

Interview

A new Mapplethorpe? The queer zine legend reinventing the nude

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Paul Mpagi Sepuya started out taking shots of his friends naked. His work, in which sitters often face away, has now earned comparisons with Robert Mapplethorpe - and even Caravaggio



Identity crisis ... a detail from *Darkroom Mirror* (2070386), 2017; full photograph in feature. Photograph: Image courtesy of the artist and CAM St. Louis and Aperture, New York.

In the autumn of 2001, Paul Mpagi Sepuya was an art student living in downtown New York. He'd just started his second year of university after moving from California when 9/11 changed life in the city for good. In March this year, the Covid-19 outbreak triggered another seismic change for the photographer: his newly opened exhibition in Los Angeles was forced to close a month before a major book collating his work was released.

For Sepuya, this time is harder.

“It seems much worse, in some ways, than September 11,” he says. “I was living downtown, maybe a mile from it, watching the whole thing happen. You didn’t know what was coming next.”

But in 2001, Sepuya and his friends could rally round in person after the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center – and later, to meet to protest against the impending wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. “At least you could be together,” he says.

For Sepuya that togetherness is not only crucial for his sense of solidarity during the Covid-19 crisis, it’s one of the key things his photography explores. From 2000 to 2014 Sepuya was in New York where he started his queer zine Shoot, which was described as an “autobiographical me-and-my-naked-friends magazine” when it came to the attention of the New York Times. That 2007 review could still be used to describe Sepuya’s work as he carries on mining his social life for his subject matter.



Model Study (OX5A4029), 2017. Photograph: Courtesy of the artist and Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects.

His sitters are friends, acquaintances and lovers, who peer into the camera or are often in an embrace with their back to the lens. It's that contact and intimacy which interests him. When he was asked to contribute to a piece about the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall riots, he wrote that if there was any aspect of the event that relates to his work, "it's what was happening in the bar before the protest, when people were just there encountering one another."

Sepuya has been described as a "postmodern portrait photographer" who challenges traditional portraiture by filtering it through the black queer gaze. Brazenly self-referential, his early work began around his "kitchen table or downstairs in the living room and then eventually my bedroom." Since then he has been compared to Robert Mapplethorpe, Wolfgang Tillmans, Ren Hang and Caravaggio.

Jop van Bennekom – who co-founded the magazines *Butt* and *Fantastic Man*, and was one of Sepuya's early supporters – says he was struck by the simplicity of the images and the fact he was tackling portraiture at all. "My first reaction was how dare you make something so simple: a guy with his shirt off sitting on the end of a bed? They don't smile or give away too much, there's just a real tension there. It felt unique in portraiture because what new things can you do there?"

Van Bennekom says that the work continued to walk a very "narrow path", with the same cast of sitters recurring. "He has kept on exploring the same sort of subject matter," he says. "It's him, it's the sitter, it's the camera, it's nudity and it's technology. It's all of these things but it never leaves Paul's world: the studio."

The work is laced with homoerotic visual culture, and pulls the curtain back – often literally – on the function of the studio. Tripods are often in shot, while orange peel, used coffee cups and Post-it notes add to the *mise-en-scene*. Black velvet backdrops and mirrors serve as a way to reflect images and bodies at surreal angles, with it often being hard to tell whose limbs belong to whom. "There is no ambiguity for me," says Sepuya, who has repeatedly said he's not trying to make "tricky" pictures. "Everything is very apparent. If you know someone there is no fragment of their body that is ambiguous or unfamiliar, right?"

Sepuya says the work can be seen as an ongoing series of "daily snapshots" of his life. "But none of it is laid out to tell a narrative," he insists. "I'm not interested in making an autobiographical narrative, but it is all tied to me." The work is also a reaction to the gay photography he saw growing up. "I think it just came out of frustration," he says. "There's something very limiting in those, I guess I'll call it 'capital G', gay photo circles, where the conversation never gets past desire."

Some of Sepuya's early sitters became famous in some corners of the internet after appearing in *Shoot* or his early portraits that were printed in *Butt* magazine, and shared on MySpace and Tumblr. In his new book, he tells a story of a friend who decided to move from New York to Buenos Aires, went into his local coffee shop and was asked if he was "Todd from Paul Sepuya's portraits?" by a couple.

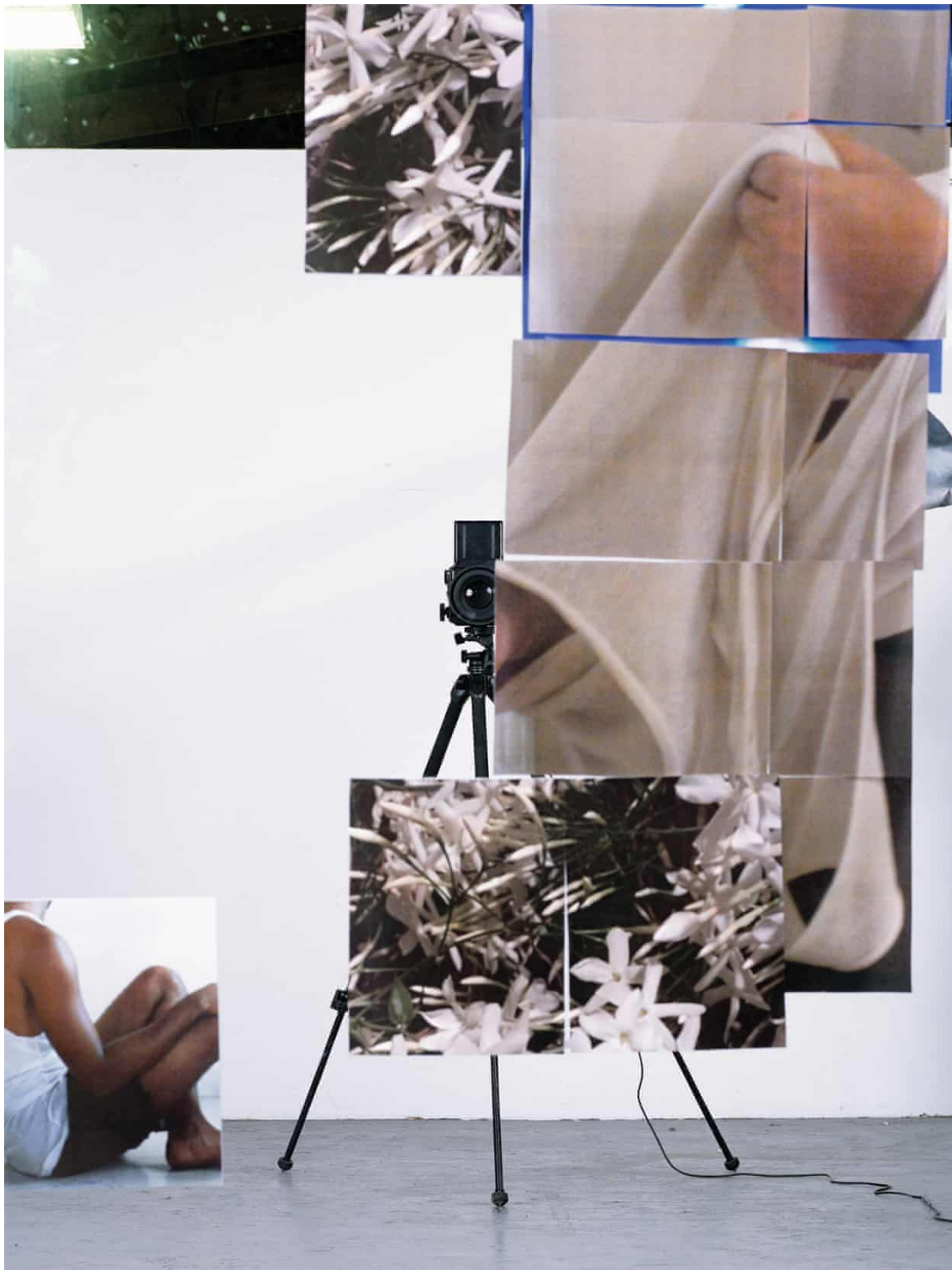


About photography itself ...
Sepuya's Darkroom Mirror
(2070386), 2017.
Photograph: Courtesy of the
artist and CAM St Louis and
Aperture, New York

In the last five years Sepuya has made the leap from zines and “alternative spaces” to the most prestigious galleries in the US. He was included in the Whitney Biennial in 2019, and the influential Being: New Photography 2018 at MoMA, while in the UK this year he had a solo exhibition at Modern Art in London and was part of the Barbican’s Masculinities show.

That burst of activity has seen his rise dubbed “meteoric”, but it’s a tag he’s quick to reject. In 2017, three years after he had moved to Los Angeles, he was interviewed by a magazine that described a New York show as his first in the city. “It was my 11th,” he says, drily. “I think for people who need to present things there’s this desire for everything to be a meteoric event, but there’s no way I could be making the work now without what had come before it.”

Talking about his eponymous book, he adds: “I realised at that point I need to take this opportunity to remind people and put all this cumulative work in front of people so they don’t think I’m looking at trends and trying to find this ‘thing’ to do.” Besides, he says, his early work is important not least because it captures the New York friends for whom he made his pictures in the first place. “I was trying to understand my friendships, relationships and developing social world at that time when I was in these new mostly gay spaces,” he says. “I hadn’t had that type of social support before.”



The studio laid bare ... Five Figures (3002), 2016.
Photograph: Courtesy of the artist and CAM St Louis and Aperture, New York.

Sepuya grew up in San Bernardino, the first major city east of Los Angeles, infamous for the terrorist attack there in 2015. It was comfortable childhood but he wanted something more exciting and would go to Los Angeles at weekends to buy magazines. The Face, i-D and Interview were favourites – at one point he had every single 90s issue of the latter. It was those magazines’ images and articles that made him take up photography.

His father, a Ugandan doctor, wasn’t supportive of his artistic exploits, but his African American mother was. A retired physical therapist from Louisiana, who also worked for the US Air Force and had briefly taken a photography course during college, she gave Sepuya her old 35mm Minolta camera and with some assistance from a neighbour – who had previously run a photography studio and lent him equipment – he began to experiment. “She let me set up a dark room in the garage,” says Sepuya.

His pugilistic response to the idea of him being a “new” artist is also rooted in his understanding of how the art world can and does treat black artists. Sepuya is more than aware that the fact his subjects are interracial and sexually ambiguous is one of the reasons his work has been so successful at a time when identity politics is “in”. “There’ll be these moments where people are like ‘Let’s curate shows about identity’ because right now everyone just loves queer stuff, right? But eventually those conversations will shift,” he says.

So how will he avoid being caught out when the fickle art world tastemakers move on? It’s simple, he says: change the rules. His more recent work, he says, does just that by deconstructing the idea of portraiture and the photographic studio. “The work from 2014 onwards is more about the mental elements of the medium and how it works.”

It’s a deliberate strategy. “I want to make work so if someone is curating an exhibition about photography itself, it would be included,” he says. “There wouldn’t necessarily need to be black bodies, or depictions of desire or touch. Then regardless of those moments when suddenly the people in power and influence are tired of a conversation on race or gender or whatever, we’ll still be part of the conversation.”

Sepuya doesn’t know what he’ll do next. Whether the lockdown measures will mean his work will be on hold until he’s about to be in the same room as a portrait subject. He brought his cameras home though. “The thing is the labs are all closed, the facilities are closed,” he says. “I have all this film, so I’m contemplating shooting something.”

Whatever it is, Sepuya’s world is still expanding.

Paul Mpagi Sepuya is published by Aperture and the Contemporary Art Museum St Louis.