

HYPERALLERGIC

The Solitude and Sensuality of an Artist's Studio

Zachary Small, February 17, 2017



Paul Mpagi Sepuya, "Self-portrait Study with Roses at Night (1709)" (2015), archival pigment print, 45 x 35 inches, edition of five ((C) Paul Mpagi Sepuya, image courtesy the artist and Yancey Richardson Gallery)

An artist's studio contains more than the materials necessary for work. More often than not, the studio is a site where the personal and the professional collide. Deconstructed, fragmented, and floating, Paul Mpagi Sepuya's photography reveals the solitude and splendors of his

studio practice. The sense of isolation in Sepuya's work is countered by the sensuousness of naked bodies and evidence of recently departed visitors — the ruffling of bed sheets, the bouquet of red roses.



Installation view of *Paul Mpagi Sepuya: Figures, Grounds and Studies* at Yancey Richardson Gallery ((C) Jason Wyche, image courtesy Yancey Richardson Gallery)

On view at Yancey Richardson Gallery, *Paul Mpagi Sepuya: Figures, Grounds and Studies* illuminates the intimate terrains of the artist's studio life. There, we lose all sense of order and time in favor of poetic compositions encouraging freeform association, visual asymmetry, and homoeroticism. For example, "Self-portrait with Roses at Night" presents a collage of fragmented images taped to the artist's studio. Together, these photographs depict the artist's body stretching up in contrapposto behind his camera and tripod. Complicating this picture, however, is a large photo fragment that covers one of the tripod's legs, disorienting our sense of foreground and background. What anchors us in these compositions in flux is the consistent presence of the artist's camera in the middle of his photographs. As a corollary to the artist-subject-viewer trifecta, Sepuya includes the camera's gaze as a fourth interested party. The camera's presence is weighty and haunting, alerting us that we, the

viewers, are interlopers in the artist's intimate space of memories and mementos. Here, the camera acts as a guardian, a monument to Sepuya's interior world which he so proudly displays on the studio's walls.



Paul Mpagi Sepuya, "Figure With Poppies After RBN (2604)" (2015), archival pigment print, 45 x 35 inches, edition of five ((C) Paul Mpagi Sepuya, image courtesy the artist and Yancey Richardson Gallery)

Other times, the camera plays an antagonistic role in Sepuya's studio, such as when it presides over a horizontal and dissected black body (possibly the artist's own) in "Figures with Poppies After RBN (2604)." Here, the artist acknowledges the ways in which the history of photography has discriminated and fetishized black bodies. The camera guiltily looms behind the body, which rests in either repose or defeat, to symbolize photography's ethnographic archiving of it. The

camera becomes a solemn monument to its own sinister history, one of subjugation and gaze.

Sepuya describes his artistic process as one of “constructive desire: the desire to photograph, to look, and to touch.” There is an underlying desire to remember here, to capture the fleeting moments of life and step outside of time and rejigger the past. When Sepuya chooses to cover the camera with fabric or photo fragments, his work becomes extremely intimate and sensuous, freeing himself from the burden of photography’s misanthropy.



Paul Mpagi Sepuya, “Draping (1_959639)” (2016), archival pigment print, 13.33 x 9 inches, edition of five
(C) Paul Mpagi Sepuya, image courtesy the artist and Yancey Richardson Gallery)

In “Draping (1_959639),” we see a hand begin to slip inside the shimmering pearl fabric, but we also see an ambiguous organic shape emerge from behind the fabric. Is it a hand? Is it a penis? Are these shapes from the same body or from two bodies? The ambiguity here is queer, an allusion to ideas of self-love and shared love.

Such passion is communicated more explicitly in Sepuya's portraits. In these photographs, he shows the tools and ephemera of his studio. Filing cabinets, makeshift particle board stools, and stray wires communicate the artist's desire to firmly situate his portraits within the universe of his studio. After all, this intimate setting is where Sepuya has cultivated relationships with his subjects — who happen to be friends, lovers, and acquaintances from his queer community. Sepuya's relaxed portraits are a contrast to the intensity of his brilliant photo collages. In both cases, however, the artist is on a search for intimacy, a special closeness that can only be cultivated, isolated, and extracted from within the studio.

Paul Mpagi Sepuya: Figures, Grounds and Studies *continues at Yancey Richardson Gallery (525 West 22nd Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through April 1.*