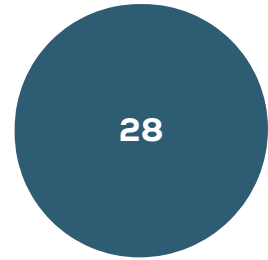




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A Space of Negotiation: Paul Mpagi Sepuya's Photographic Portraits as a Reflection on the Image of Blackness and Nudity

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**abstract:**

This article focuses on the self-portraits of contemporary African American artist Paul Mpaga Sepuya, who specializes in studio photography. In his self-portraits, Sepuya raises the issue of the contemporary representation of the black queer subject caught up in interracial relations. The author analyzes how the photographer blurs the boundary between the subjective "I" and "we," presenting a creative collective where the model-artist, artist-model relationship is defined on the basis of feelings of love and friendship. The author discusses issues of the homoerotic act and the hyper-visibility and invisibility of the racially determined subject.

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## A Space of Negotiation: Paul Mpagi Sepuya's Photographic Portraits as a Reflection on the Image of Blackness and Nudity

The 2019 Whitney Museum of American Art Biennial, put together by curators Jane Panetta and Rujeko Hockley, featured works by 75 artists.<sup>1</sup> There, for the first time, I saw photographs taken by Paul Mpagi Sepuya for the series *Drop Scenes* and *Camera Lessons*.<sup>2</sup> Hung at eye level, the large-format prints portrayed the artists holding life-sized cameras. Although there was no way for me to hear the click of the shutter, I was sure I had just been photographed, as if my presence in the gallery had been noticed. Like Jacques Lacan in his account of a sardine can, I confronted the picture-bound gaze of the Other.<sup>3</sup> To balance out this subject-object relationship, I took a couple of pictures with my cellphone.

In one of my pictures, a shot of *Drop Scene (OX5A1987)*, I saw my reflection in the protective glass covering the work, my figure clearly visible against the black drape hanging in the middle of the composition. The rectangular shape of the phone lined up almost perfectly with the camera in the work. It was only then that I realized Sepuya's photograph itself portrayed a scene reflected in a mirror. My shape was the sum total of the many multiplied reflections. The sense of being observed at the Whitney, however, was illusory. In reality, Sepuya and Goldberg were instead looking at each other, while I was followed by the reflection of the lens.



Ariel Goldberg i Paul Mpagi Sepuya, *Camera Lesson*, 2018, Whitney Museum of American Art, photo Julia Stachura

The artists blurred the boundary of the picture so successfully that it was almost impossible to resist the reflective illusion.

I

I am photo-graphed<sup>4</sup>

Jacques Lacan

Paul Mpagi Sepuya was born in 1982 in San Bernardino; self-defining as a gay African-American man and queer artist – a photographer – he specializes in studio portraits.<sup>5</sup> For over a decade, he was involved with the NYC zine scene and the indie bookstore Printed Matter. His early self-portraits and portraits draw on a particular vernacular,<sup>6</sup> characteristic of early twenty-first-century homoerotic “daily snapshots”<sup>7</sup> – pictures utilizing private dwellings and rooted in everyday life. Since 2010, the artist has been using digital cameras and working with large-format chromogenic prints. Pictures from the *Darkroom* (2016–) series, which this essay is focused on, comprise these “open” cycles, realized in Los Angeles.

Sepuya’s pictures analyzed herein are self-portraits – nudes taken with the artist’s friends and partners in an atelier, blurring the line between the subjective “I” and “we” by depicting a creative collective. Sepuya raises the problem of the contemporary representation of a black queer artist entangled in interracial relationships. The model–artist and artist–model relationships are defined on the basis of love or friendship, subverting the traditional separation of roles that presumes



Paul Mpagi Sepuya, *Drop Scene* (OX5A1987), 2018, 127 x 190,5 cm, Whitney Museum of American Art, photo. Julia Stachura

a discrete model and a discrete photographer. Sepuya's partners are equal contributors, negotiating with him the final shape of their collaboration. As the artist himself mentioned, this negotiation is an indispensable part of the photographic process, wherein the dynamic relationships between he and his lovers and friends are reflected.<sup>8</sup> Sepuya's self-portraits involve carefully calculated play with the photographic medium and the audience, whose presence "in front of the picture" thus becomes problematized.

"The male nude is a minefield, both erotically and politically."<sup>9</sup> Paweł Leszkowicz's words illustrate how closely body art is related to the private and public spheres of life. The male nude, itself a crucible of ideology, religion, taboo, political repression, censorship, and social activism, has for years confused art historians, critics, and institutions. Hence, Kenneth Clark's seminal book *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form*, published in 1956, sought to contain the body within a hermetic, perfect form,<sup>10</sup> hewing close to the classical canon of beauty and normativity. It was only the sexual revolution that swept the West in the 1960s, along with artistic performative practice, that began to explode the rigid framework of the nude.

In 1978 Margaret Walters published *The Nude Male*, one of the first books to position the male nude as an art-historical issue. The scholar stressed that in Western culture the male body has been imbued with political, religious, and moral significance, whereas the female body was traditionally depicted in more intimate situations – in the bedroom, in the artist's studio, or outdoors.<sup>11</sup> The relationships arranged by Sepuya in the pictures making up *Darkroom Mirror* invert this traditional partition. When Sepuya relocated to Los Angeles in 2014, he began filling his atelier with mirrors and black backdrops, which soon became an essential element of his photography.<sup>12</sup> Many critics have pointed out that the complication of studio space they provided turned Sepuya's pictures into something of a visual puzzle.<sup>13</sup>

2017's *Darkroom Mirror* (2090183) depicts the artist photographing himself in a mirror, with the hand of his partner also in the shot. The half-naked Sepuya, clad only in his underwear, is situated center frame. The picture shows him from the hips up, against a black curtain. While the photographer's right eye looks through the viewfinder, the left remains shrouded in shadow. The viewer cannot know whether it is closed so as to allow the other eye to focus, or still observing the scene being photographed. The prominently displayed lens serves as the artist's metonymic eye. The rectangular body of the camera enters into dialogue with the vertical format of the photograph, creating a sort of picture-in-picture. Furthermore, the artist holds the camera in his right hand, wrapping his fingers around it. The thumb, index and middle fingers create a bodily frame around the lens, completed by the upper edge of the camera body. This hyper-prominence of the camera elevates it to the status of an iconic medium, framing the work and being framed within it. The lens, clearly protruding beyond Sepuya's index finger, transcends the inner frame produced by the gesture of the artist's hand.

The portraiture convention employed here implies the concealment of the penis, by both the fabric and the framing. The naked male body, according to Walters, is typically associated with phallic power, even when the physical penis is obscured by either a fig leaf or a piece of fabric.<sup>14</sup> In his 1977 book *La signification du phallus*, Jacques Lacan tied the figure



Paul Mpagi Sepuya, *Darkroom Mirror* (\_2090183), 2017, archival pigment print, ed. 5 + 2AP, 81,3 x 61 cm, courtesy of the artist and DOCUMENT Gallery, Chicago as well as Susanne Vielmetter, Los Angeles

of the phallus to the symbol of difference – by way of the mirror stage, a child enters the symbolic order, its language and culture, constituting itself as an independent subject and adopting sexual difference. The phallus (or lack thereof) becomes a criterion defining the subject's construction and its ability to inhabit certain cultural contexts and social roles.

The history of the visual representation of black men (from a white perspective) also compels us to treat the phallus as a criterion of racial discrimination. In his seminal text *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon describes the disrupted self-image of the black subject, projected by white, Western-centric culture, in his critique of the words of French journalist Michel Cournot: "No longer do we see the black man; we see a penis: the black man has been occulted. He has been turned into a penis. He *is* a penis."<sup>15</sup>

Robert Mapplethorpe's *Man in Polyester Suit* (1980) could be considered an illustration of those words. The objectification of the black man, effected by the figuration of his sex organ, turns him into a disembodied Other, threatening the white male subject, whose phobias are located in the hyperbolized penis.

Although not explicitly visible, in Sepuya's photographs the penis is metaphorically present in the form of the protruding camera lens. In the African-American photographer's work, the eye, the act of looking, and the act of photographing are inextricably linked to the symbolic sexual act, male-centric power, and domination. The complexity of these relations is compounded by the fact that Sepuya portrays an interracial coupling. Fanon's argument suggests that the men ought to be separated by a historically determined hierarchy, presuming the subordinate position of the black body; however, the male-male relationship is portrayed here from a queer perspective, while the poses adopted by the two figures in the picture imply an intimacy typical of lovers.

Given the contrast between the artist's skin color and the almost radiant whiteness of the underwear, the viewer's gaze is

directed toward the bottom of the frame. There, in the lower right corner, the hand of a white man enters. The fingers splayed, the hand touches the artist's body, affirming its presence and corporeality. The gesture refers to the Biblical motif of the incredulity of Thomas, most famously depicted by Caravaggio. Sepuya's self-portrait thus situates itself at the intersection of Christian iconography, the visual tropes of Calvin Klein underwear ads, and the portraiture of Barkley L. Hendricks.

The photographer's muscular body stands out against the uniform backdrop. The portrayal is incredibly tactile, which is further emphasized by the prominent veins on the partner's hand, the artist's chest hair, the patch of reflected light on his forehead, and the taut abdomen and arms. The presence of traces on the surface of the mirror – clustered in the upper part of the photograph, near the left-hand edge of the field of view – implies a body print (index), as well as body heat, sweat, and movement. But no smudges or marks appear anywhere near the lens; these are seemingly unable to disturb the vision of the mechanical eye, which, by capturing a mirror image, pictures a certain distortion anyway. The photograph thus contains two separate manifestations of presence: the Barthesian "that-has-been" – the remaining traces – and the "that-is" embodied by the partner's hand.<sup>16</sup> The clean portion of the mirror, meanwhile, insinuates that no intermediary stands between the photographer and the viewer, and that the audience is what that the lens (and the photographer) is taking a picture of. The role of the model, however, has been appropriated here by the photographer and his partner – making them both the subject and object of the gaze. What's left for the viewer – to look into the mirror? On the one hand, the presence of a lens (seemingly) turned toward the audience presumes our inclusion in the photographic performance. On the other hand, however, the implied position of the viewer resembles that presumed by Jan van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait* (1434) or Velázquez's



*Las Meninas* (1656), as analyzed by Michel Foucault in *The Order of Things*, where the philosopher argues that the position of the viewer is occupied by the Spanish royal couple.<sup>17</sup> The ensuing uncertainty of the viewer's status encourages further examination of the dynamics of the artwork–audience relationship.

Sepuya's self-portrait can also be associated with Lacanian narcissistic identification, which involves the consolidation of one's own image performed within the act of looking – stepping outside the sphere of being unconscious of one's body and image, the black backdrop behind the characters might stand in as its potential figuration. The artist seems to embody the Lacanian dictum of "I am photo-graphed." In this context, Ruth E. Iskin argues that the separation of "photo" and "graphed" mirrors the split into the self and Other that emerges as the subject forms itself through the gaze in the mirror.<sup>18</sup> By taking a self-portrait, and thus "photo-graphing" himself, Sepuya realizes the subjective-objective position he inhabits. It is a representation of a model of identity for which the camera – a working tool – becomes an instrument for the emancipation of an African-American photographer. To paraphrase Stuart Hall, we are confronted with a picture of the "Black Narcissus,"<sup>19</sup> problematizing the universalizing pattern of distinguishing between self and Other.

The 2017 photograph *Darkroom Mirror* (\_207386) considerably complicates the relationship under discussion. In the frame are two men – Sepuya and his partner – pictured from the waist up. The artist holds the camera, with the lens once again placed center frame. Sepuya's partner remains unidentified – his face is turned toward the black fabric and only his bushy hairstyle may provide a clue to his identity. The man holds the Sepuya in a firm embrace, with his arms around his neck and his hands over his face. With his eyes covered, the photographer cannot look through the viewfinder, and is thus prevented

from seeing the shot he lined up. Because his vision is physically blocked, the camera lens remains the sole source of gaze in the picture.

Use of the black backdrop helped the photographer abstract the figures in the pictures from the space of the studio and portray them more as sculptures. The visible arrangements of bodies and limbs bring to mind *Laocoön and His Sons* or Bernini's *The Rape of Proserpina*. These inter pictorial associations give rise to several readings of the depicted embrace, unfolding across different semantic registers. On the one hand, it may connote intimacy between two queer men; on the other, it may be considered a demonstration of strength, erotic domination, and physical struggle against an enemy (*Laocoön*) or an oppressor (*Pluto*). Sepuya crafts something in the vein of the Warburgian *Pathosformel*, a pathos formula, denoting violent emotion expressed through specific gestures.<sup>20</sup> The picture's dramaturgy is further emphasized by the sharp twist in Sepuya's partner's neck and his close embrace of the artist, connoting fetishes like erotic asphyxiation. In this particular context, the first part of the work's title finds new meanings. Written as two words, the phrase denotes a place where photosensitive film is developed; written as a single word, the term implies the darkened room usually located at the back of a club or bar. The two men, however, are not hiding in the dark, but distancing their bodies from the curtain hanging in the back. Thus, Sepuya emphasizes the significance for contemporary photography of representing homoerotic relations from the



Paul Mpagi Sepuya, *Darkroom Mirror* (\_2070386), 2017, archival pigment print, ed. 5 + 2AP, 60,9 x 81,2 cm, courtesy of the artist and DOCUMENT Gallery, Chicago as well as Susanne Vielmetter, Los Angeles

perspective of a black artist.

The pattern is similar in another 2017 picture, *Darkroom Mirror* (*\_2070527*), depicting three men reflected in a mirror. Sepuya kneels in the center of the composition, while the others flank him on either side, their faces cropped by the edge of the frame. The one on the right emerges from behind the black curtain. There is a clear contrast between the texture of the fabric, highlighted by a prominent fold, and the man's white torso. He covers the photographer's eye and also seems to be covering his mouth, while the man on the left has his hand clasped around Sepuya's neck. While the photographer's head leans blissfully into the hand of the partner on the right, his eyes are detached from the viewfinder. Sepuya's pose, together with the men standing on either side, suggests oral sex. Here, however, the lens stands in place of the penis, a symbolic replacement. The photographer's hands are wrapped around the camera, stabilizing the image, but his index finger is raised, clearly uncoupled from the eye of the lens. The finger points at an intriguing element of the picture: leading our eyes toward two diagonal traces on the mirror and the fold in the fabric revealed by the light. Along with the fold, the traces form the shape of an arrow or three rays directed toward the artist's head, forming a peculiar halo and simultaneously connoting a metaphorical ejaculation.

Sepuya once again links the act of photographing with a sexual act. Shrouded in darkness, the studio serves both as a refuge for people of color and a stage where the carnal performance



Paul Mpagi Sepuya, *Darkroom Mirror* (*\_2070527*), 2017, archival pigment print, ed. 5 + 2AP, 81,3 x 61 cm, courtesy of the artist and DOCUMENT Gallery, Chicago as well as Susanne Vielmetter, Los Angeles

plays out before our eyes. We might paraphrase Audre Lorde and assert that here, the erotic becomes an artistic manifesto, an instrument of exercising power and reinforcing social bonds.<sup>21</sup> Sepuya's queer view of the typology of homoerotic photography is clearly subversive in character, especially when set against the picture of non-heteronormative black men conjured by Robert Mapplethorpe in his 1986 series *Black Book*.

This comparison was first set up by the Guggenheim Museum for the *Implicit Tensions: Mapplethorpe Now* retrospective exhibition (June 24, 2019 – January 5, 2020). Striving for perfection, the classic nudes from *Black Book* show black models as beautiful objects, using close-up, fragmentation, and silhouetting them with sharp lighting or against monochrome backdrops. In his 1991 critical essay *Looking for Trouble*, Kobena Mercer emphasizes that this fetishization and the position of viewer projected by Mapplethorpe presume a position of dominance or the exercise of power/control over the models, who become the objects of our gazes and desires.<sup>22</sup> The scholar adds that by assuming this position, viewers can confront their own fantasies, sexual and racial.<sup>23</sup> The critical attitude of the viewer implied by Mercer also reveals the other side of the racial problem – namely whiteness, which he believes should also be worked through, due to the particular privileges and models of representation of white people in art.<sup>24</sup>

Mercer stresses that while Mapplethorpe does indeed restore black men – “invisible men,” to paraphrase Ralph Ellison – to visibility, his representation of them is fetishizing and riddled with stereotypes. In the 1990s, shortly before his death,



*Implicit Tensions. Mapplethorpe Now* exhibition, Guggenheim Museum, New York, September 2019, photo Julia Stachura

Mapplethorpe's works were critiqued by black artists such as Rotimi Fani-Kayode and Lyle Ashton Harris, as well as Glenn Ligon, whose *Notes on the Margin of the Black Book* (1991–1993) was a direct response to Mapplethorpe. Sepuya, the youngest of the artists featured in the exhibition, provided the most current artistic commentary on the controversial series. Writing about the work of the African-American artist, Lanre Bakare went so far as to provocatively title his article "A new Mapplethorpe?"<sup>25</sup>

The presence of Sepuya's nudes alongside the photographs from *Black Book* accentuated some formal similarities – dramatic lighting, poses reminiscent of antique sculpture, uniform backdrops – and identified a handful of stark differences, the most fundamental being the fact that Mapplethorpe observed his models in the studio, whereas Sepuya was actively involved in the photographic performances. A non-heteronormative black man, he simultaneously problematizes his own visibility by using specific arrangements of the camera and the partners accompanying him. Sepuya utilizes the model of the gaze armed with a camera lens,<sup>26</sup> typical of the avant-garde, but does not embody the Umbo-photojournalist, the "man with a camera," and instead compiles studied self-portraits with mirror selfies.<sup>27</sup> Together, the mirror and the camera serve as instruments of narcissistic identification; they attract (and appeal to) the figures in the pictures. It is around them that queer relationships form, later translating into the depicted impression of sexual tension, sexual arousal, and, consequently, gratification.

## II

I was responsible not only for my body but also for my race and my ancestors. I cast an objective gaze over myself, discovered my blackness, my ethnic features; deafened by cannibalism, backwardness, fetishism, racial stigmas, slave traders, and above all, yes, above all...<sup>28</sup>

Frantz Fanon

In Frantz Fanon's telling, the black subject's identification is based on its close relationship with the image of it generated by the white gaze. The figure of the black subject, alongside its attendant cultural clichés, sits right in front of the white subject's eyes, formed into a transparent filter, a screen. In *Seeing Through Race*, W. J. T. Mitchell posits that race is a medium.<sup>29</sup> It is something we see through, as if it were a frame, window, screen, or lens. Drawing on notions first developed by Georges Didi-Huberman, we could say that race is both visible and visual, that it refers to the figural tradition and, as such, transcends text.<sup>30</sup>

All of these claims ultimately reinforce the argument that the line between the white and black subject – the screen – affects both the optics and the corporeality of both subjects, and, furthermore, is entrenched in discourse. As Stuart Hall concludes, race is a social category.

W. E. B. Du Bois defined race as a veil mediating between members of a given race and the white subject.<sup>31</sup> The phrase "born with a veil," which Du Bois used to describe the black subject, has a counterpart in Polish in the form of "born in a cap," which denotes individuals believed to be particularly lucky. The phrase also connotes uniqueness and otherness, marking an infant born in the amniotic sac as different from one lacking the transparent crown. On the one hand, the Du Boisian veil shields the black subject, making it invisible, but on the other grants it "second-sight," a dual vision of the subject driven by racial determinants, along with a "double-consciousness" and the



presence of two souls in a single body.<sup>32</sup> Through the presence of the veil, the black subject realizes the constructed, artificial nature of both blackness and whiteness, and is simultaneously invisible and seen. But when it is seen, then it is through the eyes of others, imposing their perspective and building their narrative over it.

In her book collecting the key visual theories formulated by Jacques Lacan, Kaja Silverman describes a screen of blackness, holding “legends, stories, history, and above all historicity.”<sup>33</sup> As conceived by Lacan, the screen is a locus for cultural codes and clichés mediating between the looking subject and the object.<sup>34</sup> For the purpose of analyzing Cindy Sherman’s *Untitled Film Stills* photo series, Silverman refers to it as a “stain,” a “mask,” or a “thrown-off skin.”<sup>35</sup> All of these terms, like the many dualities brought on by the existence of the veil, suggest a sort of artificiality or even redundancy.

In his work, Sepuya has repeatedly explored the opposition between the subject’s visibility and invisibility. The problem is examined by the 2017 *Darkroom Mirror (OX5A1812)*, which will serve here as a link between the aesthetic of the encounter, explored earlier in this essay, and the collective fragmentation of the subject entangled in contact with the black fabric.

The tripod-mounted camera shown in the photograph is held by a white hand and a black hand, with the black curtain as the background. The man on the left parts the fabric, revealing his knee, some of his torso, and the



Paul Mpagi Sepuya, *Darkroom Mirror (OX5A1812)*, 2017, archival pigment print, ed. 5 + 2AP, 129,5 x 86,3 cm, courtesy of the artist and DOCUMENT Gallery, Chicago as well as Susanne Vielmetter, Los Angeles

arm reaching for the shutter button. The artist's hand enters the frame on the right-hand edge of the image field, also clutching the camera. On the left side of the mirror reflecting the scene, fingerprints can clearly be seen, superimposed on the body of the white man. This produces the impression that it is out of focus, or blurred, and thus in stark contrast to the tripod and lens, sharp and sat center frame.

Here, we are once again dealing with the portrayal of a collective interracial subject, fused in the course of the creative act. The hand gestures of the two men may connote competition over who gets to press the shutter first, and thus who takes the picture. What kind of photograph is being taken by the two men? Pointing the camera at the audience implies a second picture – embodied by the pose we usually strike when we feel the mechanical eye of the camera lens on us. Sepuya plays with Lacanian *regard*, the gaze from the perspective of an object, visually rousing our desires.<sup>36</sup>

The camera serves as a sentinel, seemingly saying: "I see you." What we must remember, however, is that the scene itself is a mirror reflection. The gaze of the camera's eye is aimed at the surface reflecting the image we are looking at. In this context, Silverman argues for a "white look," in which the visions of both the observed and the observer are preceded by screens.<sup>37</sup>

A similar issue is raised by Nicolas Mirzoeff, when paraphrasing Fanon: "He feels fixed, as if photographed by what he calls 'the white gaze'. Under that gaze, he cannot be seen as himself but only as a set of clichés and stereotypes."<sup>38</sup> In Lacanian theory, the camera is the source of the photograph's visibility; by replacing the mirror, it can become a matrix of identification: "I am photo-graphed." In the case of Sepuya's photographs, that matrix is exposed and duplicated, situating the screen not just between the looking subject and the picture, but also appearing on the other side, between *le regard* and us. Thus, the viewer participates in a double mediation. Only seemingly



observed by the camera's watchful eye, his perception is unable to reach the subject visible in the photograph on account of the presence of the double screen formed by the mirror and the reflection it produces. On the one hand, this stands as a critique of the aggressive look, the gaze, penetrating the objectified subject, stemming from the lack of direct access to the photographed scene; on the other hand, it is a new image of the black subject whose identity, entangled in romantic and creative relationships, is no longer disrupted by external vision. The looking camera is thus activated, becoming a witness to the scene, whereas touch charges it with capturing reality. The lens/object becomes the literalized object-reason for the desire, *le regard*, watching the characters in the scene.

In Sepuya's photographs, the screen is hyper-visible and separates the photographer from the observer. Like the veil, it is translucent, because although we see the artist and his partners, we cannot (notionally) touch them. The construct seems a thick, transparent, but "horribly tangible"<sup>39</sup> sheet of glass through which people can see but cannot hear or touch one another.

In the *Darkroom* series, the mirror disappears, and the black curtain takes up the central position in the pictures. 2017's *Dark Room Model Study (OX5A2919)* depicts parts of the body against the black curtain: from the top – the right arm of a white man, his right leg, and the left arm of a black man (Sepuya himself). The configuration of the limbs foregrounds three lines: the diagonal, marked by the forearm parting the curtain at the top; the vertical drawn by the bent leg; and the horizontal of the outstretched arm crossing the bottom of the picture. The lines come together inside the photograph to form an unfinished, fragmentary frame.

If we were to draw on the meanings that art history has ascribed to particular directions, vertical lines might connote erectile masculine power, whereas horizontal ones are traditionally associated with the feminine.<sup>40</sup> The white body is pictured in a supported position – the leg forms a pedestal for the outstretched arm, and sharp natural light is cast on the white arm and the upper part of the curtain. Such a distribution of emphases brings to mind the works of Baroque masters, Caravaggio chief among them, whose distinctive theatricality Sepuya seems to invoke in his photographs.

This fragmentary self-portrait depicts two key gestures: the parting of the curtain at the top of the picture and the grasping of the ankle at the bottom. Bodies emerging from the darkness, hair visible on white skin, and the gleaming arm of the artist are all portrayed in an incredibly tactile manner. Likewise, the curtain, made of heavy, opaque fabric, collects dust and absorbs sweat, becoming a repository for traces of time and flesh. One of the curtains is hung at the back, while the other is parted by the seated man. His body thus straddles two zones: the realm of visibility, manifested by the stage, and the realm of seclusion, embodied by the backstage. Sepuya's position, meanwhile, indicates detachment from the depicted scene, as his arm enters it from outside the frame.

There is a clear difference between the masculinized, muscular arm of the photographer, forcefully grasping the other man, and



Paul Mpagi Sepuya, *Darkroom Model Study (OX5A2919)*, 2017, archival pigment print, ed. 5 + 2AP, 129,5 x 86,3 cm, courtesy of the artist and DOCUMENT Gallery, Chicago as well as Susanne Vielmetter, Los Angeles

the delicate, slender arm parting the fabric of the curtain. Additionally, the white man's fingers are arranged into a very unnatural gesture – only his thumb seems to be grasping the curtain, while the remaining fingers are merely displayed against it. If we were once again to refer to gestures employed by the old masters, the theatrical gestures in Sepuya's photograph seem a distant echo of Bronzino's mannerist extravagance. Near the top edge of his 1545 painting *Venus, Cupid, Folly and Time*, two similar gestures can be seen against a hanging backdrop. The figure in the background, in the top left corner, performs a gesture identical to the one featured in Sepuya's photograph – lightly touching fabric. Time, meanwhile, his muscles flexed to their limit, struggles with a length of lapis lazuli-colored cloth.

"Time and love" is perhaps the simplest yet most apt description of Sepuya's self-portraits. The visible portions of the partners' bodies tell us little – they are merely legs, arms, and torsos. For the photographer, however, this flesh is a record of mutual histories and traces of friendships – they are repositories of memory. Although foregrounded for everyone to see, the intimacy captured in Sepuya's photographs has its limits; the studio marks the threshold of his realm.

The 2016 *Darkroom* (\_MG\_9226) balances somewhere between intimacy and theatrical staging. The picture can easily be read as a thoughtful self-portrait alluding to such classics as Jacques-Louis David's *The Death of Marat* (1793). The artist pulls back the curtain to reveal a white man lying on the floor, whose indifferent face, slightly parted lips, and wide-open eyes suggest a dead body. It might seem that the audience is witness to a death scene, or its staging, to be more precise. The man's gaze is absent, his chest is naked, while the unnaturally posed hand, touching the edge of the photograph, symbolizes the line between life and death. The hand of the man in the background, portrayed in the upper portion of the picture, reveals the studio

and a small, barely visible fragment of mirror hanging on a white wall, indicating that we are dealing with the many planes of Sepuya's atelier. The first is hinted at by the artist himself, as his hand enters the shot from outside the frame; the body of his prone partner is somewhere between the stage and a backstage area, the existence of which is implied by the hand of the man in the background. Like a director controlling a *mise-en-scène*, Sepuya preserves within the confines of the shot a photographic performance unfolding over time.<sup>41</sup> The meticulously draped curtain in the center of the shot serves two functions: it fills space and partitions the atelier into two realms – one visible to the audience, and another available only to the persons portrayed in the photographs; it is a metaphor for the veil, shaping the visibility of the racially defined subject of the work.

Within the context of the above deliberations, particular significance ought to be attached to the "experience of blackness," analyzed by Darby English in terms of the (in)visibility of African-American artists.<sup>42</sup> The scholar cites David Hammons' 2002 site-specific piece *Concerto in Black and Blue*, at the Ace Gallery in New York, as an example of an artist's isolation (alienation) from their own work, driven, on the one hand, by interpretations based around racial determinants, and, on the other, by the problem of black artist representation.

Drawing on the work of Kobena Mercer, English points out the simultaneous negotiation of specific questions related to representation: how to shape



Paul Mpagi Sepuya, *Darkroom* (\_MG\_9226), 2016, archival pigment print, ed. 5 + 2AP, ed. 5 + 2AP, 33 x 25,4 cm, courtesy of the artist and DOCUMENT Gallery, Chicago as well as Susanne Vielmetter, Los Angeles

identity and how to depict presence within the context of its lack, generated by historical circumstances determining the (in)visibility of the black subject.<sup>43</sup>

In Sepuya's work, the weight of representation is transferred onto the fabric, implying the Du Boisian veil, a screen within the context of the medium, and, most of all, blackness. The material, regulating the passage of light in the studio, may itself become a matrix of racial discrimination on account of the formal devices employed by the photographer, such as emphasizing the stark contrast between skin tones or implying an opposition between the active and the passive. But do Sepuya's self-portraits actually express the absolute and Manichean white man/black man binary that Fanon wrote about? Does the artist reinforce the image of the alienated Other, the internally torn subject that can never be made whole by an external gaze?

If we were to take a closer look at the *Darkroom Mirror* and *Darkroom* series, the answer to those questions seems obvious: no. Mercer classifies the emancipatory strategies that aim to liberate artists from associating black bodies with objects or an internally sundered Other as "critical appropriation" or "refiguration."<sup>44</sup> The scholar offers the work of Nigerian-British photographer Rotimi Fani-Kayode as an example of such a practice; Fani-Kayode's works, touching on interracial themes, elude the traditionally conceived subject/object dichotomy typical of Mapplethorpe's works, among others.<sup>45</sup> Like Sepuya's, Fani-Kayode's pictures espouse a subversive interpretation of the photographer-model relationship, replacing the image of the black-skinned model isolated in the space of the studio with representations of their own bodies, sharing atelier space with those posing for them. While Sepuya draws on the rich repertoire of the old masters, the history of photography, and homoerotic aesthetics, and utilizes specific gestures, poses, and lighting arrangements, his self-portraits are by no means an extension of the work of Caravaggio or Mapplethorpe. They are

rather a point of reference, a pattern that the photographer uses to devise a new equation. His works emphasize the increasingly important question of the visibility of black artists, both institutional and public. Using photography to tell stories of love and desire, male relationships, and the medium rooted in these studio encounters, Sepuya seeks to write his own history. The feelings emerging in the atelier, the joint negotiation of the balance of power between the partners, and the artist's drive to expose the mechanisms of representation – all serve to build the image of a contemporary African-American photographer.

- 1 Rujeko Hockley and Jane Panetta, *Curatorial Statement* (New York City: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2019), <https://whitney.org/exhibitions/2019-biennial> (accessed May 1, 2020).
- 2 The Camera Lessons series was shot in collaboration with Ariel Goldberg, Clay Kerrigan, and A. L. Steiner.
- 3 Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York–London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998), 95–97.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 106.
- 5 Wassan Al-Khudhairi, *Paul Mpagi Sepuya* (St. Louis, MO: Contemporary Art Museum; New York City: Aperture, 2020).
- 6 David Velasco, "Project: Paul Mpagi Sepuya," *Artforum*, March 2019, [www.artforum.com/print/201903/project-paul-mpagi-sepuya-78670](http://www.artforum.com/print/201903/project-paul-mpagi-sepuya-78670) (accessed May 5, 2020).
- 7 Lanre Bakare, "A new Mapplethorpe? The queer zine legend reinventing the nude," *The Guardian*, April 28, 2020, [www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2020/apr/28/paul-mpagi-sepuya-mapplethorpe-queer-zine-legend-who-shoots-faceless-portraits](http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2020/apr/28/paul-mpagi-sepuya-mapplethorpe-queer-zine-legend-who-shoots-faceless-portraits) (accessed January 8, 2021).
- 8 Sarah Moroz, "Paul Mpagi Sepuya Uses Portraiture to Explore Homoerotic Desire," *i-D*, October 2018.

- 9 Paweł Leszkowicz, *Nagi mężczyzna. Akt męski w sztuce polskiej po 1945 roku* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, 2012), 11.
- 10 Published in Polish in 1998 as: Kenneth Clark, *Akt. Studium idealnej formy*, trans. Jacek Bomba (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 1998).
- 11 Margaret Walters, *The Nude Male: A New Perspective* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1979), 13.
- 12 Al-Khudhairi, *Paul Mpagi Sepuya*, 17.
- 13 See: "'Dark Room' by Paul Mpagi Sepuya at Team Gallery, California," *Blouin Artinfo*, September 2017; Arthur Lubow, "What's New in Photography? Humanism, MoMA Says," *The New York Times*, March 2018; Jared Quinton, "Paul Mpagi Sepuya," *Artforum*, April 2018; Martha Schwendener, "Paul Mpagi Sepuya," *The New York Times*, March 2019; Amelia Abraham, "Paul Mpagi Sepuya. The Photographer Conjuring Digital Cruising Culture," *Another Man*, March 2020.
- 14 Walters, *The Nude Male*, 8.
- 15 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 147.
- 16 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York City: Hill and Wang, 1982).
- 17 Michael Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Routledge, 2018).
- 18 Ruth E. Iskin, "In the Light of Images and the Shadow of Technology: Lacan, Photography and Subjectivity," *Discourse* no. 19, vol. 3 (1997), 48.
- 19 Stuart Hall, "The After-life of Frantz Fanon: Why Fanon? Why Now? Why *Black Skin, White Masks*?" in: *The Fact of Blackness: Frantz Fanon and Visual Representation*, ed. Alan Read (Seattle: Institute of Contemporary Arts, Bay Press, 1996), 21.
- 20 Aby Warburg, *Atlas obrazów Mnemosyne*, trans. Paweł Brożyński and Małgorzata Jędrzejczyk (Warsaw-Kraków: Narodowe Centrum Kultury, Fundacja SPLOT, 2016), 7.
- 21 Audre Lorde, "The Uses of Erotic: The Erotic as Power," in: *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, eds. Henry Abelove, Michele A. Berale, and David M. Halperin (London-New York: Routledge, 1993), 339–343.

- 22 Kobena Mercer, "Looking for Trouble," in: *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, op. cit., 350–359.
- 23 Ibid., 351.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 Bakare, "A new Mapplethorpe?"
- 26 Iskin, "In the Light of Images." An in-depth analysis of the "armed eye" of the avant-garde was conducted by Dorota Łuczak in her book *Foto-okno. Wizja fotograficzna wobec okularocentryzmu w sztuce I połowy XX wieku*.
- 27 In his most recent photographic series, *A Conversation Around Pictures (2017–2020)*, the artist uses both cameras and iPhones, with the selfies on their screens reflected in the mirror that is also reflecting the scene. See:  
<https://vielmetter.com/exhibitions/paul-mpagi-sepuya-2020> (accessed December 11, 2020).
- 28 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 92.
- 29 W. J. T. Mitchell, *Seeing Through Race* (Cambridge–London: Harvard University Press, 2012).
- 30 See: Georges Didi-Huberman, "The History of Art Within the Limits of Its Simple Practice," in: *Confronting Image: Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, Pennsylvania), 11–52.
- 31 W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 8.
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World* (New York–London: Routledge, 1996), 28.
- 34 Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 107.
- 35 Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World*, 196.
- 36 Todd McGowan, "Introduction: From the Imaginary Look to the Real Gaze," in: *The Real Gaze: Film Theory After Lacan* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007).
- 37 Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World*, 27–31.



- 38 Nicolas Mirzoeff, *How to See the World: An Introduction to Images, from Self-Portraits to Selfies, Maps to Movies, and More* (New York: Basic Books, 2016), 60.
- 39 Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 121–122.
- 40 See Paul Mattick Jr., “Context,” in: *Critical Terms for Art History*, eds. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Schiff (Chicago–London: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 110–127.
- 41 Mieke Bal, “Mise-en-scène,” in: *Travelling Concepts in The Humanities. A Rough Guide* (Toronto–Buffalo–London: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 99–105.
- 42 Darby English, *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness* (London: MIT Press, 2010).
- 43 *Ibid.*, 46.
- 44 Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 224–227.
- 45 *Ibid.*, 227.

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