

Paul Mpagi Sepuya

TRANCE

10 Jan–1 Mar 2025

39 Walker

Bortolami is pleased to present *TRANCE*, an exhibition of new works by Paul Mpagi Sepuya, and the artist's second solo show with the gallery. With a new body of works depicting the studio and gallery, Sepuya weaves together new and ongoing lines of inquiry to create a stark constellation of image and form that reverberates with a hypnotic tension. The exhibition expands and shifts the ways the artist depicts interior space in photographs by extending his studio pictures from the constructed "staged" area into the as-is quotidian workspace, and further still, by photographing within the same gallery where the images are now exhibited.

A sculptural diptych depicts one of these workspace genre scenes, its physicality drawing our attention to the center of the gallery. Photographs are mounted to scenic flats on wheels, echoing the large wheeled mirror props Sepuya uses to compose scenes in the studio, visible in several photographs on view. Each "mobile flat" sculpture bears an image made in the reflection of one of these studio mirrors, corresponding to that object as if holding an uncanny fixed mirror-image. The doubling of the sculptural form in the gallery with the functional form in pictures of the studio produces a disorientation akin to a house of mirrors.

Linear perspective functions as a crucial element in Sepuya's pictures, shifting between visible, invisible, and not-so-much perceived. The present diptychs each display two adjacent views of the camera separated by the subtle rotation of its position on the tripod, distorting the visual plane. The divided camera in *Studio Mirror Diptych* (*_DSF3596*, *_DSF3598*), picturing its own reflection in a large studio mirror, splits perspective, directing it outward from the composition. In *Studio Diptych with Gazing Ball* (*_DSF5808*, *_DSF5811*), the gazing ball centers a perspective in its reflective surface, but again the rotating camera disorients the broader view, turning the perspective of the wider scene outwards.

At the core of *TRANCE* is a series showing the gazing ball placed on the head of the tripod and then photographed from six relational positions in the studio—those of the legs of the tripod and the mid-points between each leg. Two of the studio positions are triangulated here with a third gazing ball photographed in the gallery. Each photograph both reflects the studio in the gazing ball and defines a new space around it.

Since 2023 the gazing ball has appeared in the background of the artist's pictures where his friends, in couples or with multiple partners, were invited to the studio to be photographed while engaging in sex play. In *TRANCE*, Sepuya seeks to use the gazing ball as a way to continue a conversation around optics and the origins of photography vis-à-vis lenses, self-absorption, and pictorial

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space. A luxury object bestowed with metaphysical powers in thirteenth-century Venice, the gazing ball holds a more decorative, kitschy role in gardens today. In the context of Sepuya's oeuvre, its form and function expand indexed histories of lens-based media as they pertain to reflexivity, the gaze, and the erotics of imaging oneself and others.

Distortion along another axis appears here for the first time, with the artist's introduction of the negative image. This inversion makes visible, to an even greater extent, the smudges, fingerprints, and other traces on the mirror surfaces depicted. Drawn to these highlighted aberrations, Sepuya offers a group of new dye-sublimation works made from photographs taken at night. The resulting images demonstrate experiments with "white" light in contrast to the red darkroom safelight or club-like blue glow of the artist's other recent nighttime scenes.

All of these inquiries come together under *TRANCE*. There is a trance-like state invoked by the conditions established in a prolonged practice or play. Adhering to these conditions, set by the patterns or scripts of behavior we follow, allows us to reach a state where focused mechanical precision meets involuntary excess pleasure. This balancing act between continuous stimulation and ecstatic feeling sustains our trance.

Paul Mpagi Sepuya (b. 1982, Los Angeles) is a Los Angeles-based artist working in photography and as an Associate Professor in Media Arts at UC San Diego. His work will be included in the forthcoming 14th Mercosur Biennial, opening in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in March 2025. Recent solo exhibitions include Nottingham Contemporary in England; Deichtoallen in Hamburg, Germany; the Bemis in Omaha, Nebraska; a survey of work from 2006-2018 at CAM St. Louis; and a project for the 2019 Whitney Biennial.

The artist's largest monograph to date, *Dark Room A–Z*, was published by Aperture in November 2024. Works by Sepuya are held in the collections of the Baltimore Museum of Art, the Getty and Guggenheim Museums, LACMA, MoMA, SFMoMA, the Studio Museum in Harlem, and the Whitney Museum of American Art, among others.