he uses this phrase, 'cutting a figure', talking specifically about black portraiture and, against the paradigm of modern portraiture, examining the relationship that's established between the subject and the author of the image (rather than subject and viewer). Powell questions the social capital of black representation, and explores the ways that fashion, and pose, and the body, are used to display a form of resistance or agency. And, for Pierre Bourdieu, the body, how we carry ourselves, how we dress, how we feel, is key to how the game of power within any field is played out. Against these contexts, queer romanticism disrupts the everyday reproduction of hierarchies of cultural value and taste.

**TH:** Questions of diversity and queer people generally are a lot more current now, hopefully not just as a passing fad.

**EK:** Which of these paintings would you say you feel most connected to?

**TH:** I really like *Portrait of a Man in Armour* because of his stance – and because he's holding a hammer. Many of the images I came across in the collection, the men were dressed to show power, or wearing armour to show strength; in this



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PORTRAIT OF CHARLES AND CAPTAIN JOHN SEALY, 1773  
Tilly Kettle (1735-1786), Oil on canvas, 142.5 x 233.2 cm  
© The Samuel Courtauld Trust, The Courtauld Gallery, London



PORTRAIT OF A MAN IN ARMOUR, Circa 1550, Italy (North) 16th century (1500 - 1599) Oil on canvas, 213.3 x 114.5 cm  
© The Samuel Courtauld Trust, The Courtauld Gallery, London

painting the subject is holding a tool or a weapon. In my photo, Jordan's holding a bag. Both these images display a sense of power and strength, even though the dress is very different. I loved the stance the subject had in this painting – the hand on the hip and the leg turned out.

**EK:** He looks powerful but also a little bit effeminate. Or elegant

**TH:** There's a sense of elegance, there's a sense of power; nowadays, can you be masculine holding a weapon, can you be masculine holding a purse? It was this correlation between the two images that struck me. It's an interesting question.

ELIZABETH KUTESKO (PhD Courtauld Institute of Art) is Lecturer in Cultural Studies at Central Saint Martins and Associate Lecturer at The Courtauld Institute. She is the author of *Fashioning Brazil: Globalization and the Representation of Brazilian Dress in National Geographic* (Bloomsbury, 2018)

THOMAS HARVEY graduated from London College of Fashion with a First in 2018. He is Creative Director of menswear brand, MMRMS Studio

#### QUESTIONS

In the 18th century, portrait sitters wanted to show that they belonged to a small and privileged elite. They conveyed belonging and conformity by displaying similar fashions, poses and expressions. By contrast, how do the models in Thomas Harvey's Maromas photoshoot express individuality?

Any transgression from the normal modes of display would have been noted (e.g. Charles and Captain John Sealy forgoing wigs and wearing relatively bright clothing) and an explanation expected (in this case they are far from home). How do the contemporary photographs engage with and/or subvert elements of historical portraiture?

What do you consider to be the signs or indicators of masculinity in these artworks?

Do they have fixed meanings or are they open to interpretation?

#### LINK

[www.othellodesouzahartley.com](http://www.othellodesouzahartley.com)

Othello De'Souza-Hartley is a London-based visual artist working with photography and film. Inspired by classical painting, his work centres on the socio-politics of identity. De'Souza-Hartley's Masculinity Project questions notions of masculinity in the 21st century. "I am questioning what my and other mens' perception of masculinity is today. What does it consist of and what are the foundations that it is based upon? Is masculinity a performance?"



MMRMS Studio: Queer Romanticism, Image by ALMA ROSAZ,  
Model: JORDAN A, Styling: CHANEL BAKER, CHARLENE COULIBALY