

PAUL MPAGI SEPUYA

Paul Mpagi Sepuya challenges the history of photography and deconstructs traditional portraiture through layering, fragmentation, mirror imagery, and the perspective of the black, queer gaze. His intricately-considered photographs of friends, artists, collaborators, and himself splinter a singular view in favor of simultaneous visions that reflect ideas about interpersonal relationships, social environments, storytelling, and composition.

Sepuya's current practice is largely grounded in the studio as a site through which people, objects, and experiences are translated into material that is positioned, related, and reworked. This work began as early photographs and self-made zines produced in his Brooklyn home and while participating in a series of formative artist residencies. Photographs often depict formal sittings or remnants of exchanges between the artist and others, creating a simultaneous presence and absence. Upon Sepuya's later move to Los Angeles, the studio became a more grounded site through which materials pass at a steady pace. This, in turn, also leads the artist's work to grow more complex and



Image: Paul Mpagi Sepuya, *Mirror Study (0X5A1317)*, 2017. Archival pigment print, 51 x 34 inches. Courtesy the artist; DOCUMENT, Chicago; team (gallery, inc.); and Vielmetter Los Angeles.

deliberate. Sepuya's experiments with mirrors are especially formative—demonstrating that the double enclosure of camera and reflection can radically alter the dynamics of a portrait or scene. In these meticulous images, he provides glimpses of the studio setting and reveals the apparatus of photography, including backdrops, lighting, darkness, lenses, the camera, and the artist himself.

Although little is hidden in these images, much is obscured and fragmented with narratives left to conjecture. All of Sepuya's compositions are constructed through analog techniques with no digital manipulation. In contrast to the slick artifice of traditional or commercial portraiture, Sepuya points to the human elements of picture taking and social relationships—embracing fingerprints, smudges, and the dust on a mirror's surface to make both his images, and photography itself, more tactile and human.

Sepuya employs velvet and draped fabrics in a number of his works, materials used to create backdrops in photo studios since the 19th century. He positions the camera as if he were pulling back a curtain, bringing into view what is usually hidden. If photography is considered an “act of exposure,” or bringing forms into light, Sepuya sculpts the shadows to reveal intimacy without the glare of bright lights or judgment. In these queer/ed spaces, the subjects in front of and behind the camera pose casually and sensually, secure in the beauty of the image.

Early Career

Sepuya’s interest in photography began in his adolescence when he was initially drawn to the immediacy of the medium and its ability to be copied, shared, and reworked. In the 1990s as a teenager spending time outside of Los Angeles, he gravitated towards pop and alternative magazines, early online image-sharing boards, chatrooms, and rudimentary searches that gathered together early ‘gay’ content. The artist was fascinated by the democracy of these spaces where art, fashion advertisements, pornography, and popular culture mixed. This was an arena dominated by the drive of desire, and of desiring images.

After moving to New York in 2000, Sepuya became connected to queer zine culture, which embraced the mixing of ideas, images, and text in collage-like compositions. Sepuya began publishing his zines in 2005 with the support of a community of fellow artists and platforms like the non-profit organization Printed Matter, which has long been dedicated to the dissemination and appreciation of artists’ books. Without a fixed studio space, he employed the zine as a vehicle to distribute and exhibit his work. Sepuya also made printouts of his photographs that could travel and be handled manually, expanding the boundaries of the studio and revising the perceived preciousness of photographs.

Evolution of the Studio

In his first portrait project, *Beloved Object & Amorous Subject (Revisited) (2005–07)*, Sepuya created photographs in the genre of traditional portraiture busts—picturing his subjects against a stark white background which was in fact his kitchen or bedroom wall. He quickly began to reconsider photographers’ desires to represent the essence of their sitters, and to challenge our faith in photographs to document the “truth” about a subject. The portraits featured close friends, acquaintances, and those whom he wished to know better. In the process, these works became attempts to



Paul Mpagi Sepuya, *Mirror Study for Joe* (_2010980), 2017. Archival pigment print, 45.36 x 34 inches. Courtesy the artist; DOCUMENT, Chicago; team (gallery, inc.); and Vielmetter Los Angeles.

explore and assign meaning to relationships at a time when the interpersonal dynamics were still unfolding. Sepuya has said that this work is about insecurities, failings, and the confusion that lingers between people, as well as how the camera subtly alters these complex relationships.

These portraits were taken in Sepuya’s Brooklyn home (where he resided for 11 years) and set where his sitters felt most comfortable. Often, the chosen location was the artist’s bedroom, which, in an urban space, functions as a setting for both group socializing and private intimacies. In *Self-Portrait Holding Joshua’s Hand (2006)*, the artist draws our attention to the edge of the frame where all that is visible is Joshua’s hand being held by a shirtless Sepuya sitting on his unmade bed. The presumed connection between the artist and sitter is left to the viewer’s speculation. For his part, Sepuya comments, “What I hope for is that the work is formally and conceptually open, accessible, and challenging for viewers and leads them to think about the structures of photography, portraiture, and of queer sociality in new ways.”

From 2010-2011, Sepuya took part in an artist residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem, where he had his first formal

studio in New York. Friends would often stop by and leave objects or remnants of their visits. These comings and goings were increasingly reflected in Sepuya’s studio environment, prompting the artist to photograph this informal collection as a bridge between himself, his friends, and the studio itself. In so doing, unlike other portraitists of the time, Sepuya leaves traces of his previous sitters in the image—creating an archival fluidity to his practice that allows queer narratives and intimate stories to evolve over time.

Construction of the Image

In 2014 Sepuya moved back to Los Angeles to attend graduate school at UCLA, and he began to work in a dedicated studio space that informed the next phase of his practice. Whereas the intimacy of his Brooklyn home studio cultivated the initiation and evolution of relationships, the artist soon realized that the sprawling geography of LA could produce social isolation. This scenario, in concert with the slower pace of his new studio practice, provided Sepuya the room to experiment with different forms of image construction. He subsequently began collaging fragments of imagery onto mirrored surfaces, and eventually included himself, others, and the camera itself into the shared reflection. The mirrors became a way to reorganize his material and contain multiple sites or moments in time within a single image, complicating (and expanding) our apprehension of the subject. In the process, these mirrors activate photography’s artifice as a generative gesture. Employing the camera’s inability to capture “truth” as a newfound platform, Sepuya plays with the architecture of an image where the perceived depth is continuously obstructed by reflections and collage.

Sepuya improvises these photographs within an attendant set of parameters—using mirrors, two cameras, a still-life, a portrait, and the accumulated material in his studio. And while many of the resulting images are, according to the artist, “unsuccessful,” they nonetheless become a means toward an end that is purposefully uncertain at the time of their making. For Sepuya, the studio is a space where “everything is allowed to wander.” In his words, “I love creative ‘ah-ha’ moments when things accidentally find themselves in conjunction and conversation.”

The Dark Room

Sepuya’s studio is a material site of transformation, a place where relationships can be cultivated and reframed, and queer intimacies can unfold within the simultaneous privacy and

exhibitionism of the image. The artist uses black and brown velvet drapery as a backdrop in the series *Dark Room*. For Sepuya, the use of drapery is not an act of concealment, but rather a way to invite the viewer into the space behind the dark cloth. The drapery also serves as a metaphor for the doubling of the photographic darkroom and social “dark room.” Just as an artist first develops and handles an image in the former, the sex club dark room may be a site of primary contact—both images and relationships subject to revision in the light.

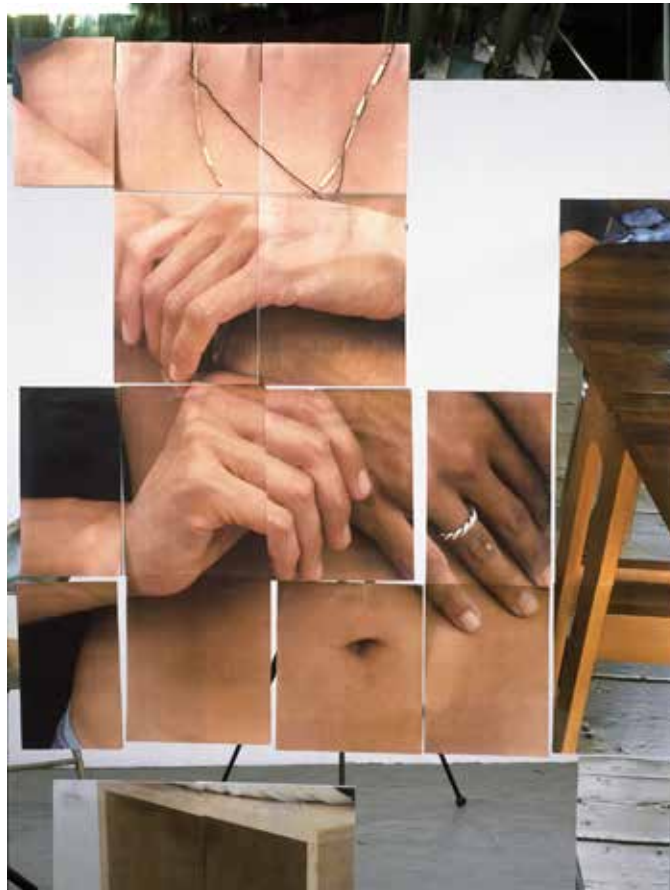
In combination with the drapery, Sepuya also uses mirrors as a surface to make visible the fingerprints and traces of touch that occurred before. As the artist states, “Nothing is hidden... There is the ‘dark room’ spaces, created within the drapes of the black and brown velvet...that space created is a world in its own, and only its darkness, or the black of the camera body and tripod, or my own body, can throw into view the latent traces on the mirror’s surface. We must allow ourselves to privilege darkness, and blackness, as requisites for vision.” Sepuya’s artistic practice is thus one of constructive desire: to photograph, to look, and to touch.



Paul Mpagi Sepuya, *Darkroom Mirror Study (0X5A1531)*, 2017. Archival pigment print, 34 x 51 inches. Courtesy the artist and team (gallery, inc.).

About Paul Mpagi Sepuya

Paul Mpagi Sepuya (b.1982, San Bernardino, California) lives and works in Los Angeles, California. From 2000-2014 he lived in New York City, where he became known for his zine series *SHOOT* (2005–07), and the body of work *Beloved Object & Amorous Subject, (Revisited)* (2005–07). Sepuya participated in artist-in-residence programs at the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, Center for Photography at Woodstock, The Studio Museum in Harlem, and Fire Island Artist Residency. His work is in the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art, New York; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; The Studio Museum in Harlem; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; among many others. Sepuya is currently Acting Associate Professor at the University of California at San Diego.



Paul Mpagi Sepuya, *Study for friendship, D.C.S. and F.C. (2106)*, 2015. Archival pigment print, 48 x 34 inches. Courtesy the artist; DOCUMENT, Chicago; team (gallery, inc.); and Vielmetter Los Angeles.

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