

BORTOLAMI

55 Walker

Paul Mpagi Sepuya

D.R.M.P.

13 May – 18 June 2022

Bortolami is pleased to present *D.R.M.P.*, an exhibition of new works by Paul Mpagi Sepuya at the gallery, which builds on a cumulative and related series of projects under the loose title of *Dark Room* (2017 - ongoing). This exhibition introduces the *Daylight Studio* works to the series, depicting the artist both constructing and reclining in the space, along with images made with the artist's friend and zine collaborator Caleb Kruzel, also known by the Instagram handle @boyfriend.dick. *D.R.M.P.* further expands upon the artist's process of image making, entangling the double-entendre of the site that is the *dark room*, while simultaneously investigating themes of visibility, the circulation of images and information, racialization as material and subject position within photography, and the studio as both a figurative and physical concept.

Sepuya engages select conceptual and aesthetic devices from 19th century studio photography, reinvented to confront contemporary issues in portraiture. At the forefront in this reimagining is the translation of the early photographic subject who is firstly a model and study as well as muse, and translated by Sepuya in his photographs into a more intimate matrix of friend and muse. This new role is best highlighted in Sepuya's figurative images featuring Caleb Kruzel/@boyfriend.dick, who further complicates his role as subject by co-producing his own portrait. A symbiosis develops between the artist and Kruzel, as each subject oscillates between the varying roles of friend, study, and muse. In *Model Study (OX5A6947)* the artist and Kruzel playfully photograph one another, while *Figures (OX5A6850)* presents the two subjects as an intertwined sculptural nude, a direct reference to the photographs documenting the studio of Auguste Rodin. Expanding this concept, through his use of multiple cameras and signature mirror reflections, the artist employs what he calls "circuits of desiring look." Although the face of the subject is obscured, the viewer is presented with the themes of visibility, public versus private, and solicitation and flirtation.

Specific lighting devices and mise-en-scène, such as the introduction of curtains, pillows, carpets, and Savonarola chairs, amongst other components, create a direct reference to European and North American 19th century daylight studio photography. Working in this mode, with a nod to history, Sepuya calls into question the very essence of a studio space, expanding the definition of what this space has been as well as what it can be. The triptych *Daylight Studio Mirror (OX5A1181, OX5A1716, OX5A1708)* presents the viewer with this novel understanding of the studio. Here, Sepuya moves through each frame, from left to right, suggesting the passage of time, doing away with the static nature of traditional portraiture, and emphasizing the physicality of the space. Working in tandem, the aesthetic and formal devices allow the viewer to realize the artist's goal of creating an expanded studio physically, temporally, and conceptually.

The inclusion of friends and collaborators, each with various social media platforms, inherently links that which exists inside the frame and the space beyond. Kruzel is represented not only as himself, but also as his persona across social media, providing a layered interpretation of the subject beyond his photographic portrayal. Social media, from Instagram to OnlyFans, is inextricable to each image and its subjects, informing what and who we see. Navigating the space beyond the frame, beyond the studio itself, and into the world of social media and its promised notoriety, is essential in fully developing each portrait, and ultimately observing the subjects themselves. By imaging the oft-invisible but always present exterior forces of the portrait making process, Sepuya conveys the complex nature of contemporary portraiture

Paul Mpagi Sepuya (b. 1982, San Bernardino, CA) is an artist working in photography whose projects weave together histories and possibilities of portraiture, queer and homoerotic networks of production and collaboration, and the material and conceptual potential of blackness at the heart of the medium. His interests also include queer

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literary modernism, questions of artistic responsibility and care regarding representation and refusal. Sepuya received a BFA from New York University's Tisch School of the Arts in 2004, and an MFA in photography from UCLA in 2016. Solo museum exhibitions include "Double Enclosure" at Fotomuseum Amsterdam (2018), "Drop Scene" at Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts (2020), and "Paul Mpagi Sepuya," a survey of work from 2006 - 2018 presented at Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis and University of Houston Blaffer Art Museum. Recent museum exhibitions also include a project for the 2019 Whitney Biennial, "Being: New Photography 2018" at the Museum of Modern Art, "Trigger" at the New Museum New York City, and group exhibitions at the Walker Art Center, Contemporary Art Museum Houston, the Guggenheim Museum, and the Getty Museum. He was a recipient of the 2019 Rauschenberg Residency. He is Associate Professor in Media Arts at the University of California San Diego and has taught at CalArts and Bard MFA. Sepuya's work is in the permanent collections of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, MOCA Los Angeles, the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Guggenheim Museum, the Getty Museum, the Studio Museum in Harlem, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the ICA Boston, the Baltimore Museum of Art, the International Center for Photography, Stedelijk Museum, and the Carnegie Museum, among others.