



Paul Mpagi Sepuya: *STUDIO WORK*

Having dedicated himself to the making of portraiture within an expanded definition of its possibilities, Paul Mpagi Sepuya's practice has been positioned at the epicenter of a queer renaissance that quickly overtook the digital realm. His spare portraits first received attention from his web presence and zine series — *SHOOT* (2005-2007) — coinciding with what was the burgeoning of a new generation of queer self-publishing and other artist-initiated projects. As such, Sepuya used his medium format film camera (and what he calls the 'constellation' of resulting work) as a tool to record his community and the relationships, both platonic and romantic, from where it has sprung. From that point he has come to question "how photographs, print projects, and online disseminations return from their excursions into the world, enriching and complicating the studio space as site of their origination." In 2010 Sepuya was invited to be artist-in-residence at the Studio Museum in Harlem, where he began incorporating digital photography as an elemental part of his work in order to be able to collapse the space between darkroom and studio. It was in concert with this new immediacy that *STUDIO WORK*, a project that took the form of an artistbook as well as a series of exhibitions, was started. At the outset of his residency, the artist stated "During my residency, I am exploring how the studio environment, as the site of creation, editing, and accumulation affects and frames portraiture, and the performance of portraiture. I am interested in exploring the space's effects on the development of meaning and context to the resulting works."

With *STUDIO WORK*, Sepuya embraces his materials and blurs the site of production by bringing it into the gallery space. He shows us what makes up his work space: books, magazines, papers, laser prints on paper, digital c-prints (8x10, 4x6 and various sizes), medium-format instant photographs, push pins, Post-It notes, bookmarks, bricks, store-bought frames, dried orange peels, bread, glass, succulent plants, terra cotta pots, manila envelopes, wax envelope with contents, pens, pencils, clips, glass water bottle, glass wine bottle, filing boxes, fabric, bubble-wrap. This collection sits atop a pair of tables so that the viewer can play witness to the archive over and over again, seeing new images and varying perspectives each time; they're circling and their meandering eyes reinforcing the non-hierarchical approach to both production and display. The tabletop installation is yet another way Sepuya has been able to marry his concept with presentation in order to offer a view of how he thinks of his practice: in flux, laid bare, messy, inquisitive. This exhibition marks the fifth iteration of the project installed. Though the archive of source

material and photographic production is closed, he incorporates new ways of editing, approaches to display, and working with the material based on previous installation and even his current work or the materials he is dealing with elsewhere for each presentation. This is not the sort of traveling exhibition that falls out of the crate and onto the walls, no fuss / no muss. Rather, it is continually evolving through the act of re-visiting the archive, and making decisions on site when faced with what he's accumulated, produced, cherished, or even forgotten.

As an exhibition and book *STUDIO WORK* is about intimacy and the creative process. It is an investigation of the translation from the environment in which an artist makes his work to the gallery where it is exhibited. It may be argued that many shows have been about this exact topic. Sepuya's approach, however, mindfully conflates the subject / object dynamic so that his studio is not presented as the pristine, sacrosanct, for-artists-eyes-only hideout but rather an inviting place where friends drop by, chat and read, and have their portrait taken. It is a convivial atmosphere; we can see that in the portraits. Furthermore, multiple interpretations of intimacy, or perhaps multiple intimacies, are elicited through Sepuya's work. Beyond the fact that there are clothed and nude portraits, self-portraits as well as those of friends, beyond the fact that there are photographs of the artist's favourite passages of Woolf, among others, we see the whole. Paul shows us the forest for the trees. Or to muddle my metaphor further, his accumulation of studio stuff: books, plants, photos, note pads are all tent poles, and there is shelter provided when we see the series as a whole.

His *Self-portrait, September 2*, is in actuality a photograph of four, framed, previous self-portraits clumped together in a corner on the studio floor, three of which are included in the *STUDIO WORK* book: *Self-portrait, May 27*, where Sepuya faces head on while casually leaning against the blank white wall, snapshots and colour proofs littering the floor and a half-eaten orange in his left hand, his right arm folded across his bare torso somewhere just above his khaki shorts; *Self-portrait, May 24*, (which is actually published as part of a diptych in his book), that shows the artist seated at his desk, looking off in profile, again shirtless, and again surrounded by print-outs of the week's images; *Self-portrait, March 17*, where he is also seated, only this time naked, his right leg folded up between his body and the chair that supports him, the other curled under the chair, his socked foot flush with the floor, his arm is yet again across his torso while his shoulders sit square and his half-hard cock falls forward between his shadowed thighs as he stares directly at the camera. This amalgamation of self-portraits into one meta self-portrait relies on the understanding of place and knowing the artist is as much a subject as the others who enter the room, and even as much as the room itself takes shape through these images. As in *Studio, September 8*: The silhouette of the window frame that casts a slanting shadow along the wall, catching the lower edge of a pinned up portrait of the empty studio, just a cloth resting on a stool. This shadow continues to fall into the real space onto his desk, bisecting the corner to highlight a stack of paper and torn cardboard next to one used Post-It note, bent slightly as though it is trying to remember its former life as a tree and in an impossible act of photosynthesis the pulped and milled and bought and used paper turns itself toward the light. In both the *Self-portrait* and the *Studio portrait* we get the sense of haphazard but somehow deliberate play.

Sepuya's approach to installation is akin to his work in the studio. It is exploratory but deliberate. It is ordered but malleable. It piles up, and is then divested. Each stack of books, every heap of test shots, the layering of manuscripts, working proofs, temporarily framed photographs add up to a landscape of information. Of course we are drawn to the aesthetic, a beauty or a comparison ... someone we are reminded of, another we want to hug or fuck, envy erupts. "Sepuya's subjects are not hunks. Distance from pulchritude constitutes their profundity. Sepuya's stylized, minimalist portraits — emotive yet even-tempered — participate in a new, anti-hunk genre of homoerotic photography, most often found in zines." (excerpted from "Eric's Stubble" by Wayne Koestenbaum, 2012).

Indeed not only are his subjects, though striking in Koestenbaum's description as 'anti-hunk', beautiful in their imperfections, so too are his finished studio portraits something to behold, not for their perfection but lack there-of: the portrait of Ryan for example, includes both the subject and an earlier photo of him leaning against the wall in the background, something other studio portraitist might have cleaned up. In other shots we see the previous day's (week's) (month's) test shoots and print experiments in collage or cut-and-paste pinned to the studio walls, not so much as make-shift backdrops for the current sitter as the accumulation of process. We see this wonderful messiness again and again – scattered frames, loose swathes of fabric, discarded clothing, plants and orange peels, piles upon piles of paper ... the stuff Sepuya includes in the installation as part of *STUDIO WORK* is there for a reason, because it was all there during the making of the body of work, it was in his studio. It is worth noting those who posed for him are not exclusive to this series, since some have appeared in previous bodies of work, and will continue to work with the artist on future projects. This may sound simple, but it is a testament to the artist's creative process, that he is true to his environment, to his method, and to his understanding of how relationships work, even when mediated by the lens.

Studio Visit (s).

Paul uses the phrase “concentric circles” in describing his interest in the diaries of Bloomsbury lesbians. Their overlapping lives and the ways in which their writings overlap fascinate him. I’m not so sure, but his summation (“They are either gardening or about to kill themselves after a break-up”) makes them sound like a good read.

Concentric circles are on my mind whenever I’ve gone up to Harlem to visit Paul in his studio. I picture, incorrectly, Venn diagrams with grade-school blue and yellow circles and the muddy green oval they have in common. I think about the ways that lives intersect because there, tacked up on the walls and scattered and stacked on the floor, are photographs of men (and the occasional lady) who I have seen in bars and on sidewalks for years, have met at one of Paul’s dinner parties, or worked under. There are portraits of friends, people who I want to meet, and guys I’m just beginning to get to know. It’s a bit like a social network mapped out on the wall.

But I say incorrectly because while writing this I looked up “concentric circles” and discovered that they are, in fact, circles that share the same center. They fit inside of one another, like a bull’s-eye. This strikes me as more apt, because more than a mere representation of Paul’s social world, the accumulation and repetition of images of objects and people in the studio seem to have the power to collapse time in a funny way. The potted succulent and shriveled orange peel that sit on the window ledge are the same ones in the framed photograph that leans beside them. When my boots and shirt get cast aside, they end up slumped over a portrait that Paul took of me months before. While I take my pants off, the Beyoncé that we’re listening to is the same Beyoncé that we danced to a few nights earlier. Paul asks me to recreate poses struck a week ago by someone I recognize but don’t personally know. I realize I could listen to Beyoncé and talk about Beyoncé pants-less with Paul all day.

Concentric circles.

I stared to keep a diary faithfully after picking up a volume of Virginia Woolf’s diaries, but that was even before Paul had told me of his interest in all of her friends. Perhaps this is why we are friends? On my first trip uptown to sit for Paul, he read aloud from one of Virginia Woolf’s letters about the prospect of sitting for Cecil Beaton:

Really, it’s worse than being bound in Morocco by Lytton, and read by all the tarts of the moment. Which reminds me, do you know a man of that persuasion called Cecil Beaton – who wants to photograph me, and Osbert will comment up on the portrait in a catalogue; and shall I go and be done? I say no; I say I am living perpetually in Sussex. I say, judging from your style and manner (this is what I say to Cecil Beaton) you are a Mere Catamite. Clive who came in yesterday, dropping with sleep after what I understood was an orgy, confirmed this.

“Catamite,” the second word I’ve looked up while writing this, is old school for total bottom. Paul and I both love how bitchy Mrs. Woolf is here, but her mood is understandable, because, as Paul explained, Vita Sackville-West is dumping her.

My diary entry from another day that I sat for Paul:

Hot again, but the air moved. Harlem is oddly timeless with its mansard roofs and people sitting in folding chairs on the sidewalk. I accidentally took the 1 train, which swings too far over to the west side of the island. Sitting for Paul I felt silly and handsome and like I might actually be interesting. I ended up naked, which I had not planned on.

Ryan Chassee | 2011



EXHIBITION | 30 May - 12 July 2014

OPENING RECEPTION | Friday 30 May - 7 PM

IN CONVERSATION: PAUL MPAGI SEPUYA WITH J.J. KEGAN MCFADDEN | Saturday 31 May - 2 PM

Paul Mpagi Sepuya lives and works in Brooklyn, NY. He has been Artist-in-Residence at the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council's Workspace Residency (2009-2010), the Center for Photography at Woodstock (2010), Studio Museum in Harlem (2010-2011), and most recently this winter at the Hyde Park Art Center, Chicago (2014). His most recent artist publication, *STUDIO WORK*, was self-published in 2012 and the related body of work has been exhibited at The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York City, The Center for Photography at Woodstock, NY, Franklin Art Works, Minneapolis, with its Canadian debut presented by Artspeak, Vancouver and PLATFORM. | paulsepuya.com

Born in New Orleans, **Ryan Chasse** studied English and Film Studies as an undergraduate at NYU. He is currently writing a novel and biking around Brooklyn.

Since 2002 **J.J. Kegan McFadden** has devised a hybridized practice as artist-curator-publisher-writer, orchestrating opportunities for the presentation of contemporary art and publishing with an emphasis on issues related to melancholy, exploratory research, and artist publishing. He has organized exhibitions and screenings throughout Canada and internationally for artist-run, university, and public galleries. The recipient of numerous grants and awards from municipal, provincial, and federal professional funding agencies, including the Major Arts Grant from the Manitoba Arts Council in recognition of his curatorial prowess. Kegan was the Director / Curator of PLATFORM centre for photographic + digital arts in Winnipeg between 2007 and 2012 where he focused on rigorous, thematic group exhibitions, commissioning new work by emerging artists, and intensifying the Centre's publishing program. As a curator, Kegan's interest in contemporary art is focused on divergent photographic practices, queer and performance-based research and presentation, and artist publishing.



Cover: Paul Mpagi Sepuya, *Studio, March 11* (2011, C-print)

Inside: Paul Mpagi Sepuya, *Ryan, May 26* (2011), as seen in installation in progress at PLATFORM

Back: Installation detail, *STUDIO WORK*. Artspeak (Vancouver, B.C.) 26 January - 02 March 2013 photo: Peter Gazendam

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