

Paul Mpagi Sepuya at team (bungalow)

September 17–
October 22, 2018

A bluish, smoky miasma bathes two life-size studies—or self-portraits—of Paul Mpagi Sepuya. In one, Sepuya’s face is obscured—save for the small of his naked thigh and lower torso—as he hunches over a camera fixed to a three-legged tripod. He leans back to peer forward, his hands cradling the device, readying it to shoot the image in question: *Dark Room Mirror Study* (OX5A1531) (all works 2017). Sepuya hugs the fringes of this mirror/photo, his bent body flush with the right side of the picture plane. Across the photographs at team (bungalow), mirrors allow Sepuya (and his friends, lovers, acquaintances) to bask in a closed loop, a self-referential present that welcomes fragments of the past that feel simultaneously speculative and serial.

For starters, the grubby, dust-ridden mirrors that Sepuya employs in his photographs evoke a sensuous “symmetry” to the “drifting vapors of... blue smoke” that pepper Richard Bruce Nugent’s elliptical story *Smoke, Lilies and Jade* (1926).¹ Nugent’s

presence wafts over the exhibition, with a scrawled note, “R. Bruce Nugent tableaux,” appearing in the work *Studio* (OX5A0173) that hangs beside *Dark Room Mirror Study* (OX5A1531). By turns romantic and restrained, *Smoke* finds Nugent narrating the wanderings of Alex, an idle and impressionistic 19 year-old black male who meditates on the queer strands to desire, love, sexuality, and aesthetics.

Strikingly, with experimental typography, Nugent implements ellipses throughout the vignette to signify a hesitation in his protagonist’s sexuality: his pensiveness is parsed out with a series of ellipses. Without them, and if given over to proper punctuation, the narrative is still legible, lucid. With them, we still encounter male same-sex desire, but in ways that are both “full of holes and yet still... whole.”² While this fluidity imbues itself in the smoky ambiance of *Dark Room Mirror Study*, it also snakes its way across Sepuya’s photographic practice that is novel-like and serendipitous, with people and places shuttling in and out, dissolving any preconceived notions of a narrative.

The import of Nugent and *Smoke, Lilies and Jade* is not lost on Sepuya; in an installation at Callicoon Fine Arts, Sepuya included the little-known black literary magazine *Fire!!* that first published Nugent’s pioneering prose. Nugent re-appears in *Studio* (OX5A0173): slivers of Sepuya, his camera, and his tripod can be seen standing behind three, narrow floor-to-ceiling collages, with one featuring that scribbled note to Nugent. From the collages to the studio space itself, visual excess—in threeness—manifests in ways that echo Nugent’s use of ellipses in *Smoke, Lilies and Jade*.

Venturing inside the bungalow reveals, further, how the self, for Sepuya, is decidedly produced “on the fringes of portraits of other people.”³ *Dark Room Mirror* (_2010899) and (_2080162) find Sepuya more front and center, sharing the frame with another body.



Paul Mpagi Sepuya, *Dark Room* (2017) (installation view).
Image courtesy of the artist and team (bungalow).
Photo: Jeff McLane.

In both images, Sepuya holds a camera to his face, a gesture that flits between voyeurism and narcissism—a desire to see oneself and others.⁴ The other body here—across both works—happens to be the same slender man of olive complexion. On the surface, these photographs are unremarkable. Yet the RAW file numbering—and the different bodies in *Dark Room Mirror* (_02060999)—suggests two separate encounters. On this evidence, Sepuya’s titles offer up serial record of what images made the cut and what was left on the cutting room floor. Sitting with this equivocal trace of omitted images intimates an elliptical form to Sepuya’s practice, which is a mirroring of Nugent’s desire to be direct and un-closeted about documenting what is often relegated to the shadows.⁵

That this constructive mode of desire still exists even when exposing the slippages in one’s photographic process

reveals the many (queer) sides to ellipses: communicating an unfinished thought, a trailing voice, or a moment of pause to reflect. These pensive places are generative, with Sepuya reflecting that his desire to document the self comes out of a “strange” feeling in his studio, which is to say a queer feeling that, yes, finds him disoriented, but also creating from that self-same space of dislocation, queerness.⁶ At the same time, when the past feels, in many respects, like a gulf of disappearance, it is encouraging to witness *Dark Room* and the way non-normative sightlines of yore emerge through oblique arrangements. The overlooked past felt present here thanks to how Sepuya looks to find his way, to gather ground differently even if it’s grounded in an openness to deviation. Though Sepuya’s deviant horizons at times appear repetitive in their format, they dwell in a speculative realm that does “not reproduce what we follow but instead create[s] wrinkles in the earth.”⁷ Wrinkles, ultimately, in how we see ourselves.

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1. Richard Bruce, “Smoke, Lilies and Jade, A Novel, Part I,” *FIRE!! A Quarterly Devoted to the Younger Negro Artists*, October 31, 1926, 36-39.

2. Richard Glavey, “Squandering Your Potential with Richard Bruce Nugent,” in *The Wallflower Avant-garde: Modernism, Sexuality, and Queer Ekphrasis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 82.

3. Boško Blagojević, “A Conversation between Boško Blagojević and Paul Mpagi Sepuya,” in *Paul Mpagi Sepuya: Studio Work* (Minneapolis: Franklin Artworks, 2012), 29.

4. Sabine T. Kriebel, “Theories of Photography: A Short History,” in *Photography Theory (The Art Seminar)*, ed. James Elkins (New York: Routledge, 2007), 33.

5. Nugent was open with his homosexuality, stating “I have never been in what they call ‘the closet.’” Richard Bruce Nugent, *Gay Rebel of the Harlem Renaissance: Selections from the Work of Richard Bruce Nugent*, ed. Thomas H. Wirth (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 268.

6. Blagojević, “Conversation,” 29.

7. Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 179.