

Paul Mpagi Sepuya (b. 1982, San Bernardino, California, lives and works in Los Angeles) has been selected for the 2019 Whitney Biennial. From 2000 to 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), and participation and collaborations in the re-emergence of queer zines culture of the 2000s. He 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, Whitney Museum of American Art, Guggenheim Museum, The Studio Museum in Harlem, and International Center for Photography, among others. Solo exhibitions include *Dark Room* at DOCUMENT, Chicago and at team (bungalow), Los Angeles (2018), and *Figures, Grounds and Studies* at Yancey Richardson Gallery, New York City (2017). Sepuya was recently featured in *Being: New Photography 2018* at the Museum of Modern Art and *Trigger: Gender as a Tool and a Weapon* at the New Museum (2018).

Paul Mpagi Sepuya is organized for the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis by Wassan Al-Khudhairi, Chief Curator, with Misa Jeffereis, Assistant Curator.

The exhibition tours to Blaffer Art Museum, University of Houston (October 25, 2019–March 14, 2020).

The exhibition and catalog are generously supported by the Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation; DOCUMENT, Chicago; team (gallery, inc.); Vielmetter Los Angeles; Hedy Fischer and Randy Shull; Nancy and Fred Poses; Hunt R. Tackbary; Heiji and Brian Black; and Thomas Lavin. The Artist Talk is generously supported by the Robert Lehman Foundation. Special thanks to Barrett Barrera Projects.

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Related Programs

Artist Talk: Paul Mpagi Sepuya
Thursday, June 27, 6:30 pm

RE: The Body and Movement
Saturday, August 3, 1:00 pm

Artist's Suggested Reading List

Paul Mpagi Sepuya provided the following list of books and essays to share insights into his art and ideas.

Delaney, Samuel R. *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*. New York: New York University Press, 1999.

Dennis, Kelly. *Art/Porn: A History of Seeing and Touching*. Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2009.

Doyle, Jennifer. "Between Friends" in *The Blackwell Companion to Queer Theory*, edited by George Haggerty and Molly McGarry. New York: Blackwell, 2007.

Goldberg, Ariel. *The Estrangement Principle*. New York: Nightboat Books, 2016.

Goldstein, Richard. *James Baldwin: The Last Interview and Other Conversations*. Brooklyn: Melville House, 2014.

Hall, Gordon. "Party Friends" in *Platforms: Ten Years of Chances Dances*, edited by Aay Preston-Myint and Bryce Dwyer. Chicago: Chances Dances, 2015.

Killian, Kevin. "Two Way Street" in *Likeness: Portraits of Artists by Other Artists*, edited by Matthew Higgs. San Francisco: CCA Wattis/ New York: Independent Curators International, 2004.

O'Grady, Lorraine. "Olympia's Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity" in *Art, Activism, and Oppositionality: Essays from Afterimage*, edited by Grant H. Kester. Durham: Duke University Press, 1998.

Winterson, Jeanette. *Art Objects: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery*. New York: Vintage Books, 1997.

Paul Mpagi Sepuya

Paul Mpagi Sepuya makes photographs of friends, artists, collaborators, and himself. Through his portraiture, he challenges the history of photography and deconstructs traditional portraiture by way of layering, fragmentation, mirror imagery, and the perspective of the black, queer gaze. This exhibition brings together work Sepuya has made over the last thirteen years, offering viewers the opportunity to trace connections across his life and practice.

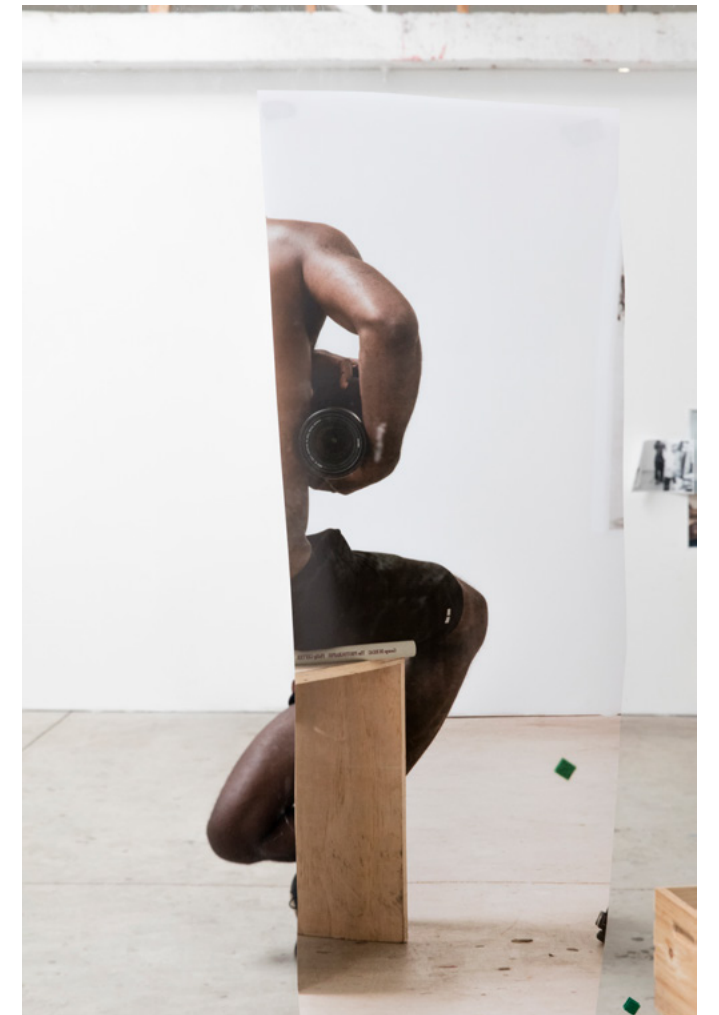
Sepuya's photography is grounded in the studio as a site through which people, objects, and experiences pass. In early work, made during an artist residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem, photographs collect both presences and absences—an orange peel in one photo is the residue of an orange in another. With Sepuya's move to Los Angeles, the studio becomes a more constant, static site through which experiences pass at a slower pace. He experiments with mirrors, finding that with the shifting of a mirror he can radically alter the dynamics of the portrait. All his compositions are constructed analog, without digital manipulation. What you see is what is there.

For Sepuya, the photograph should reveal its own making. The apparatus of photography remains in the picture—tripod, clamps, lenses, and the camera itself. In contrast to the slick artifice of traditional portraiture, Sepuya suggests the human element of picture taking—fingerprints, smudges, dust on the surface of mirrors. He makes photography tactile.

Sepuya employs velvet and draped fabrics in some works, materials often used to create backdrops in mid-century photography studios. He positions the camera as if he were pulling back a curtain, bringing into view what is usually hidden. If photography, in part, is an act of exposure, of bringing forms into light, Sepuya flips that agenda. He keeps his shadows dark, revealing intimacy between men without the glare of bright lights or of judgment. In these queer spaces, black and brown people pose casually, sensually. Neither marginalized, socialized, sexualized, nor scandalized, they are secure in the beauty of the image.

Gallery Guide
Contemporary Art
Museum St. Louis

May 17–
August 18, 2019



Mirror Study (OX5A1317), 2017. Archival pigment print, 51 × 34 inches. Courtesy the artist; DOCUMENT, Chicago; team (gallery, inc.); and Vielmetter Los Angeles.



Audio Tour

Visit camstl.org/audio on a mobile device to hear directly from the artist and curator.

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. During his teens in Los Angeles in the 1990s, he gravitated toward pop and alternative magazines, early online image-sharing boards, chatrooms, and pre-Google searches that grouped together anything considered 'gay.' The artist was fascinated by the democracy of these spaces, where art, fashion advertisements, pornography, and popular culture mixed, dominated by the drive of desire and of desiring images.

In his early photographic practice in New York, the artist was connected to queer zine culture, a medium whose very nature is nonhierarchical, the mixing of ideas, images, and words in collage-like, disjointed compositions. Sepuya began publishing his zines with Printed Matter, a non-profit organization dedicated to the dissemination and appreciation of artists' books. Without a fixed studio space, Sepuya used the medium of a zine as a way to distribute and exhibit his work. The artist also made printouts of his photographs that could travel and be handled, expanding the boundaries of the studio and undercutting the perceived preciousness of photographs.



Darkroom Mirror (_2070386), 2017. Archival pigment print, 32 x 24 inches. Courtesy the artist; DOCUMENT, Chicago; team (gallery, inc.); and Vielmetter Los Angeles.

Evolution of the Studio

In his first portrait project, *Beloved Object & Amorous Subject (Revisited)* (2005–07), Sepuya created photographs within the genre of traditional portraiture, capturing his topless male subjects from torso up against a stark white background. He quickly began to reconsider how to represent the essence of his sitters, and to challenge our faith in photographs to document the "truth" about or a mastery of a subject; since 2007 Sepuya has been complicating this notion. His next portraits featured his close friends, acquaintances, and those whom he wanted to know better. These works were attempts to explore and define relationships at a time when the dynamics were still unfolding. Sepuya has said that overall the work is about insecurities, failings, and confusion that goes on between people, and how the camera allows him to investigate and resolve these relationships.

The portraits were taken in Sepuya's Brooklyn apartment of eleven years. The photos were often set where his sitters felt most comfortable: in his bedroom—the bedroom in miniscule city apartments being a space of both group socializing and private intimacies. In a work like *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 connection between artist and sitter is left to the viewer's consideration. Sepuya has said, "What I do 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 to 2011 Sepuya took part in an artist residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem, where he had his first formal studio in New York. Often friends would stop by and leave objects or remnants of their visits. These comings and goings began to be reflected in Sepuya's studio surroundings, and eventually the artist was photographing this ongoing process of interaction and accretion between himself, his friends, and the studio itself. Unlike many other portraitists, Sepuya returns to his subjects and leaves traces of his previous sitters in the image, bringing a generative 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 acquired a dedicated studio space. Whereas the intimacy of his Brooklyn home studio allowed for the evolution of relationships, the artist soon realized that the sprawling geography of Los Angeles caused social isolation. However, the

slower pace of his new studio practice provided him room to experiment with different forms of image manipulation. Sepuya began collaging fragments of imagery onto mirrored surfaces, and eventually added himself, others, and the camera itself. The mirrors became a way to reorganize his material and contain multiple spaces in one image, complicating our gaze on the subject. The mirrors reveal photography's artifice, its inability to capture "truth"—the perceived depth of the image is obstructed by reflections and collage.

Sepuya improvises his photographs within a set of parameters: he uses mirrors, two cameras, a still life, a portrait, and the accumulated material in his studio. Although many of the resulting photographs are, according to the artist, "unsuccessful"—more often than not they become a means toward an end that is uncertain at the time of their making. For Sepuya, the studio is a space where "everything is allowed to wander. 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 in the privacy of the image. The artist uses black and brown velvety 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 beneath the dark cloth, usually hidden from view. The drapery additionally serves as a metaphor for the doubling of the photographic darkroom and social dark room. Just as an artist develops an image in the photographic darkroom, the sex club dark room is where queer socializing sometimes begins.

In combination with the drapery, Sepuya may also use mirrors to throw into relief 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." Sepuya's artistic practice is one of constructive desire: the desire to photograph, to look, and to touch.



From top: *Study for friendship, D.C.S and F.C.* (2106), 2015. Archival pigment print, 48 x 34 inches; *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.