chorus, filmed by Zackary Drucker. In Drucker's contribution, *Everything We Love is Fleeting*, the artist leads a chorus of trans women who collectively recite a poetic call to perseverance and resistance. Speaking individually or in pairs, each chorus member recites lines that soon build into a synchronized declaration of liberation directed at the viewer. "Repairing masculinity is a full-time job for billions of people and centuries to come," Drucker and Mz Neon say together. "Are you doing your part?" asks Rain Valdez.

In the scenes of Rosales driving around at night—an extension of her recent series of nocturnal photographs—she narrates to an unnamed passenger. They share stories as they pass by personal landmarks: the alley where one first saw a porn magazine, how the grief over witnessing the death of a loved one led the other on a drinking binge. As Rosales and her companion cross the First Street Bridge from Boyle Heights into Downtown Los Angeles, they are abruptly stopped by a line of police officers who have assembled in response to this summer's protests. This inclusion snaps the viewer back from Rosales' personal stories of the past into the harsh realities of the present.

Channel Flip is not a coherent response to the pandemic or the current social justice uprising. As in her archival work, Rosales doesn't try to fit her collaborators' contributions into any overarching structure or adapt their narratives to fit into her own. Instead, she lets them speak for themselves, providing a fractured vision that bounces between longing, memory, trauma, violence, solidarity, and resistance. For months, we have been locked up in quarantine, craving community while also trying to find ways to put our bodies to collective, meaningful use. As with each of these artists, we are all searching for a way to navigate these uncertain times, and each video offers a very different, personal window onto our collective struggle. Meant for isolated virtual consumption, *Channel Flip* offers an intimate, embodied sense of the connection for which we long.

Paul Mpagi Sepuya at Vielmetter Los Angeles

March 14–July 25, 2020

As whatever is the exact opposite of luck would have it, Paul Mpagi Sepuya's solo exhibition at Vielmetter Los Angeles, *A conversation ~~about~~ around pictures*, opened at the precise moment that the statewide shelter-in-place order took effect. It remained open, but unseen, for 18 weeks; I visited in March, when gallery-going still felt like an appropriate early-pandemic activity. A sleek, motion-operated bottle of hand sanitizer on the front desk welcomed me, too-forcefully ejecting its liquid-y contents and spraying the neat stacks of press releases and show cards nearby.

Viewing the pictures in-person and at their intended scale, I was struck by my sense of proximity to their subjects, felt acutely because of my new distance from virtually all other people. Although they were all created pre-pandemic, Sepuya's pictures feel like they could have been made in quarantine: they all play out within the four walls of his studio, the same equipment arranged and rearranged. The images sometimes gesture to the world beyond their frames, including things that conventional studio photographs would exclude: a pile of clothes, the jutting poles of equipment, the space outside the rectangular backdrop. But most notable is the inclusion of the subject's iPhones, for it is their presence that opens the space of the photograph—not so much visually, but symbolically—and gestures outward to the vast circulation of images via social media, the world of pictures beyond *this* picture.

Characteristically, Sepuya's work plays with the question of authorship as a means of leveling the power dynamic between photographer and subject. In past works, the presence of two "active" cameras in the scene—one wielded by each of its subjects/makers—made the origin of the photograph ambiguous. Here, Sepuya's subjects are instead afforded agency through the use of the iPhone, the power of which resides not in its ability to make images, but in its ability to share them—and in its democratization of photography more generally. Indeed, as image-making becomes near-universal, photography's power may reside less in its production than in its circulation. Sepuya provides his subjects with agency through their symbolic access to this power, which extends beyond the photographs to the public world of image-based social media, wherein photographs

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1. "Paul Mpagi Sepuya: A conversation ~~about~~ around pictures," Vielmetter Los Angeles, 2020, https://vielmetter.com/exhibitions/paul-mpagi-sepuya-2020.

have currency through their dissemination.

By allowing iPhones into the picture-space, Sepuya shares the powerful act of looking at oneself with his subjects as they enact tender, private performances for the camera(s). In the eponymous *A conversation around pictures (_1090454)* (2019), Sepuya sits behind the camera as a second figure peers out from behind his shoulder, most of his face covered by his iPhone. On its screen is a second scene: a panorama-in-progress has haphazardly stitched together a 360-degree view of the surrounding studio, rendering the faces and bodies of the two men in glitchy, fragmented parts. In *Model Study (0X5A4029)* (2017), a seated figure in a cool, white jockstrap poses for a portrait but has turned to face away. Though he does not present himself for the camera, the voyeuristic perspective is reciprocated: he holds up an iPhone which reflects his face in miniature—visible only because he photographs it himself. He is not only seen, but is actively involved in seeing himself.

Sepuya often refers to the infinite loop, or the "closed circuit of mirror and camera,"[1] in his pictures: the photographs are all shot through a mirror, so the scene is already "closed" to viewers, as they are not reflected in that mirror. The inclusion of the iPhones begins to open this circuit because the phone pictures belong to the subjects, have lives of their own beyond the photoshoot as they are presumably shared, posted, and circulated.

Given the often-toxic pervasiveness of iPhone use, it's easy to look at the figure in *Model Study* as distracted or self-involved. Certainly, the prevalence of phone cameras and social media in contemporary life has produced side effects both personal and global (self-involvement being the least of them): damaging effects on mental health, the degradation of privacy, and state-sanctioned surveillance. But Sepuya's photographs don't critique selfie culture as vanity: self-portraiture is, necessarily, the language of the unseen. And despite its algorithmic biases (making online virality something of a myth akin to that of the American dream), social media has a similarly equalizing power.

Amidst the June uprisings, Sepuya launched a fundraiser via Instagram, offering an unlimited editioned "solidarity" print to anyone who donated a minimum of $250 to one of several BLM-adjacent advocacy organizations.[2] While not technically part of the Vielmetter exhibition, the solidarity photograph, *Studio (0X5A4983)*, is presumably an outtake of *Studio (0X5A5051)* (both works 2020). (Sepuya titles his works with the RAW file numbers assigned by his camera, creating a traceable lineage.) The solidarity photograph is simpler than its exhibited counterpart, and is starkly devoid of Sepuya's usual layers of mirrors, bodies, and cameras. Instead, a single camera, sans operator, stands on a tripod at the photograph's center against two black backdrops. On the right edge of the frame, a partially-obscured photographic print hangs on the studio wall. In it, two entangled Black bodies hold up their own camera, which points forward. Although the circuit is still technically closed, without a visible maker/operator, the viewer is implicated by the central camera—especially in the context of Sepuya's call to action. Looking at the solidarity photograph feels, deeply, like being looked at—or perhaps more precisely, like being prompted to look at yourself. It is a picture as much about self-portraiture as anything else.

As of this writing, the initiative has raised over 215 thousand dollars, and while the Vielmetter exhibit remained largely unseen through the pandemic, one photograph, at least, will not only be widely seen, but widely *owned*. Through the profound circulation and collective ownership of his solidarity print, Sepuya activated the power of image-sharing as a real-time demonstration of the power that the subjects in the Vielmetter exhibition symbolically enact. The print's vast distribution echoes Sepuya's subject-as-collaborator model for making photographs, wherein collective ownership becomes a meaningful strategy for mutual aid. A reminder that hanging on the wall is not art's end-all, the viral spread of *Studio (0X5A4983)* generated real money as a tool for furthering agency within the real communities to which many of Sepuya's subjects belong.

Both the camera and the institutional space of the gallery/museum are mechanisms of record-keeping that have historically and continually excluded Black, brown, and queer bodies. The current movement for Black life has been propelled by the online dissemination of images of Black death. Still, it is worth

2. P. M. Sepuya (@pagmi), "THOSE W THE RESOURCES, GIVE : this open edition print is yours for a minimum $250 donation," Instagram, June 2, 2020, https://www.instagram.com/p/CA8UgjUFtZ6/.

3. Teju Cole, "When the Camera Was a Weapon of Imperialism. (And When It Still Is.)," *The New York Times Magazine*, Feb. 6, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/06/magazine/when-the-camera-was-a-weapon-of-imperialism-and-when-it-still-is.html.

Paul Mpagi Sepuya, *Studio (0X5A4983)* (2020). Archival pigment print, 6 x 9 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and Vielmetter Los Angeles.

Paul Mpagi Sepuya, *Model Study (0X5A4029)* (2017). Archival pigment print, 60 x 40 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and Vielmetter Los Angeles.

considering who has the right to share these images, and what it means that a widespread outrage has seemingly relied on them. The very language used to enact photography ("to shoot," "to take") reveals the medium's inherent kinship with violence and possession. If we expect a future for photography that is any different from its colonial past,[3] its subjects must be—like Sepuya's—collaborators involved in a photography that is collective, rather than hierarchical.

Simone Leigh at David Kordansky Gallery

May 26–July 11, 2020

A chartreuse-hued ceramic bust by Simone Leigh immediately reels in the eye from across the room. Balancing on a cylindrical pedestal at David Kordansky Gallery, *Figure (135Y-2)* (all works 2020) depicts the bosom, neck, and face of an unidentified woman. A smooth arc of hair forms a crown (or deific aura) above her head. Her defined nose and lips rest below a vacant slope of skin where her eyes should be. The figure's slender arms abruptly end above the elbows, with one side more truncated than the other—a fissure that suggests a temporal break, as if she were an archaeological vestige from another epoch. Leigh's fragmented sculptures of anonymous Black female figures (which she has referred to as both reflecting and directly speaking to Black women), impart a multitude of references, from functional architecture and vernacular ceramics (specifically face jug pottery, a tradition associated with enslaved African Americans in the 19th century), to 20th century minimalism and contemporary abstraction. By also subtly invoking classical statuary—the false paragon of a white-centric art history—alongside these many historical framing devices, Leigh fosters a critical art practice that melds diverse cultural references while privileging the representation of Black women. In this context, her humanesque figures function as sacred, living vessels: active sites of agency and resistance that retool vulnerability as a form of power.

Figure (135Y-2) directly faces another female figure, this one headless, situated on the opposite side of the gallery. Titled *Martinique*, this figure comprises a similarly sculpted bust, with two abbreviated arms and a nude torso, the surface of which drips with a thick, milky-white glaze. In place of a pedestal, the lower half of *Martinique*'s body swoops outward at the hips to form a bulbous bell, which also recalls a jug or a hoop skirt—voluminous shapes that dually point to the body as a container and as an object contained. In the tradition of 19th century face jug pottery, hand-hewn vessels functioned as critical sites of authorship, with an object's formal surface becoming a malleable receptacle for gesture, language, and mark making—acts of creative ingenuity that doubled as modes of resistance. (Notable here is the artist and poet David Drake, who, while enslaved in South Carolina, crafted thickly glazed cisterns inscribed with poetry and signed, "Dave"—the first enslaved potter known to utilize such markings.) Sculpturally, *Martinique*'s alabaster surface echoes the indexical, almost sacred nature of these vessels, reflecting Leigh's extensive research into their histories. *Martinique*'s craftsmanship—with luscious pools of glaze and visible fingerprints —reveals a haptic matrix of hand and tool markings related to her construction. Like both ceramic forms and a real mortal body, she functions as a vessel for the physical history inscribed on her surface, conjuring bodily agency and vulnerability through the tangible language of her making.

Face jugs have enigmatic spiritual undertones, and *Martinique* can also be interpreted as such a reliquary. Her headless ivory torso boasts a proud posture suggestive of an ancient goddess—pointing to the presence of a worshipful ideal—while her broken limbs imply the immobile fragility of a relic. Her chimerical lower half both furthers and complicates these dichotomies. While her stoneware skirt functions as a protective, fortress-like barrier designed to maintain the sanctity of her body, it also paradoxically acts as an imposing, bell-shaped corset that constricts her anatomical form. The work's title, *Martinique*, conceptually buttresses this dialectic of containment: the titular Caribbean island of Martinique was thrust into the Transatlantic slave trade by French colonizers, who pillaged its resources and forced it into economic dependence—the island remains a French territory today. (Martinique was also

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