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PAUL MPAGI SEPUYA: FIGURES, GROUNDS AND STUDIES AT YANCEY RICHARDSON GALLERY

By Jean Dykstra



Paul Mpagi Sepuya, *Self-portrait Study with Roses at Night (1709)*, 2015. Courtesy Yancey

Paul Mpagi Sepuya's exhibition, on view at [Yancey Richardson Gallery](#) through April 1, is rooted in the artist's deconstructed approach to portraiture, a process involving accumulating and re-photographing prints, some torn, or taped to walls or mirrors. Occasionally there is a full portrait of someone, but more often there is a hand or a shoulder or a torso in the scene – a scattering of elements that ultimately cohere into a single plane. The subject is sometimes Sepuya himself. In *Self Portrait Study with Roses at Night*, a camera tripod is positioned in front of a photograph of the inverted V of his bare legs, echoing the shape of the tripod itself; the artist is a stand-in for the camera, which frequently takes center stage.

Sepuya seems to intentionally unmoor the viewer's gaze in his photographs, leaving it bouncing around in search of a subject. The LA-based artist has said that he is inspired by the merging of biography and fiction in works like Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, whose time-traveling, gender-bending subject is similarly elusive. In his photographs of friends, lovers, other artists, touch is a recurring theme, hands a repeated element, and race a consistent undercurrent: in *Mirror Study*, 2016, a black arm and a white arm echo each other; in *Darkroom*, 2016, hands, black and white, reach out to adjust, or caress, a swath of wine-colored velvet draped over one of the men. The images are expressions of desire – on the part of the men within the pictures, but also on the part of the viewer to see more – and desire, in these images, is mercurial and ever-changing.

Sepia's photographs are also firmly rooted in his studio practice – not in the specifics of technique (or not only that), but rather in the thinking behind the picture-making. In that sense, they're all self-portraits, but evasive ones. They seem to reveal their own construction, except that they don't. It's nearly impossible to work out precisely how his pictures were made, though it's entirely rewarding to try.