

# VIELMETTER LOS ANGELES

## Press Release

### Paul Mpagi Sepuya

A conversation *about* around pictures

March 14 – April 25, 2020

Reception: Saturday, March 14, 4 – 6 pm



Vielmetter Los Angeles is thrilled to announce our first solo exhibition with Los Angeles-based artist Paul Mpagi Sepuya, *A conversation about around pictures*. These new works, made in Sepuya's Los Angeles studio between 2017 and early 2020 represent a subtle evolution of the artist's thoughts about how pictures are made,

1700 S Santa Fe Ave #101 Los Angeles, CA 90021 +1 213 623 3280

[vielmetter.com](http://vielmetter.com)

seen, and circulated. In several of the works on view, multiple images of alternate points of view appear in the on screens of sitters' and collaborators' iPhones, reflected in the mirror that is the technical focus of all of Sepuya's photographs. In others, the focus is on the space of the studio itself, rendered strange and indeterminate by multiple reflections and a proliferation of images in the form of test prints adhered to the wall, arranged on tables, or otherwise visible in the space of the image. Following his participation in the 2019 Whitney Biennial, where Sepuya included not only images made by his camera in his studio, but also images made by other artists in their cameras in his studio, several potential conversations around pictures emerge in this body of work.

One genesis of this exhibition is the work *Model Study (0X5A4029)*, 2017, once an outtake from a previous group of photographs. Sepuya describes this image as "...a medium-scale work. At 60 x 40 inches, Yasir's body is presented at roughly life scale as he sits, back toward the camera, holding an iPhone up to image himself. In the detail of that screen you can see his face which is not visible to the (my) camera, and on closer inspection you can see me, very small also captured in that screen. He sits on a cube-shaped plywood stool which is caught between two views - again reflected and non-reflected space. The non-reflected "present" stool reveals the fact that the image of Yasir at the center of this picture is a reflection, just out-of-frame in the "present" space. His iPhone screen is pointed toward the mirror itself." Returning to this image in 2019, the artist focused on Yasir's iPhone and the direction of its screen. This on-screen image within the photograph opens up the usually closed circuit of mirror and camera in the studio, by pointing not only to a sort of infinity of reflection within this circuit, but also to a way out through alternate modes of circulation.

If Sepuya's work made over the last several years has an identifiable signature, it is the distinctive (but evolving) set up of his LA studio and that the technical subject of all of the photographs made there is the surface of a large mirror; in front of which camera, subjects, and objects are arranged, and sometimes onto which other images or portions of images are adhered. There exist images, like the one visible on Yasir's iPhone screen, that are made on cameras other than Paul's in this environment and then circulate around and outside of the official channels of the artworld. Their value is their ability to signify membership in a specific community of queer artists; they suggest to an informed viewer the degrees of connection that may exist between themselves and the person in the picture. This quality of generosity, community, and friendship, as well as the suggestion of digital cruising is a critical conceptual element of Sepuya's work even as his photographs evolve into ever more technical and formal explorations of what constitutes a picture.

In many of Sepuya's photographs, a black velvet backdrop fully or partially obscures the space of the studio behind it, while simultaneously revealing the surface of the mirror onto which Sepuya focuses his camera. The blackness of the curtain is what makes it possible to see the smudges on the mirror, the visual cues that allows the viewer to begin to understand the space of the image, the circuit of reflection and lens. The curtain signifies a history of studio portraits, delineates a space of action, and asserts inherent power and value for the quality of blackness itself. In *A conversation about around pictures*, the role of this curtain as a screen is highlighted - it is both backdrop and subject, revealer and concealer within these images; much like the mirror, the cell phone screens, and the camera viewfinders. In some images, the black backdrop is replaced with a gauzy peachy-

toned scrim that blurs but does not fully hide the bodies and space that exist behind it. Like Yasir's iPhone, this scrim changes the circuit of reflection and image within the studio, suggesting not so much a way out of the infinite loop of reflection and lens, but a sense that this closure is a framing device that is intended to tease us with suggestions of action behind the curtain.

In the most recent works in the show, titled *Studio*, the black curtain is pushed aside, but still visible and present as a figure in the space. Its presence plays tricks with scale, highlighting what becomes in one case a larger than life thumbprint with its reflection in another mirror on wheels, that is arranged to create a strangely infinite but claustrophobic view of the familiar front area of the studio. In this group of images, the space in which other parts of the act of making pictures occurs: editing, selecting, arranging, both alone and with collaborators and visitors feels temptingly revealed for our examination. In notes on this body of work Sepuya remarked that: "Queerness and blackness exist in the space behind the curtain, at first conditioned by necessity and following that maintained by fetish and fantasy. We may not always need to cruise, but we wish to." Crucially, in these *Studio* images what is revealed is highly controlled. The illusion of freedom to visually wander through this space of work and play is suggested, but the entirety of the space and all of its workings are never laid bare. This is an encounter at once intimate and and precisely delimited and it is this tension that excites.

In these images of the studio the focus of the photograph, as always what is reflected in the mirror, becomes the space of making images. There are partial prints, reflected into the lens that bring bodies and the idea of portraiture into these images, but they are not the subjects of the photographs. Like the photographs titled *A conversation around pictures* in which other images appear in viewfinders and phone screens, there is an element of distraction at play in this group of works. But this is distraction reconfigured to focus our attention on looking, on the way the image draws our eyes in many different directions, seeking to make sense of space and also gravitating toward the attractive and legible elements of the picture, in this case often other pictures.

In a recent interview, Sepuya said that he would like those who view his work to be excited, "in every sense of the word." The ambiguity of what you are looking at in Sepuya's photographs – the sitters, their reflections, the studio, the black velvet backdrop that renders the surface of the mirror enticingly smudged with remnants of tape and fingerprints – is visually and intellectually exciting; a puzzle of surface, screen, and reflection. The playful interactions of artist and (mostly male) sitters who are often but not always nude; weaving limbs in gestures that span the suggestive, intimate, and self-consciously performative excites not only because there is the suggestion of sex, but also because this suggestion rebukes the objectifying gaze so typical of historical representations of queer, raced male bodies. Interwoven with other references to creative power, suggestions of play and collaboration in the making of the images, Sepuya offers a conversation around pictures that touches upon histories of representation, formal and technical approaches to image making, and on the space of encounter with pictures. This body of work suggests the expanded field of queer community, a conversation around and about pictures, but also around and about friendship, sexuality, authorship, distraction and attention.

Paul Mpagi Sepuya (b. 1982, San Bernardino, CA) 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. In 2019 a survey of Sepuya's work was presented in a solo exhibition at the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis that traveled to the Blaffer Art Museum in Houston, Texas. The corresponding monograph is forthcoming. Other recent solo exhibitions include "Double Enclosure," FOAM Fotografiemuseum, Amsterdam, Netherlands; "Portraits / Positions," KMAC Museum, Louisville, KY; and "STUDIO WORK," Platform Centre for Photography, Winnipeg, MB, Canada. Recent group exhibitions include "Masculinities: Through Photography and Film from the 1960s to Now," Barbican, London; "In Focus: The Camera," Getty Museum, Los Angeles; "Implicit Tensions: Mapplethorpe Now," Guggenheim Museum, New York; the 2019 Whitney Biennial; "Being : New Photography 2018," Museum of Modern Art, New York; and "Trigger" at the New Museum, New York. 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.

The gallery is located at 1700 S Santa Fe Avenue, south of the 10 freeway. Parking is available on the south parking lot adjacent to the building. Gallery hours are Tuesday through Saturday from 10 am to 6 pm and by appointment.