

ART

## Paul Mpagi Sepuya Breathes New Life Into the Genre of Studio Portraiture

Sepuya's portraits unmask the artifice of studio portrait photography.

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Paul Mpagi Sepuya, "Darkroom Mirror (oX5A1812)" (2017), archival pigment print, 51 x 34 inches (image courtesy Paul Mpagi Sepuya and Team Gallery, inc.)

We live in the age of selfies, when we know nearly everywhere we go in public, a photo of us is likely being captured on surveillance from stores or as a “photobomb” in the background of a stranger’s snapshot. The idea of a formal studio portrait is almost outdated now, at a time when the everyday and the mundane are celebrated in contemporary art and culture.

Paul Mpagi Sepuya’s “A Portrait (OX5A8325)” (2018) shows a seated, androgynously dressed figure, pale skin contrasted against a lush black velvet curtain. The gaze is downward, but still meets the viewer’s. In the background, the curtain hangs haphazardly — the top dangling just below the picture’s frame with the right edge held up by a visible clip. The clip evidences the intricate construct of the scene — the labor and materials required to stage a simple portrait. The image is one of a few in Sepuya’s exhibition, *The Conditions* at Team Gallery, NY, that does not show Sepuya himself. Thus, the clip stands in for Sepuya, metonymy for the artist’s hand. In this context, another work, “Darkcloth (\_2000142)” (2016), becomes an inside joke. It shows the actual hand of the artist, gripping and pulling the bottom of the black curtain, which fills the frame. Towards the center, holding the curtain in place, is a large black clamp — different from the common place clip in “A Portrait (OX5A8325),” but serving the same purpose of scene construction. The hand of the artist meets the hand of artifice. The curtain, which appears in at least 10 of the 14 works, recalls the saying from magic shows, “*show us what is behind the curtain.*” With Sepuya’s images, we simultaneously want to know the trick and be fooled.



*The Conditions*, installation view (image courtesy Team Gallery, inc., photo by Jason Mandella)

Sepuya's photographs breathe new life into the genre of studio portraiture. He is known for staging elaborate scenes that include himself and others partially clothed against a backdrop of his other prints, stacks of books, and other commonplace items he has lying around. Much has been written about Sepuya's deconstruction of the studio space — how his images invite us into the artist's working process, the site of creation. His latest show continues this project, but repeats specific motifs — the black curtain backdrop, the circular aperture of the camera lens, and clips — to unmask the artifice of studio portrait photography and make visible the complex power dynamic between photographer and photographed — a relationship built on consent, trust, and power, similar to romantic and sexual relationships (interesting because many of Sepuya's subjects are friends and lovers). As the title suggests, Sepuya's images reveal a number of parameters for how these relationships are negotiated between himself and his subjects, and between us and the image.



Paul Mpagi Sepuya, “Darkcloth (\_2000142)” (2016), archival pigment print, 32 x 24 inches (image courtesy Paul Mpagi Sepuya and Team Gallery, inc.)

“Darkcloth (\_2000142),” displaying Sepuya’s hand and the clip, appears in a row of other small photographs, each roughly 2½ x 2 feet, featuring the lush black curtain (or similar black screen) as a fully immersive backdrop for tableaus ranging from the sexually explicit — as with a

close-up of Sepuya's face and camera flanked on either side by erect penises — to the suggestive — several show stand-ins for orifices, including the camera lens and a hole cut into a black screen. The final image in the row is more mundane: “Darkroom Mirror (\_2150768)” (2018) depicts the camera on a tripod in the center. Behind it, a pale figure in white sits to the side. Sepuya's arms and hands reach into the frame instructing his sitter on how to hold and press the camera. Both have hands on the device, capturing a sharing of power between the two, a change in the dynamic of studio portraiture. The negotiation of power and space is especially a factor in studio portraiture, where presumably everything is arranged by the photographer, who physically touches the subjects — turn your head this way, no a little more that way — to achieve the desired effect. But “Darkroom Mirror (\_2150768)” suggests a sharing of power. Still directed, Sepuya selects a moment in which he is handing over a bit of his power.



*The Conditions*, installation view (image courtesy Team Gallery, inc., photo by Jason Mandella)

Once spotted, the sharing of power becomes evident in a number of the images:

“Darkroom Mirror (oX5A1812)” (2017) presents a more intimate version of the scene just described. The tripod and camera stand against the curtain, which conceals the nude bodies of two figures — presumably

Sepuya's and another man's, each with one arm and the bottom of their legs visibly peeking out. Their fingers graze each other as they rest atop the camera. Clicking the shutter button becomes like a private shared sexual act. The scene is strikingly personal, even — and perhaps especially — with the nude bodies concealed. What we aren't allowed to see becomes as powerful as what we are shown.



*The Conditions*, installation view (image courtesy Team Gallery, inc., photo by Jason Mandella)

“Darkroom Mirror (\_2070386)” (2017) shows a tableau of interwoven bodies, Sepuya at the center with his camera pointed out at us, blocking his face with another man’s muscular arms wrapped around his shoulders, and head in a way that looks like it must block Sepuya from seeing into the viewfinder. “Drop Scene (oX5A8165)” (2018) presents Sepuya straddling a bench, again his camera pointed toward us and blocking his face. His head leans against the backside of another man who is on all fours, straddling the bench and Sepuya, the other man’s head cropped out of the image. These heavily orchestrated panoramas certainly involved much direction and arrangement of bodies, props, and the camera, evidencing a willingness on the part of the subject to be directed.



*The Conditions*, installation view (image courtesy Team Gallery, inc., photo by Jason Mandella)

In our era of selfie culture, Sepuya's images reveal the subtle power dynamic of consenting to be photographed, particularly in such a heavily choreographed studio portrait. The sexual nature of his images layers the suggestion of a sexual relationship atop this. In both cases, there is a give and take between partners — a sharing, giving, and having of control over the situation. Sepuya's intimate scenes illustrate these nuances, showing us the grace in giving up control at a time when dominating one's self-image is the popular modus-operandi.

*The Conditions is on display at Team Gallery (83 Grand Street, Manhattan, New York) through April 20.*