



STUDIO

WORK

PAUL

MPAGI

SEPUYA

TEXTS BY

William Oliver

Naomi Beckwith

A CONVERSATION WITH

Boško Blagojević

Franklin Artworks, Minneapolis, MN

November 18, 2011 – February 4, 2012



INTRODUCTION

WILLIAM OLIVER

Paul Mpagi Sepuya's work first emerged at the beginning of the 2000s, a time marked by a shift in queer culture, when artists, photographers, writers, and publications – such as *BUTT, Straight to Hell, or They Shoot Homos Don't They?* – began exploring an understanding of sexuality outside of what had become mainstream gay culture. Taking the xeroxed, self-published idea of the queer-zine as a starting point, Paul published *SHOOT* (a series of seven short artist books) between 2005 and 2007, not long after graduating from NYU. But while he was very much surrounded by this new movement in queer culture, Paul's use of a subtle, softer, evocative, but less-than-distinct sexualization always set him apart. Even in those early stages, his take on the re-appropriation of the "male gaze" went deeper than simply using the body as a visual tool or symbol. Instead Paul always examined his subjects' personalities, profiling their varying aspects in a manner sometimes engaged, and at others isolated – a delicate game oscillating between self-examination and performance. Documenting these relationships between subject and audience, subject and photographer, and photographer and audience, Paul's early work began a focus on relationships that has now become central to his oeuvre.

Although containing all the elements of a "studio portrait" – clean background, very few props, and shadow-less lighting – the photographs in *SHOOT*, and most of those Paul took after that, were made in the kitchen and bedroom of his home in Brooklyn. The home is always an easily accessible location for a young artist, but in Paul's case shooting in his own private space tied closely into the work itself. Paul's subjects are not models; they are artists, performers, or "figures" from the creative community, but first and foremost they are his friends and collaborators. Bringing them into the privacy of his own home not only offered a safe and comfortable place for these relationships to unfold, it also imbued the images with a further layer of emotion, allowing Paul to examine his relationships through his photographs, as well as the subject of the relationship itself.

When, in October 2010, Paul was invited for a one-year artist's residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, he set out to continue his exploration of relationships. In this temporary location on 125th Street, Paul faced the new challenge of continuing the discourse he had begun but in an isolated, non-residential environment to which he had no prior personal connection. After sparsely decorating the space with a few objects from home, he invited friends over, making pictures as they came and went. As his residency continued, the detritus these visitors left behind contributed to the formation of an emotional landscape. While his work had previously been about the subject, relationship, and location, at the Studio Museum the location became the crucible in which the subjects were performers. Paul's focus now progressed from not only the people in the pictures, but also included

what was immediately surrounding them – test prints, tables, bottles, pieces of bread, or orange peel – thus turning the studio itself into an archive of sorts, documenting not only the relationship between artist, subject, and audience, but also the relationship between them and the space in which the work was made. His subjects, as well as Paul himself in his many self-portraits, hold objects that subsequently remained in the studio and re-appeared in still lifes at a later date.

Continuing with this idea of the studio as archive, it was a natural progression to include those very objects in the end-of-residency exhibition in September 2011, where they appeared as photographic still lifes facing the portraits. In his second Studio Work show at the Franklin Art Works gallery two months later, they appeared as real, physical objects which he shipped from his Brooklyn studio to Minneapolis for the occasion. In both shows, Paul filled the visitor's vision with a variety of different cues, from the images one examined to the objects leaking in at the edges of one's peripheral vision. Each object or subject may have had an emotional resonance for the artist, but the exhibitions were not narrative; they were to be viewed as a whole, as a discussion of an idea and how it played out across a twelve-month period, something we find once more in this body of work. While the Studio Museum work was very much a project in its own right, with its own discourse, it must also be viewed as a considered culmination of six years of experimentation in Paul's ongoing discourse with his community and immediate surroundings – and as the first formalized presentation of a new phase and process, documenting a decisive turning point in Paul's oeuvre.

WILLIAM OLIVER is a writer, editor, and curator focusing on art, design, fashion, and photography. He is a regular contributor to *Dazed & Confused*, *NOWNESS*, *i-D*, *AnOther Magazine*, *AnOther Man*, *W Magazine*, and *DUST* amongst others. Alongside his editorial work, William has written essays for a number of artist monographs and curates the photographic-exhibition space Pleasant Gallery in Clerkenwell, London, England.

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

FRANKLIN ARTWORKS, MINNEAPOLIS, MN

NOVEMBER 18, 2011-FEBRUARY 4, 2012





TABLE INSTALLATION

Artist's studio archive of five file boxes containing: books, magazines, papers, laser prints on paper, digital c-prints (8×10, 4×6, and various sizes), medium-format instant photographs, bricks, store-bought frames, dried orange peels, bread, glass, succulent plants, terra-cotta pots, manila envelopes, envelopes with assorted contents, pens, pencils, clips, push pins, post-it notes, glass bottles, fabric, Bubble Wrap.





Studio, after Tony, January 11



Vita, Virginia, Violet, Harold, Patti, Patricia, Jonathan, June 12



Stuart and Lars, June 8



Desktop, March 11



Dominic, March 8



Self-portrait, December 9

Jeffrey, March 2





Studio, after Jeffrey, March 2



Darren, June 9



Tyler, February 18



Victor, November 21



Studio, February 8



Studio, November 18



All photographs 2010-2011, digital c-prints mounted on Sintra,
18 x 24 and 24 x 32 inches, framed, editions of three.



LOOKING AT STUDIO WORK

NAOMI BECKWITH

The first Paul Mpagi Sepuya works to capture my attention were a series of photographs exploring the notion of “home.” Paul attempted to define “home” in an accumulative way, by shooting landscapes, family members, and domestic spaces, and by collecting family ephemera that, when all pulled together, would perhaps give shape to the places and things that shaped Paul. In the years that followed, Paul’s photography rarely veered far from anyone’s home: many of his projects record his community of friends and lovers and their friends and lovers, almost exclusively shot in their bedrooms, living rooms, and kitchens. This community of mostly queer, attractive, and creative young Brooklynites was portrayed in a way that gave access to their private, intimate moments and spaces. Some images feign candid shots, capturing a subject absorbed in an exchange with someone who may or may not be included in the frame. Other images are highly composed portraits, though the overall sensibility is informal. Or, at times, the camera is turned on accidental still lifes of crumpled clothes in Paul’s own home. Though the images never feel cloistered, this body of work is, for lack of a better word, introverted, documenting a social scene that feels as close-knit as it is transient.

While Paul’s work depends on a *verité* sensibility, it deliberately moves away from photography’s documentary pretenses. Paul has had a long-standing interest in not only the formal construction of an image but also how a subject’s identity is constructed via images. As a result, Paul is attuned to how every image – whether framed in a photograph or projected from a person – is a fabrication of sorts; or that every image is, to borrow a phrase from Gustave Courbet, a “real allegory.”

Paul utilizes painting’s historic tropes and mechanisms again and again in the Studio Work series: his subjects assume mannered poses – with a preponderance of nudes in the best classical tradition – and inanimate objects are arranged in the studio space as still lifes or as remnants of a portrait session. Though generally separated in academic art history, the traditions of still life and portraiture are almost interchangeable in Paul’s studio. All of his subjects, whether people, books, plants, or other photos are arranged and shot in specific ways that belie a calculated internal construction. While each photograph’s formal elements draw attention to the conditions of its own making, Paul further underscores the very objecthood of his photo prints as if to drive home the notion of image as constructed object.

For instance, Paul’s photographs often exist in relationship to other photographs – sometimes a print will become a paper object situated within the frame of another photo-

graph; Paul will photograph a cluster of prints arranged on tables as a collage or as a layout-in-process; or several framed photographs sit on shelves and tabletops, in spaces that, again, mimic the domestic sphere. In these conditions, the photograph exists as much as an object as an image. There are many images of Paul placing and manipulating his photographs: these presume to give insight into a working process, but as the viewer remembers that the candid feel of each photo is wholly constructed, he or she realizes that Paul is establishing the prints as tactile, tangible objects. Most telling are Paul's photos of texts or books with images, where prints are situated in relationship to literature he is reading. In these works, Paul plants his photographs into the social sphere of language and history, implying that all his aesthetic strategies and concerns have a social lineage.

Paul's practice is generally peripatetic, moving from home to home, constructing aesthetic and social spheres. However, all of the works shown in this exhibition were produced during a residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem, an institution whose very name solicits a reflective response to the working space and compels artists to interrogate the meaning and structures of "studio" practice. One of Paul's strategies was to import his notions of community, family, domesticity, and home into the studio space on 125th Street that he occupied for almost a year.

There is historical precedent for this same strategy very near to where Paul's images were produced. Just two blocks from the Studio Museum is a late-19th-century brownstone that once housed the GGG Photo Studio run by James VanDerZee, a photographer who chronicled Harlem and its denizens for six decades. VanDerZee's portraits of socialites, Garveyites, musicians, and his occasional street scene are now prized as historical documentation of Harlem life. Though VanDerZee — like any commercial studio photographer — constructed tableaux and touched up his prints, his interventions are commonly overlooked, ignored in a hindsight desire to construct a narrative of black cultural life in New York. As Paul shot in his own Harlem studio 80 years later, he too used many of the same techniques — recreating a space that feels domestic, with fabric backdrops, props, and soft light — to give a sense of intimacy and candor.

Yet Paul is aware, given the specificity of his subjects, of the "documentary" lens through which his audience may view the work — both now and, especially, in the future — as well as of his own documentary impulse. Paul clearly shares a genuine emotional bond with his subjects, and, though critical of photography's role in constructing an image and history, uses it not just to record, but literally to create, a lasting community by documenting fleeting moments that accumulate into something approaching history. Each time a subject is shot and exhibited in relation to another subject or group of photographs, Paul reinforces an idea of a very specific community, very much akin to Jean-Luc Nancy's idea that a community is not a fixed entity with subjects moving in and out of it, but something that only comes into being at the moment when individual subjects are exposed to one another. Community, then, is better understood not as a spatial form ("inside" and "outside") but as a temporal entity: it exists at the moment things are brought together in relation to each other.

Paul's Studio Work series codifies a community via his camera and plays out this temporal notion of community in the way prints are physically collaged together or arranged in and around the studio. Yet symbols marking out time weave in and out of several photographs. Paul's succulent plants and coiled orange peels are more than props or personal effects; as organic objects, they lend a memento mori feel to the photographs, especially as the peels desiccate, darken, and harden over the weeks of shooting. The plants and peels appear and re-appear, several men appear and re-appear, in what may seem like a conceptual strategy of repetition and redundancy. But when one considers the deep affective register in which Paul operates with his subjects, one realizes that these images of beautiful people appear again and again in order to stave off their inevitable disappearance.

NAOMI BECKWITH is a Curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) in Chicago and focuses on conceptual practices in contemporary art. Prior to joining the MCA, Beckwith was Special Project Coordinator for BAMart at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, a Helena Rubenstein Critical Studies Fellow at the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program, the Whitney Lauder Curatorial Fellow at the Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, and, most immediately, Associate Curator at the Studio Museum in Harlem where she also managed the Artist-in-Residence program.



A CONVERSATION

BETWEEN BOŠKO BLAGOJEVIĆ AND PAUL MPAGI SEPUYA

Boško Blagojević: It's nice to be back here in your studio, Paul, since I figured it would be the best place to talk about Studio Work. How did this body of work come into being?

Paul Mpagi Sepuya: Well it all started with the fact that for twelve months I was given this empty space up in Harlem. I didn't really have a specific idea of what I was going to make at first. I just continued to work as I always do, inviting people into the space, except now it was a studio and not my home anymore.

BB: The concept of a residency is always interesting, because you're not only given a limited amount of time, but also a new space. So did you start with a blank slate? Or did you bring previous work with you into the space?

PMS: Originally I had the idea that I would bring things I'd already been working on and sort of refine or edit them. But when I actually moved into the space I thought, "I'm going to start completely clean and fill it in." But I always wanted the studio to be open, and I wanted to be able to invite people to come up and spend time there with me. That way the studio is permeable.

BB: Open but private.

PMS: Yes. And there were times when there was a lot happening in the studio, and times when there wasn't. That's where the still lifes came from, for example. Even when there's no one there to photograph, my studio is still inhabited by all of these images, all of the pictures you see around you right now. And so I'm sitting at my desk, and I'm looking at things and reviewing things, editing and reading, surfing the Internet, and looking out the window, composing images. And a lot of that time is where the transformation in the work happens.

BB: Let's talk about the portraits for a moment, and the way you installed them in your studio and in the two Studio Work shows. When I think of posing for a portrait, it's always about composing a face that's facing a world that can't be seen at that moment. But the series of portraits you made at the Studio Museum suggests another possibility: they bear a face that seems composed not for meeting the world, but rather for meeting other portraits. Pictures meeting pictures...

PMS: Those installations were very much informed by the relationships of the people in the portraits to each other, as well as to myself. Because of the way in which the work is made, it exists within certain social networks and relational matrices.

Because a lot of the people in these pictures have worked with me before, there's an existing framework and history that inflects each picture formally. And each portrait really is made in reference to the other work around it, to the people, but also to the knowledge of who's going to receive it and who's going to live with the final picture.

BB: Do you think it's important to live with the pictures?

PMS: Yes, for me it's very important to live with the work in the studio. Before I had a studio, I lived with it in my room, in my kitchen, in my living room. If you were to come to my home, you would see a mantle with pictures of family and friends. And a lot of them are some of the same images that you see here in my studio.

BB: The scale of the portraits in your Studio Work exhibitions actually suggested an arrangement I would expect to see in a domestic interior, like pictures on a dresser or a credenza. It wasn't the kind of scale or installation of images one usually encounters in a museum.

PMS: I like to deal with photographs as individual objects, similar to how a non-professional might work with them in a domestic space. In terms of the scale, it was partly in response to the scale of the Studio Museum where my installation lived – not wanting to overcrowd it, to force too much work in. It was also partly a decision to keep the final images the same size as the work prints I was making while preparing for the installation.

BB: Not everybody keeps pictures in their home, but everybody does photography these days. It's part of social life, taking pictures, doing things...

PMS: I think that's definitely incorporated in what I do. But also, a lot of the people I photograph are artists and image makers themselves, so it's like we're constantly making work back and forth. And so sometimes I may have been taking a portrait of a friend, but they were taking snapshots at the same time that they then give back to me. Or I've asked people to send me any kind of writing or thoughts about the whole experience. So it really is like back and forth, and there's not necessarily a hierarchy of who's in control of what with the final image. I think sharing images is so important. That's one of the great things about photography. I kind of love it when they become people's Facebook pictures, and now a few friends have used them for Grindr profiles.

BB: Really? They're getting laid with your pictures?

PMS: Hopefully! [Laughs.]

BB: So how is making a portrait of yourself different to making one of your friends?

PMS: Well, the self-portraits are, in a way, kind of me not only just trying to figure out myself and my body, but also figuring out myself in relation to these other people.

BB: That's interesting, because it does indeed seem like you're never alone in your self-portraits. You're still there with all these other figures. The room is never empty somehow.

PMS: Yeah. The self-portraits tended to take place either just before or right after taking a portrait of someone else, and there's an interesting back-and-forth reflection. Sometimes they were actually made on the fringes of portraits of other people, and sometimes it was just me, alone in the space – I'd just jump up from my desk, and I'd be like, "Okay, I'm feeling sort of strange. Let me just step back and look at myself and see how I fit in this space," and I'd take a portrait.

BB: And then there are also still-life images in Studio Work.

PMS: Yes. I began making those as a way to make a record of what I was looking at in my workspace at a certain moment. The intention was to produce an image that would be source material for a future arrangement or installation of something for an exhibition. Later on something changed and I started to see that they were actual works in themselves. I was never interested in the idea of making work in a clean, empty studio. So I let myself pull back from the subjects a bit and ground each individual in my studio, and let the world around them creep into the images. It was like an expanded horizon because as you lined up these images, there were these recurring things, objects, that formed a small topography. One of my favorite early images is the initial portrait of my friend Jay [2008], where you can see the bed sheets and how they become so beautiful in and of themselves. And soon after that I started making images without people in them at all, sometimes just the bed landscapes.

BB: I think the still lifes were a really interesting part of the exhibition because they were so different from the portraits. It's saying something's alive when it isn't. The single defining characteristic for a living thing, as opposed to one that isn't, is that the living thing is always changing, becoming. Do you think your pictures change? Do they age?

PMS: What do you mean about pictures aging?

BB: I mean your relationship with the images and how it changes over time. Like

when you're taking a picture of somebody, and then they're still in your life five years later. And then you go and take that original image and make another image of that, a still life.

PMS: The relationship I have with the images in my work changes, and oftentimes they'll become reincorporated into a new work in a different way. For example, in 2011 I did a piece for Jay for a project he was putting together in Berlin, and I had this portrait of him from 2008 that I mentioned before. And the piece I made was actually just re-photographing the original print in my studio, surrounded by the things I was working with at that moment. So the original is called *Jay 2008* and the new work *Jay 2011*. I've also been very interested in the life of these pictures. Sometimes I go to a friend's home and take a snapshot of how they've installed or hung my work. It's always interesting to give someone a portrait of himself. Sometimes people say, "Oh, do I want this picture of myself? Or do I give it to my mom?"

BB: I'm actually most happy when I see art in homes.

PMS: Yes, me too. One of the funny things that happened after the Studio Museum show came down was that all of those pictures ended up back in my house. The art handlers brought them to me and all these images sat in my living room. And then many of those people in the pictures came over to visit. It was like this little army of people looking at you, at us. They sat there for a month, really, or even longer. It was interesting and very different to bring home work that was made in the studio, that was about being in the studio and inhabiting the studio space. Because that way they kind of bring the studio to wherever they are.

BB: This reminds me of a great essay on the studio by Daniel Buren ["Function of the Studio," 1979]. He writes about being a young painter and traveling a great deal one year to visit the studios of many artists across Europe. Years later he would occasionally encounter work he had previously seen on this trip; on these second encounters, however, the work would be in a very different context from the original site of production where he had last seen it — hanging in a gallery or museum, or perhaps in the home of a collector. And in this displacement, Buren felt, something crucial had been taken from the work, something had been irretrievably lost.

PMS: What I find interesting about that is the idea that any work Buren saw was surrounded by all the other things in the studio at the time. And maybe when he encountered the same work in the gallery, he contended with a sort of after-image of that first encounter: of the work situated in the studio, surrounded by all of those other things, objects, paint, canvas...

BB: So you can relate to that?

PMS: I've actually often thought that when I've exhibited works and there's a possibility that they're coming back to the studio, then to me they're not done yet, they are still just in progress.

BB: What will draw you to return to an image?

PMS: Sometimes it's a very strong image that I want to keep up as a reference in moving forward. And sometimes it's because I feel that something's not quite finished, and I need to keep looking at it, or that something needs to be added to it, or that it needs to exist in the context of something else – some other material or some other time. What I do are not environmental portraits, but I'm interested in that sort of afterglow, that after-image. And I always want to incorporate that into wherever they end up going.

BOŠKO BLAGOJEVIĆ received his B.A. from Fordham University and later participated in the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program. His writing and interviews have appeared in both online and print journals, as well as several bound volumes and exhibition catalogs. He has exhibited in New York City at Audio Visual Arts, Anthology Film Archives, and the Emily Harvey Foundation. He has lectured at Parsons The New School for Design and the School of Visual Arts. Along with Xenia Pachikov, he is co-founder of Platform for Pedagogy.

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Aperçu

PAUL MPAGI SEPUYA (1982, San Bernardino, CA) lives and works in Brooklyn, New York. He studied photography and imaging at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts. His work has been exhibited nationally and internationally and featured and reviewed in *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, *Interview*, *Capricious Magazine*, *V*, *Paper*, and *BUTT*, among other publications. Sepuya published the zine series *SHOOT* from 2005–2008. He has participated in the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council's Workspace program (2009–2010), Woodstock A-I-R (2010), and the Studio Museum in Harlem's Artist-in-Residence program (2010–2011).

FRANKLIN ART WORKS is a visual arts center in Minneapolis, MN devoted to presenting cutting-edge contemporary work by local, national, and international artists. www.franklinartworks.org