

'Dark Room' by Paul Mpagi Sepuya at Team Gallery, California

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Studio (0X5A0173), Paul Mpagi Sepuya, 2017, archival pigment print, 75 x 50 inches; 190 x 127 cm, edition of five, Exhibited in Dark Room 2017 (Team Gallery, New York)

Team Gallery hosts a show by L.A. based photographer Paul Mpagi Sepuya's "Dark Room".

The exhibition features a series of Sepuya's new images that is subversive in nature and challenges the history and typecasting of photographic portraiture from a queer, black perspective. Sepuya explores his medium through the dichotomy and balance between concealment and disclosure. To him, the role of the photographer is to be in control of the two factors. He centers his practice on the usage of mirrors which he uses in an undisguised yet experimental manner. The very usage of the mirrors draws the viewers' attention to the images and their artistic approach reflecting through the photographic experience. His approach is to complicate the experience of looking at a subject as he engages the spectators. Through this approach he creates a mystifying effect.

The photographs featured in the exhibition showcase draped black and brown velvets, bringing smoothness to the frame with a complementing roughness of the colors. The material used here plays in the foreground and often in the backdrop of his compositions, alternatively, referring to the cultural associations with sensuousness, femininity and blackness. Situated in the foreground the fabric does its predictive best to hide its ostensible subject, 'the portrait-sitter.' In many of his creations the subject is the creator, Sepuya himself. But in the frames captures, his face is only partly visible and obstructed by the fabric.

In his photographic practice the artist cites his inspiration from Manet's Olympia and follows the work as a template for his own subjects. The painting shows a pulled back curtain revealing the subject through obstruction. And the subject is a reclining and nude white woman who gazes confrontationally, some would say carnivorously towards the viewer and in stark contradiction a barely visible black woman, who is perceived to be a servant, presents the central character, the nude white woman with beautiful flowers. It's the modernist masterpiece that has inspired the photographer to explore the possibility of control even from a marginalized perspective. The point he makes through that is subtle but is powerful, and is about power position itself showing that the role of the pictorially objectified can even possess power. In his work the studio setup plays a major role being the space of the production as much as reflecting the complex and even perplexing temporal index which through the artist vision is elevated and distilled to a single shot of discrete charm.

Sepuya's characterized men are intimate and create inescapable relations between one another; they are friends, lovers and peers. This approach of the artist is powerful and often discomfiting; it's a familiarity that affects a partial erasure of the line between private and public spaces. Paul Mpagi Sepuya (b. 1982) has recently returned to his home town in LA in 2014 from his decade long stay in New York for fourteen years.

The exhibition will run from September 17 through October 22, 2017 at the Team Bungalow at 306 Windward Avenue in Venice, CA.

For details, visit: http://www.teamgal.com/exhibitions/379/dark_room