Paul Mpazi Sepuya’s work is part of a common plea for a sincere regard of feeling and sensuality as tools for photographic inquiry. Touch and distance are formulated as requisite foundations for articulating, linking and retreading elided knowledge structures. Working within the lineage of homoerotic photography, Sepuya crafts unique frameworks for understanding how bodies and subjectivities emerge as actionable properties of entanglements, which result from a cohabitation of haptic visuality and spatial arrangements. What we are presented with are libidinally-charged ecosystems that unfold affects and positions, extending our relationship to the world, and touched bodies, across time and space.

For the artist, “photography is a dialogue” occurring in a tactile community of social textures, and further imbricated by considerations of queer presence. Whether it’s images of himself, close friends, acquaintances, or studio detritus in forms of fragmentation, Sepuya’s photographs are less containers for immediate experience and more so relational spaces to capture, disrupt and reterritorialise the sinuous nature of desire. In this event, a constant interchange takes place about the constitution and organization of senses that undergo processes of movement with respect to the viewer’s gaze. On the horizon, a shifting of sensual registers points to the question proposed by scholar Dana Seidler: how do we define queerness within aesthetics? Sepuya does not seek to provide a definitive answer, instead, opting to use photography as an analytical mechanism for the purpose of structuring the terms and conditions of these key, insightful propositions.

Through the careful choreography of photographer, camera and eye, sensuality and immediacy are activated within the confessional realm of portraiture—a domain represented and negotiated via surfaces. These surfaces intrinsically exist in parallel with the historical logistics of the body and knowledge production. Sepuya’s mise en scène materializes both an uncoupling and contention with the largely desexualized 20th-century histories of photography’s 19th-century invention, and its disregard of sensuality as an aspect of aesthetic enterprise. This concern with context finds explicit resonation in ‘Figure’ (2001)135 and ‘Darkroom Mirror Portrait’ (20100618), 2017, which feature the artist and another subject of olive complexion captured together in different orientations, wielding cameras of different technologies—recent for the former, vintage for the latter. In calling to question the dialectical territories of photography, Sepuya gestures toward a connection of these historically contingent sites of production—the studio, body, and photography in itself—as a way of displacing and relocating the boundaries of an insurgent proposal: feeling through photography by configuring the material constellations of queer sociality. What is produced, then, is an undertaking for attentive contemplation and magnification of the interstices of surfaces—somatic or otherwise—as lenses into interiority and orientations that are socially located at the intersection of race, gender and sexuality.

Prioritizing touch in all aspects of his meticulous process, Sepuya’s photographs excludes any digital manipulation. His studio practice is predicated on people and the physical handling of materials within the image taking absolute precedence. Additionally, according to Sepuya, the ubiquitous use of dark-brown walnut frames relays a transfigured continuation of his touch and body. Through this speculative frame, Sepuya is interested in ways of building platforms that link his method to a particular place in photo historically, ideally “from the first sight, to the approach and close investigation” of his work.

Sepuya approaches photography much in the same way he does his subjects and conceptual trajectories: as an ongoing process of learning and unlearning. Structural and theoretical cues are taken from the likes of Catherine Opie and Mary Kelly, and others. In fact, when asked about what references the stock of images—the purposefully engendered queer image-repertoire—he hopes to imitate through his work, he points to transgressive fashion photographer David LaChapelle’s contributions to 90s covers of Interview Magazine. He also cites “online image boards and chatrooms, early websites and pre-google searches that lumped anything ‘gay’ together, whether it be fine art, soft or hard-core porn, fashion advertisements, and amateur takes on all and everything included in between” as an influence. These references point coalescing to form constituents in a political economy of sensation that Sepuya reflexively and fluidly mediates, obliging the viewer to consider their inherent complicity in the realities of the presented images.

In his ongoing series and investigations Mirror Studies, Exposures and Dark Room, the mirror’s surface and the space of the dark room function as sites for processing, reevaluating and visualizing these necessary terms and conditions of possible queer interiority and networked collective sensations. Traces of haptic activity are represented in the pieces ‘Darkroom Mirror (OKSAI5SI)’ and ‘Darkroom Mirror (OKSIA5SIH)’—both 2017—which feature smudges on the reflective surface, fragmented bodies and a camera, positioned in front of a dark, rumpled velvet cloth. The disjoint figures represented in Sepuya’s exposure, mirror studies and dark room projects, collapsed into a single viewing plane, serve as idolects for the impossibility of capturing the full constitutions of being, as well as the liminal spaces of prefigurative subjectivity that outwit direct expression. Nowhere is this more evident than in the images that comprise the series Exposures, where the artist’s body is only slightly, and rather seductively, visible between a thin, central space. With these works and others of similar composition, Sepuya moves away from straightforward portraiture and critically engages the senses of the viewer (here, as the amorous subject), invoking them into the space beneath the dark cloth and the entangled, vestigious space of the homorotic, queer dark room.

Along these lines, the use of drapery is not to be taken as an act of concealment or exclusion in works such as ‘Dark Cloth (2010616), 2017, ‘Darkroom (1990407), 2016, and ‘A Ground (OKSAI495),’ 2018. Rather, drapery here highlights what Sepuya points to as “the world of the larger studio,” created through fragmentation, that often resist perceptibility. “Nothing is hidden...There is the ‘dark room’ spaces, created within the drapes of the black and brown velvet... that space created is a world in its own, and only its darkness, or the black of the camera body and tripod, or my own body, can throw into view the latent traces on the mirror’s surface,” asserts Sepuya. The tableaux of images demonstrate contingent worlds waiting and yearning to be revealed through perceptual and radical engagement. Because, indeed, as Susan Sontag poetically states in On Photography: “To collect photographs is to collect the world.”

— Mark Pieterson


Paul Mpazi Sepuya (b. 1982, San Bernadino, CA) lives and works in Los Angeles, where he received an MFA in photography at UCLA in 2016. From 2000 – 2014 Sepuya resided in New York City, receiving a BFA from New York University’s Tisch School of the Arts in 2004 and participating in Artist-in-Residence programs at the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, the Center for Photography at Woodstock, The Studio Museum in Harlem and Fire Island Artist Residency.

Sepuya’s work is in the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Guggenheim Museum, the Studio Museum in Harlem, the International Center for Photography, the Cleveland Museum of Art, the Milwaukee Art Museum and the Carnegie Museum, among others. Recent solo exhibitions include “Dark Room” at team (Bungalow), Los Angeles and “Figures, Grounds and Studies” at Xaney Richardson Gallery, New York City, and group shows at the New Museum, Callicoon Fine Arts and Sikkema Jenkins & Co, in New York City. His work is featured in “Being : New Photography 2018” at the Museum of Modern Art, New York City, through August.