

STATUS



Paul Mpagi Sepuya

ISSN 2531-3967 € 15.00



9 772531 3967 16

Interview by *Simone Rossi*

*Paul Mpagi
Sepuya*

For 'The Conditions', Paul Mpagi Sepuya's first solo exhibition with Team Gallery in New York, we got the chance to talk to the Los Angeles-based artist about his performative practice, the role of the observer and the *dispositif* of mirror.

Simone Rossi

Let's start from your solo show at Team Gallery, New York, on display through April 13th. The exhibition consists of ongoing projects whose re-articulation allows you to reflect on 'the conditions' of possibility (and thinkability) of your artistic practice. Which criteria did you follow to select the artworks for this exhibition?

Paul Mpagi Sepuya

The works in the exhibition were made between the fall of 2016 and the summer of last year, 2018, and they include the primary subjects of my recent work and themes going back to my earliest photographs. 'The Conditions' begins and ends with portraiture. The site of the studio and the dramatic elements of the photographer's practice in staging and backdrop are interwoven. The photos we chose feature a play with the language of figure and ground, dark-room and dark room; the entanglement with the apparatus, and the mirror as reflection and enclosure. And then of course, keeping those elements in mind, the selection is what José and I really got excited about. The conditions of an exhibition are editing.

SR

The subjects of your photos (in which you're basically the primary actor) are usually scattered in the fragmentation of the monolithic form – their identities become relational. The portraits are composed of collage elements, photographs taken in the past, parts of bodies, often in relation with friends/partners who contribute to shape the identity (and image) of the subject. What relation do you think lies between the real bodies you photograph and their photographic image? Where does the body end and the representation start?

PS

I would say this is a false contrast, when considering my work as a whole. This exhibition is part of a desire to redirect the conversation about my work from fragmentation, as it is a primary concern for the subject of the portrait and our personal and formal relationships. There is only one 'Mirror Study' in this exhibition for good reason. The identity of the friends alongside me are relational, in that they place the viewer on either side of really *knowing*.



PS

*I am somewhere between
my own reflection and the
naming of names that you
may or may not be able to
follow*



SR

The subject of desire really stands out in your photographs; friendship and desire collide in an infinite tension. The time suffers in turn the disruption of the desire, it becomes heterochronic: past and present intertwine in a complex timeline that accompanies the dissipation of the unity of the represented subject. Could we compare your photographic collages to a sort of performance?

PS

Yes, of course. Not because of time, but because of the *conditions* underlying their making. I am very much into the idea of an artist's practice continually collapsing time and reincorporating what elements enter into it. And by extension, that is my own practice, my own studio, my friendships and the artwork that results from all of these.

SR

The way in which you portray yourself as object and subject of your shots problematizes not only your role as artist but also the role of the observer. Who's looking at whom? Boundaries are blurred. Is the observer the one to objectify the camera that takes the portrait and the subject portrayed, or, on the contrary, is the camera objectifying the observer, the subject of the photo and the photo itself? This issue probably needs to be left open.

PS

The portraits look out, the darkroom mirrors are sealed and you can only look in.

SR

You're used to working in studios and portraying people you know, with whom you have some kind of connection. The atmosphere benefits from it, you get an intimacy that is hard to imagine. The artifice is instead masterfully created by the use of the mirror. What does this *mirror-dispositif* mean to you?

PS

For me it's about both questioning the positions of subject(s), photographer(s), viewer(s) by separating them out and more closely entangling them.

SR

In your work, the formal aspects appear as relevant as the meaning conveyed by the photographs. Reflecting on the medium enables you to inquire the queer subjectivity and the blackness with no rhetoric. In this regard, it should be positively noted that the New Museum's recent exhibition 'Trigger: Gender as a Tool and a Weapon', curated by Johanna Burton, has placed your artwork *Darkroom Mirror (OX5A1531)* as the main image. In your photographic investigation, what kind of relationship do practice and theory have?





PS

Theory can be useful to clarify what has happened in retrospect, not to develop a thesis for work such as illustrations. There is a certain kind of rhetoric in what I am proposing about the positions of queerness and blackness as fundamental to the medium.

SR

Finally, I'd like to ask you about the Gaze. An identity issue seems to lay at the core of your artistic research, a question which finds the Self split into two essential polarities: its own image and Otherness. The anachronic *montages*, which are your work's signature, the use of mirrors and draperies, the insertion of the camera itself in the frame, all of this suggests a reflection about the gaze from/for whom the scene is conceived. What about this gaze? Where do we place this shaken 'I', subject and object of desire?

PS

I am somewhere between my own reflection and the naming of names that you may or may not be able to follow.

