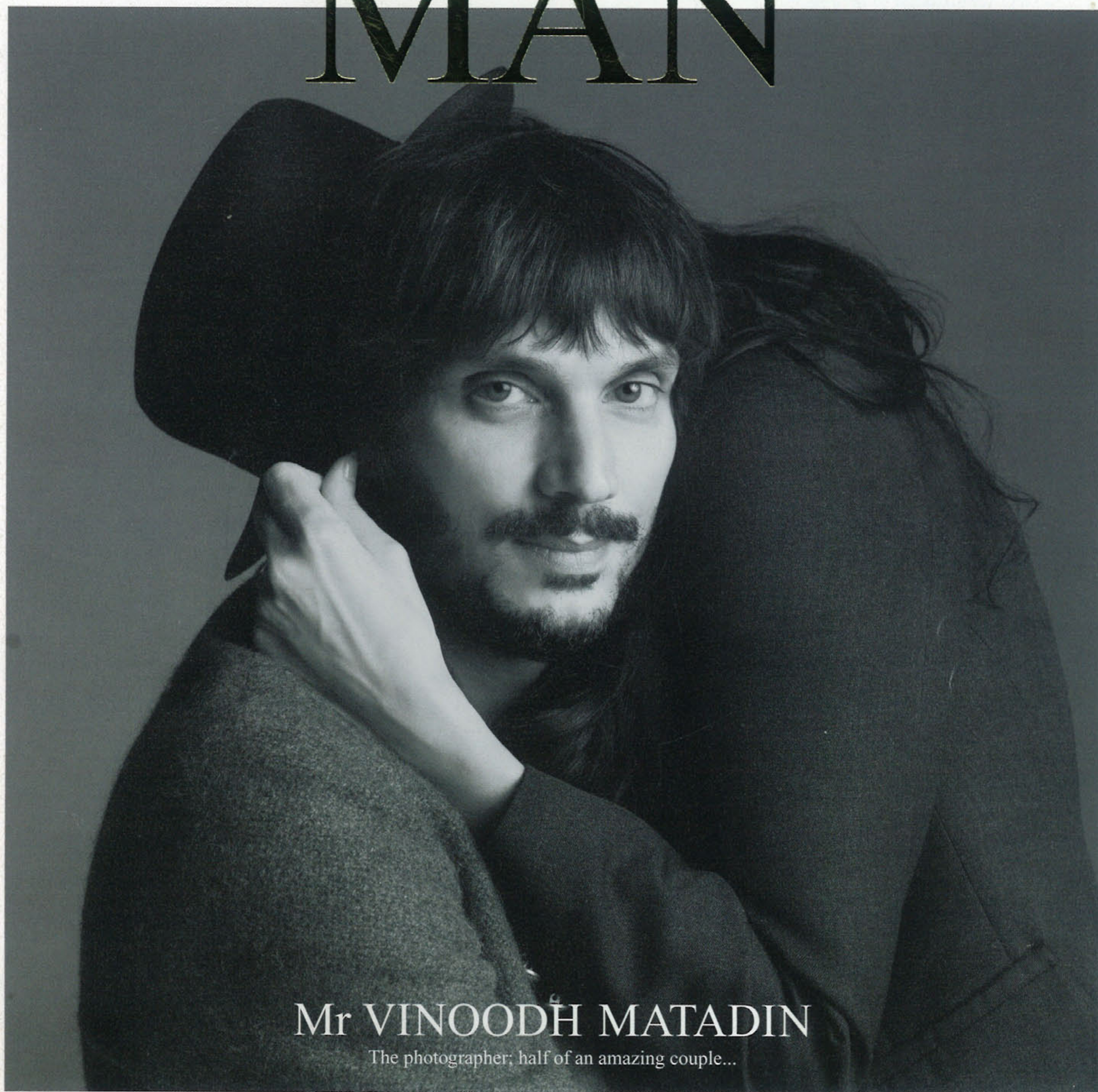


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ADAM KIMMEL AND THE MANLY CRAFT OF FASHION DESIGN

BY CHRISTOPHER BOLLEN

ADAM KIMMEL cannot sleep late. And it's not because he hasn't tried. The 28-year-old menswear designer goes to bed around midnight on a normal evening and much later if he's moving through the clubs and parties of downtown New York with his artist friends – many of whom appear decked out in head-to-toe KIMMEL in the look book he produces each season. Maybe it's because his bedroom doesn't have shades. Or, more likely, it's because the designer has one of those rare minds that seem unable to catch on an object – any object – and not try to figure out how it could be better. A few years ago he constructed sunglasses that fold up to fit in a shirt pocket. His latest invention is a Douglas-fir plywood chair that is assembled much like metal library shelves with a series of adjustable bolts. "Everything I do comes out of just fulfilling a need," he says. If you're thinking that this kind of craft-shop tinkering is not the done thing for a young sartorialist who dresses some of New York's coolest men and competes with the big French brands when he presents his collections in Paris, then you'd be right. But then KIMMEL comes to his fabrics and silhouettes more like an architect than a stylist. Six seasons into his eponymous label, KIMMEL makes tough, masculine clothes for dudes that like to get their hands dirty. And this in a market that is still largely treating men like pretty little boys jealous of their sisters' wardrobes.

He's up by 7:30am, pacing through his large Gramercy apartment furnished with a long rectangular table (the location of the celebratory dinner parties he's taken to throwing every few months) and a baseball-glove ottoman. After a quick breakfast downstairs at a local diner, he's off to his studio in West Chelsea, where he and his two assistants get down to work. It's fitting that KIMMEL's

first foray into fashion came from his now signature jumpsuits. They are, after all, traditional work clothes. "I've always valued the idea of labour," he explains, "of artists in their workshops and studios making their stuff." The designer started out at age 23 with a small collection, largely composed of these durable one-pieces that smock the body almost like a uniform. Now constructed out of painter's canvas, terrycloth, or flannel, the jumpsuits – and most of his other sportswear and suits – find their inspiration in blue-collar materials. Even a standard suit coat is made from sweatshirt cotton; it's a good example of how KIMMEL meddles with a traditional menswear article until it becomes fine tailoring for the rough-and-tumble set. "I guess I'm always keeping in mind a masculine presence," he says, "and for me that translates into wearability. That said, I like to play with the fabrics in unconventional ways." While most menswear today finds its muses in rock 'n' roll icons, KIMMEL continually looks to the Abstract Expressionists of the 1950s. These were the good old boys that cursed and spit and threw their paintbrushes around like they were fucking or punching half the time. These giants might not have worn the cashmere or chamois that KIMMEL introduced into the cuts for his Winter 2007 line, but even these softer textures are worked into lab coats or drop pants that those macho artists would have approved of.

"I didn't have a pot to piss in when I began," he says, looking back at the difficulty of launching his line. Born and raised in New York to an accomplished abstract painter for a mother and a father who worked in finance, KIMMEL attended NYU, where he spent his more wild times hanging out at places like SPY BAR and dating, although he modestly won't admit to it, a lot of extremely pretty

girls that may or may not have been models. Luckily, the kid knew when to quit the scene, and the idea of producing menswear grew out of a period he now refers to as his "days of monasticism" (the fact that monks like pared-down head-to-toe vestments might be the unacknowledged root of the jumpsuit). His mother was one of his only early supporters. "Almost no one thought it was a good idea," he laughs. But after putting together a little bit of backing and a lot of courage, KIMMEL produced a tremendous first round. Even half-brother photographer ALEXEI HAY couldn't help acknowledging that his sibling had hit a winner when he shot the first look book. For the past few seasons, artists like DAN COLEN, RYAN MCGINLEY, AARON YOUNG, and NATE LOWMAN stand in as models for his clothes – arguably the closest thing today's art world has to a gang of Expressionists. KIMMEL's success is pretty much built on a sexiness that comes from not trying too hard – like his cotton "unijohns" that look all the more seductive for showing less skin rather than more. Usually walking around in a denim button-down, jeans, and a pair of faux-tortoise-shell glasses, KIMMEL still looks more like an architect than one of the rising stars of the fashion elite. Which is probably a good thing. "I don't have any huge ten-year plan to take over the world," he says. "I just keep designing the way I want to. We'll see how it goes." Since he's spending a lot of his off-time surfing and learning how to play the guitar, it would not be surprising to see the designer start reinventing wetsuits and guitar straps. Indeed, KIMMEL may be the only man in New York with enough hours in his day.

CHRISTOPHER BOLLEN is the editor of V magazine and VMAN. He graduated from Columbia University in 1998 and talked to ADAM on 9 July, 2007.