

Jonathan VanDyke on Paul Mpagi Sepuya
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Paul Sepuya's large-scale recent photographs are fascinating visual puzzles. They are photographs of cameras, mounted upon tripods and dead center in a white-walled studio space. The cameras are unattended, facing us, as if we have taken our seat in a portrait studio and the photographer has gone on break. The tidy walls and the objects that appear behind and around the camera – snapshots, bits of fruit on the floor, scattered Post-it notes, a roll of tape – suggest an artist's process; but if this is an artist's studio, it is composed, coy. We are not in the trash heap of libidinal desire that we associate with Francis Bacon's workspace. Fragments of intimate photos (imaging empty beds, nude limbs and torsos, flowers seen at close range as if to be smelled) float through this space. They do not drift randomly like thought bubbles, but stick to the grid, like "windows" on a computer screen. While superimposed on top of the pictorial space, these pictures offer psychological depth. Their suggestive, desire-rich fragments linger in the empty air, like sensation after sex or the keen insight released after an argument.

At the top of the picture plane, high enough to be out of reach, the studio wall ends. A sliver of ceiling and a bigger room, abutting this one, come into view above the white partition. For a minute, this view of deep space makes me check myself: am I looking in a mirror, at something behind me, and not at a photograph? I am reminded of the flat, reflective "paintings" of Michelangelo Pistoletto, a premonition of selfie culture, where the viewer confronts her own image in the picture plane. In Sepuya's prints we can't literally see ourselves, but I feel as if I've walked into something uncannily familiar. His assemblage of cameras, objects, and bodies reflects the way we experience and make imagery now. This wall we project ourselves upon is just a thin wall, after all; and the shutter might be about to open, marking us in a space of making. -- JVD