

The Expanded Photograph

The work of three American artists shows how photography is breaking the limits of the frame and the constraints of the medium to become an artform that is site-specific, as concerned with overall context and the space of its own existence as any other. Is this another instance of the ‘postmedium’ age we’ve all been promised, or merely a recognition that the specifics of the medium are more wide-ranging than we previously thought?

by David Everitt Howe

In one of Paul Mpagi Sepuya’s black-and-white c-print diptychs, *Jake (A Reproduction)* (2010), a hot, well-built and, incidentally, well-hung young man reclines on a bed, naked except for a leather harness wrapped around his chest. Comfortably outstretched, he looks at the lens casually, as if he were a BDSM subject in Robert Mapplethorpe’s *X Portfolio* (1978), taking a break but perhaps feeling a little horny. It’s a pretty casual setup, though still a posed portrait. In another image, *Jake* (2009), the same man, wearing the same harness in the same bed (though now in a leather jockstrap), pays no attention to the camera. Rather, he’s looking at himself in a Polaroid, which he holds up in the air. The Polaroid, as opposed to the person, becomes the subject of the photograph, and it’s perhaps indicative of the way that Sepuya, David Gilbert and Jonathan VanDyke have ‘expanded’ the medium, to borrow a term from Rosalind Krauss. She used it to describe postmodernism’s break with Modernism, in which artists became less concerned with an object of sculpture than its space of existence, its overall context (she called this ‘marking sites’). Synonymising what’s within the frame with what’s outside it, what’s posed with what’s not, Sepuya, Gilbert and VanDyke make the studio itself their subject. While they each identify as queer, homosexuality is more footnote than focus; the artists are more notable for turning photography increasingly site-specific, subjecting it to other forms of artistic production.

Take Sepuya’s *Desktop, April 23, 2010* (2010), a photograph featuring several other photographs scattered randomly across the artist’s

studio desk. Originally shot for editing purposes, it became a work in and of itself only years later, when the artist was in residence at the Studio Museum in Harlem. In lieu of the studio operating as a theatrical space for traditional, head-on studio portraits – his trademark approach for several years – Sepuya trained the camera, literally, on the studio itself. It was a noticeable shift in his practice, such that throwaway photographs, orange peels, paper towels and other assorted items left around became of formal interest, in and of themselves. A portrait of a man seated on the floor is featured prominently

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in *Darren, September 8, 2011* (2011), propped up on a tabletop surrounded by orange peels, a book and several stacks of ephemera. These items were not posed just so, but rather left that way by chance. In *Studio, February 8, 2011* (2011), an orange rests on a table. A chair is pulled out and draped messily with clothing. Tossed on the floor around a roll of paper towels and beat-up black boots, other garments make notable appearance in *Studio, March 2, 2011* (2011), while a c-print, likely fallen from the wall, slumps on the floor in the upper-right-hand corner of the shot, partially cut off. It becomes the focus of another work, *Ryan, February 16, 2011* (2011), where it’s still half on the floor, half on the wall, the model’s body marred by glare where the two meet.

Notable in this body of work is the architecture of the studio, its white walls and polished floor becoming something of a still-life landscape, much like the empty beds Sepuya has had a habit of photographing over the years, such as *Bed, November 29, 2010* (2010),



Paul Mpagi Sepuya,
Darren, September 8. 2011, 2011, c-print, 61 × 46 cm, edition of 3.
Courtesy the artist



David Gilbert, *Small Erotic Picture (Spring)*, 2013,
archival ink jet print, 20 × 14 cm, edition of 5.
Courtesy the artist and Klaus von Nichtssagend, New York



Jonathan VanDyke, *Eddie Saint Mondrian*, 2013,
archival pigment print, 93 × 140 cm, edition of 3.
Courtesy the artist and Scaramouche, New York

little more than a black pillow propped upright on a rumpled surface of sheets. These were done almost as an afterthought. Since Sepuya had no proper studio, he used his bedroom, and specifically his own bed, to shoot the many people he considered friends and lovers – most of them gay – after he graduated from school. These bedroom scenes thus reference, intentionally or not, Felix Gonzalez-Torres's iconic billboards of empty beds, *Untitled* (1991), which served as dramatic memorial to Gonzalez-Torres's lover, who died of AIDS complications that same year. Thus there's something faintly elegiac about Sepuya's work when it's devoid of people. In the absence of bodies, his photographs of empty beds and studios become like indexes of past lives, or more probably, future deaths, something akin to what Roland Barthes would call the photograph's *punctum*, the 'this-has-been' or 'this-will-die' of the human subject – here supplanted by space itself, filled with the inanimate traces of many.

In David Gilbert's work too, the empty studio setup takes centre stage. Unlike Sepuya's, though, which is almost elegantly sparse – like a West Elm catalogue – Gilbert's is manically stuffed with things, a pack rat sent to task, so to speak: scraps of paper, yarn, ripped fabric, leftover canvases and drips of paint, among other things, are turned into dramatic sculptural tableaux, photographed, then blown up large and in full colour, as was the case with his 2013 solo exhibition *Coming of Age* at Klaus von Nichtssagend, New York. It would take almost a whole paragraph to detail everything Gilbert captures in one shot; with *Girlfriend!* (2013), two layers of fabric are pinned to the wall – one torn and gauzy – while a red bucket on the floor is nearly impaled by a long, wooden rod covered in string. On the wall, several paintings rest against each other, as if left there in storage. In *Drama at Sunset (Summer)* (2013), the studio window is lit a brilliant red from outside by a Los Angeles sunset. It looks almost artificial, though it's not, while a clamp lamp, illuminating a far studio wall layered with paper, thread, planks of wood, paintings and other innumerable things, lends dramatic emphasis.

Unlike Sepuya's studio shots, for which the artist left objects untouched, here the studio is both formally arranged and left as is, such that the two are nearly one-and-the-same. As Emily Hall recently wrote in *Artforum*, 'Discerning where Gilbert's deliberately arranged assemblages end and their environs begin can be difficult – indeed, the boundary between the two is so fluid that the act of distinguishing becomes nearly pointless.' In Gilbert's free-for-all studio – which is often compared to the way Brancusi kept his, a place with 'nothing fixed, nothing rigid' – media is so mixed, it's illegible. As Gilbert noted in an email exchange, "While the materials remain readable as fabric, paper, plaster and paint, exactly what they 'are' is much harder to pin down."

Similarly, it's the overlapping and sometimes complex intertwining of studio setup, painting and photography that makes Jonathan VanDyke's work so similarly hard to pin down. Known mostly for his paintings, which slowly drip paint onto the floor with a series of tubes hidden behind elaborately woven or constructed

surfaces, photography has taken a more leading role in his practice, which employs his studio as a performative framework. For *The Painter of the Hole*, his last solo exhibition at Long Island City's Scaramouche, VanDyke laid canvas on his studio floor and invited two dancers, Bradley Teal Ellis and David Rafael Botana, who are a couple, to work with him on a series of choreographed movements in private at his studio, based on their relationship. With paint inserted into their costumes, over time the canvases became

streaked with paint as they performed. The fabric later became both colourful backdrops for a series of photographs and paintings; cut and stitched together into a Harlequin-inspired diamond pattern, they were stretched around painting frames. The photographs were inspired by Bauhaus fibre artist Gertrud Arndt and the private, clandestine photography of George Platt Lynes, who became well known for his melodramatic, homoerotic nude photography during

the 1930s, 40s and 50s. The stills feature VanDyke's friends and colleagues hyperstiled and dressed. In *Eddie Saint Mondrian* (2013), a man is clothed only in white boxer briefs, his body marked with graffitilike scribbles. Wearing what looks like a small, square version of Piet Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie-Woogie* (1943) around his neck, he leans back on a backdrop reminiscent of a Jackson Pollock splatter painting. Pollock makes another appearance as a pair of jeans worn by a seated man in *Cumberland Valley Portrait Studio 1979* (2013). The man is surrounded on all sides by the disorienting folds of Ellis and Botana's paint-smear canvases.

Hung together back-to-back, such that VanDyke's photographs were often placed directly onto the paintings' reverse, the pairings foregrounded just how recurrent a motif the dancers' canvases were, functioning as both utilitarian, behind-the-scenes flooring and formal aesthetic device – studio space, photograph and painting all in one. What's notable is that while VanDyke increasingly abstracts his studio's site-specificity through various processes and mediums, it pops up again and again, hardly able to be ignored. Everything stems from it, including the photographs.

This is hardly relegation. Rather, it just proves that medium-specificity has little place in a contemporary artworld that's 'postmedium', even though that's a little bit of a lie. Mediums aren't going anywhere. The conventions of painting and photography will always be around, waiting to be renovated, redone, readdressed, over and over. Sepuya, Gilbert and VanDyke do this handily vis-à-vis an emphasis on the studio. It's an open-ended, experimental space, where if you didn't quite catch the 'here and now' of it – the building up or the breaking down, the choreographed or unchoreographed thing that happened – it exists in relic form as photographs, which speak to a certain time and a certain place, always contingent. ar

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Paul Mpagi Sepuya: *Studio Work* is on view at Platform Centre for Photographic + Digital Arts, Winnipeg, from 31 May to 11 July.

Jonathan VanDyke: *Video and Performance* opens at Four Boxes Gallery, Krabbesholm Højskole, Skive, Denmark, on 17 May