

Exposure

Paul Mpagi Sepuya

27 January – 5 May 2024

Paul Mpagi Sepuya’s intimate studio portraits explore the relationships between camera, subject and viewer. For the past twenty years, Sepuya has trained his eye exclusively on people he knows—friends, lovers and members of the artist’s queer and creative communities—who have moved in and out of the space of his studio. His photographs are not only images of desire, but also images about the making of images. They are concerned with the operations of the photographic act, the technology of the medium itself, and the power relations of the gaze. As Sepuya describes, ‘these are all things that I wanted to tie together

through a different kind of origin point of Black subjectivity, homoerotic desire and queer social formations.'

Sepuya himself is often present in his work, glimpses of his body appearing in reflections, or from outside the frame to highlight him as the maker of the images. The recurring use of mirrors is both practical and symbolic: a tool to hold and layer fragments of images, as well as a means to deny the direct gaze of the viewer's eye. Made always in a single exposure with no digital manipulation, the image's construction is often revealed through the inclusion of the camera and tripod. They invite a dynamic act of looking, a search for clues in how to read the different layers of the image: what is there and what is a reflection? Who is looking at whom? What is obscured and what is revealed?

The history of photography, particularly that of daylight studios in 19th- century Europe and North America, forms the basis of Sepuya's most recent body of work, *Daylight Studio/Dark Room Studio* (2021 –ongoing). This series coincides with the artist's relocation to a larger studio in 2021, a skylit space where the changing conditions of light could be observed over the course of a day. Here Sepuya began gathering props and furniture seen in early portrait studios—velvet cushions and woven rugs, European pedestals and African stools, and other objects from the height of Europe's colonial exploits—and thinking about how the queer, racialised bodies he photographs might be situated amongst them. This exhibition brings these new explorations, including three new sculptural pieces, into conversation with a

selection of works from the past eight years around different ideas and acts of ‘exposure’.

The works in Gallery 1 consider the photographic exposure and acts of image-making, as well as the intimate dynamics of obscuring and revealing. From often unseen moments of queer intimacy to the traces of people left behind in the studio, these works also underscore the formal and technical elements of shooting in varying conditions of light. Using red ‘safelights’, Sepuya refers to the darkroom both as a space where film is processed and as a site where other forms of exposure and revelation might occur. These *Dark Room Studio* works are often produced with an exposure time of several seconds, creating a spectral distortion in these otherwise luminous images. Elsewhere in his *Mirror Study* series, which he began in 2014,

Sepuya frustrates the logic of spectacle as it plays against the viewer's voyeuristic impulse. He reflects, 'We figures in front of the mirror perform for a viewing audience that is ourselves—a spectacle that at once asks for the voyeur, yet in a modernist joke, disregards the necessity of this outside, beholding eye.'

Gallery 2 expands the notion of exposure to encompass ideas of exposition (also from the Latin root exponere), the act of making public, of performance. In many of the images presented here, Sepuya's studio becomes a space for play, pleasure and empowerment—a kind of stage where images are constructed through casual and informal interactions with his subjects. Playing off the nature of his relationships with the people he invites into the studio, Sepuya often encourages his subjects

to locate the pleasure of experimenting with self-presentation.

***Exposure* is the first institutional presentation of Los Angeles-based artist Paul Mpagi Sepuya's work in the UK.**

RELATED EVENTS

Artist Talk: Paul Mpagi Sepuya Saturday 27 Jan, 3 – 4:30pm Join artist Paul Mpagi Sepuya and Ali Roche for a presentation and conversation on his practice.

EXHIBITION WALKTHROUGHS Wednesday 7 Feb, 12pm

Welcome Walkthrough

Explore the exhibition with our team and community partners Emmanuel House and

Skate Nottingham, followed by refreshments and conversation in the café afterwards.

Wednesday 28 Feb, 2pm

Curator's Walkthrough

Join Nottingham Contemporary's curators for a tour of our spring exhibitions.

Wednesday 6 Mar, 1pm

With Natifah White, dance artist, self-archivist.

Tuesday 30 Apr, 1pm

With Jazz Swali, curator and programme coordinator, BACKLIT Gallery.

12.30 TALKS

12.30pm every Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday, starting Tuesday 6 Feb

Join one of our friendly Gallery Assistants for a short exploration of one of our current exhibitions. For more details visit our website.

FREE FAMILY ACTIVITIES

February Half-Term: 13 Feb – 15 Feb

Early Years Workshops: Mon 4 Mar & Mon 22 Apr

Easter Holiday Workshops: 2 Apr – 11 Apr

Explore the themes in the exhibitions through making and play.

The Screen at Contemporary

Light After Dark Film Festival 2024: 8 – 16 Mar

A city-wide immersive film festival for intimate and collective encounters with cinema. Made possible with support from Film Hub Midlands through funds from the National Lottery. Film Hub Midlands support people to watch, show, and make films in the Midlands.

The exhibition is curated by Nicole Yip, Chief Curator at Nottingham Contemporary.

All works courtesy the artist and Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zurich, Paris, unless otherwise stated.

Paul Mpagi Sepuya: *Exposure* is generously supported by the Paul Mpagi Sepuya Exhibition Circle: Bortolami, DOCUMENT, Chicago & Lisbon, Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Vielmetter Los Angeles, & those who wish to remain anonymous.

Exhibition graphics by Studio Marie Lusa.

For more information about the exhibition, related events and learning programmes, visit nottinghamcontemporary.org or scan here:



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If you would like a calm space to reflect during your visit, please feel free to use Gallery Zero (room adjacent to Gallery 1), where you can also find support resources and tools. Please speak to a member of staff for more information.

Environmental: Nottingham Contemporary is committed to advancing sustainability within the organisation and aims to explore and embed sustainable working practices and habits within our workplace and across the sector. This includes standardising

environmental considerations at all stages of decision making.

In *Exposure*, most of the artworks have been transported using road freight. In instances where new editions have been produced, framing and fabrication was completed in the UK. Our exhibition notes are printed on FSC Mix paper (Forest Stewardship Council ® certified products manufactured with a variety of sources including FSC-certified virgin fibre, controlled wood and/or recycled materials).