Evidence of Accumulation.
Lauren Haynes, Assistant Curator

There are many critical texts, thematic principles and turns of phrases one can use to connect the work of this year’s Studio Museum artists in residence—Simone Leigh, Kamau Amu Patton and Paul Mpagi Sepuya. All three incorporate aspects of performance in their practices, for example. In addition, all three are interested in collaboration, though that interest manifests in a different way in each artist’s practice. In addition to these similarities, accumulation provides the most compelling metaphor to understand their diverse approaches. They aggregate information, ideas, objects and materials to create their artwork and installations. The work made by each of these artists is motivated by continuous collecting.

Simone Leigh (b. 1968) creates ceramic objects, often referencing colonial and anthropological histories as well as ethnographic objects and artifacts. Her process frequently brings together her handcrafted objects with found, ready-made objects. During her residency, Leigh has experimented with using a salt kiln to fire her sculptures. Salt kilns were popular in the United States from the seventeenth century through the early nineteenth century, but are used less frequently now. During her time at the Studio Museum, Leigh also explored notions of what she terms “African Americana,” and as a result of these explorations has added new elements and materials into her practice. Materials including tobacco leaves and African-American face jugs led to new objects and considerations in Leigh’s practice.

Kamau Amu Patton (b. 1972) creates atmospheric installations using a range of diverse media. In addition to collecting the various materials and electronic equipment he uses for these installations, Patton collects, sorts and processes intangible digital information and uses that to feed the installations. Patton’s experimentations with data, objects and information are a cumulative process. Even moments of failure are seen as part of his practice and lead to different ideas and works that, in turn, lead to new thoughts and processes.

Photographer Paul Mpagi Sepuya (b. 1982) works directly in his community and documents his interactions and relationships with friends and acquaintances, often people from his community of young, urban men in New York, many of whom work in the arts and its surrounding fields. His studio in the Museum is filled with hundreds of portraits taken there throughout his residency. Sepuya then crops, frames and edits these images and places them in installations to re-create the experience of being in his studio—surrounded by such photographs and ephemera. This process of selection adds another element to Sepuya’s practice and creates an instant archive of images with which he can work. Because he shoots his photographs in a studio filled with portraits, many of his images have someone else’s portraits slightly visible in the background. This process creates photographs within photographs that make each image slightly recognizable, but not entirely placeable.

Evidence of Accumulation is the latest in a series of exhibitions featuring works by the three emerging artists who have been awarded year-long residencies at the Studio Museum. The Artist-in-Residence Program represents one of the founding initiatives and vital traditions of the Museum from its inception in 1968. Past participants in the program include Terry Adkins, Chakaia Booker, Renée Green, David Hammons, Kerry James Marshall, Julie Mehretu, Wangechi Mutu, Nadine Robinson, Alison Saar and Kehinde Wiley. This exhibition maintains the Museum’s commitment to highlighting new artistic talent and voices, and continues the Museum’s core mission.
Paul Mpagi Sepuya
AA Bronson

Sunday, May 15, 2011, 11:33 am: It is a gray, moody day here at Fire Island Pines, and I am having trouble writing this essay, which has been percolating in my mind for several weeks. I am sitting in shorts and a sweater, trying to pretend it is warmer than it is, and I have promised myself that if I write the introduction at least, then I will take a break and plant some geraniums in two cast-iron planters outdoors. I have chosen geraniums because they thrive on neglect; hopefully this essay also will benefit from my procrastination.

Saturday, May 26, 2011, 1:13 pm: It is hot, muggy and sunny here at Fire Island. Paul Mpagi Sepuya has emailed me to ask which works I mention in this essay, and I realize that I do not even know what is a work and what is an element in a work, or what once was a work but now has been discarded or rephotographed and wrapped back into a larger work, an installation of photographs on a table, for example, with a plant and a heap of books, including Mapplethorpe: A Biography by Patricia Morrisroe.' And if Paul himself then enters the picture and begins to rearrange the elements, is that a new work, perhaps even a performance? And is a self-portrait of that process yet another work again? How about if this work, this photograph of Paul naked (or not) rearranging a previous arrangement of photos of friends, becomes part of a subsequent scenario: A friend arrives and, removing his clothes, places himself naked on the floor in front of this photo. Is that a work too? And how will these be placed in the gallery for the exhibition that this essay accompanies? Will Paul reproduce an arrangement from his studio and call that a work? And what if a friend of Paul, perhaps someone already in one of the photos, arrives at the Studio Museum, even at the opening itself, and discards his clothes and lies naked (or even partially clothed) in the midst of the installation, would that be another work yet again? I think it would.

Paul’s work is deceptively simple: He takes photos of his friends. He indulges in portraiture, but not quite as one imagines. He documents communities, his own community, and by documenting forms them. A community is not a community until it is seen as a community, until it sees itself as a community. It is the representation of community that brings community into consciousness, into existence. So Paul’s process of creation is more than a creation of images, or of installations: I will go further and say that Paul’s art also exists in the creation of community. In this sense he falls within a long line of queer artists and writers whose place in community was an important part of how they were and what they produced. People like Frank O’Hara lived and loved in community, and their creative output was an outpouring of the heart and mind, flowing into the outer world from the stream, the river, the ocean of their desires, their love, their friends, their communities.

I think of O’Hara first because he was one of many queer artists and writers who spent time right here in Fire Island Pines and formed the culture and heritage that still exists here today. O’Hara, drunk one night (one imagines), fell asleep on the beach, not far from where I sit typing, was run over by a truck and died. It is his death and the knowledge of his death that mark this place as a place of queer community. I once visited Ron Vawter, the brilliant founding actor of the Wooster Group, as queer as they come, and we swam together naked in a swimming pool at the house he had rented for the summer. He had come to live his final days in this beautiful queer place, to take his place in this queer history. He died soon afterward. I remember coming here in the summer of 1993 with Jorge Zontal of General Idea and renting a tiny house, which I can practically see from where I sit, surrounded by trees and the very tame wild deer that populate the place. When we woke up
in the morning we heard hooves trotting around on the deck that wrapped all four sides of our diminutive house. When Jorge left, that September, the real estate agent, Bob Howard, arranged for him to be driven to the ferry dock in an emergency vehicle, because Jorge was too weak to walk. He died a few months later. This place is wrapped in queer history, the woods are thick with spirit life, with the presence of the queer spirits that are, together with the living, our own special community.

I hope that Paul will forgive me for this long tangent. But I think it is no accident that the arrangements of friends that have populated his studio at the Studio Museum for the past months have resembled *memento mori*. As queer people, we are always aware of the dead and of the living, of shared experience gone by, of memory but also of presence.

The particular queer histories that form the invisible armature of Paul's work are, of course, somewhat different. As Paul outlined in a recent email to me, "the shared lovers and stories among Isherwood, Capote, Vidal, Beaton . . . Beaton and Tchelitchew and Charles Henri Ford, G. Stein, Sam Steward, David Leddick's gossipy book *Intimate Companions* about Platt Lynes, Lincoln Kirstein, Paul and Fidelma Cadmus . . . etc. Van Vechten and Richard Bruce Nugent. Beaton meets Woolf, Woolf and Vita(!) Sackville-West, Vita and Violet Trefusis, Vita to Harold Nicolson, Violet and Colette . . ." 2

When I first began thinking about this text, I thought about Paul's many portraits of attractive young white men, of the way in which he seems to objectify white men (and some men of color) the way that black men themselves so often are objectified, even fetishized, by white men. But I soon abandoned this approach. In Paul's photographs, nakedness is intimacy, intimacy declared by the sitter between himself and the photographer. His body language is relaxed, caught in a moment between one comment and another. The photographer, this human being Paul Mpagi Sepuya, is always present in the photo. These are photographs of relationship.

Paul's work, that is to say his process of working, is as fluid as life itself, as the flowing running river of relationship that joins us in this community that Paul depicts. We are naked under his gaze; he reads us like books; his is the sweet spirit of love that weaves us into the spreading community of his attention.

*Sunday, May 30, 2011, 11:42 pm*: It is Memorial Day weekend and Fire Island Pines is finally quieting. The faint sound of drunken revelry seeps from the house next door, a modernist enclave of gay young men who are meeting, one suspects, for the first time this weekend.

I am now two weeks past my deadline and in the meantime I have been potting seedlings, mostly tomatoes and herbs, but also some exotic morning glories, including a seed given to me by a young artist in Tokyo named Daisuke Monko. In the Edo Period, scholars in Tokyo became fascinated by the genetically mutable morning glory and developed it into rare and often unstable mutations. My young friend showed me historical photographs of scholars' studios, with rows of potted morning glories competing with books for attention. Like Paul, with his biographical books on George Platt Lynes and Paul Cadmus, or Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West, Daisuke combed the histories of these eccentric scholars of the nineteenth century, searching for community, for his own history in a long line of queer culture. Like Daisuke, Paul unwittingly reproduces the studios of these long-lost Edo scholars, marrying books and potted plants in familial arrangements that anchor his narrative web of friends, companions and lovers.
AA Bronson is an artist and healer living and working in New York City. In 1969 he formed the artists’ group General Idea with Felix Partz and Jorge Zontal; for the next twenty-five years they lived and worked together, undertaking over one hundred solo exhibitions and countless group shows and temporary public art projects. They were known for their magazine FILE (1972–1989), their unrelenting production of low-cost multiples, and their early involvement in punk, queer theory and AIDS activism. From 1987 to 1994, they addressed the subject of AIDS. Since his partners’ deaths in 1994, AA has focused on themes of death, grieving and healing, most recently in his performance series Invocation of the Queer Spirits. From 2004 to 2010 he was Director of Printed Matter, Inc. Currently Co-Director of the Institute for Art, Religion and Social Justice at Union Theological Seminary, he was recently named a Chevalier de l’Ordre des Arts et des Lettres (a Knight of the Order of Arts and Letters) by the French government.


2 Paul Mpagi Sepuya, email to the author, May 17, 2011.