



PAUL MPAGI SEPUYA: RECENT PICTURES / A JOURNAL

2013 jan 18 — feb 15, clough-hanson gallery
rhodes college, memphis, tennessee



By Christopher Trout



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The photographs that make up Paul Mpagi Sepuya's show *Recent Pictures / A Journal* were taken between the summer of 2011 and the fall of 2012. This diverse collection of images presents a broad scope of subject matter that at first appears to be a departure from the artist's earlier bodies of work that operated within clearly defined parameters. These earlier conventions allowed the artist to focus exclusively on intimate portraits of individuals (*Beloved Objects & Amorous Subject, Revisited*, 2005-2007) or investigations of the physicality / sculptural qualities of the photographic portraits themselves (*Studio Work*, 2010-2011). In *Recent Pictures / A Journal* we see Sepuya's consistent clarity and sensitivity now paired with a more outward investigation. Together the new photographs create a social webbing of sorts that begins to enumerate the artist's broader interests. Taken at the artist's home in Brooklyn, in visits to California, and during his travels to Copenhagen, Paris, and Barcelona, these photographs draw from the artist's life-experiences. The artist sees this process as embracing the "influence of generations of personal and creative exchanges."¹ In doing so this collection serves as a kind of personal memoir for the artist.

Sepuya's intimate photographs provide a glimpse into his rich personal world. In *Ryan Reading Christopher* (2012) the artist presents a closely cropped image of a young man caught in repose. His legs are vertical against a wall while he holds the book he is reading in his lap. The light is soft, but clear. The viewpoint of the photographer is right next to Ryan on the bed or floor. As a result we, the viewers, are sharing Ryan's space. The words on the pages are clearly legible to us; we are experiencing this moment of closeness together. We can't help but feel a connection. A similar affection is felt in the other portraits from the series. In *Guillaume* (2012) the portrait is closely cropped once more; we see a young man leaning back on a weathered wooden lounge chair. His hand is raised, shielding his eyes and face from the harsh summer sun. His eyes are softly focused, as if waking from a nap, and he is smiling fondly at the photographer. There is a profound comfort in these pictures, both in the looseness in the way they are composed and in the restful demeanor of Sepuya's subjects. These pictures leave us with a sense that we are witnessing just a small part of a larger experience. We are presented with a cropped view of the world. We are also keenly aware that there was a *before* and an *after* to the specific moments captured in the photographs. It is this sense of intrigue that provides us with the desire to know more and makes the photographs linger in the imagination.

Similarly, the landscape images from the series present us with intriguing spaces. Sepuya's *At the Writing Desk, Brooklyn* (2012) shows a writing desk against an open window that looks out onto a lush, green view. The table contains a mason jar holding a single pencil and a vase holding a cutting of deep purple setcreasea. We also find a lighter, a number of books, along with some letters and their respective envelopes. While skillfully composed, the image doesn't give the impression that it is the result of some elaborate, time-consuming vanitas construction. The scene feels found and wholly without artifice. These unpeopled images from the collection present discrete, inviting spaces where connections between individuals and their ideas (or other individuals) are found and fostered. The sympathetic landscapes are just as compelling as the wonderful implied narratives sparked by Sepuya's charming portraits.

Sepuya has said that his initial desire to take up photography was a means of initiating social interaction. As a shy, newly out teenager, it was a way for him to meet people and overcome the awkwardness of that first meeting.² As the artist has matured, the viewer (particularly those who have followed his work) has seen his process develop and his projects shift in scope and scale. The artist's nuanced pictures show him expanding the social aspect of his artistic practice. Sepuya's process allows him to nurture close friendships and cultivate relationships with a number of people and places. While these engaging pictures are presented here as a singular collection, they should also be seen as yet another aspect of this extraordinary young artist's ever growing practice. With *Recent Pictures / A Journal* Paul Mpagi Sepuya explores the blind spots and fills in the gaps as he continues to map his personal world.

Hamlett Dobbins
Director, Clough-Hanson Gallery

Cover: *Gyarfas at Amager Strand*
Inside Flap: *Ryan reading Christopher*
Back: *Lalo at San Pol de Mar*
Inside Left: *Come*
Inside Right: *At the writing desk, Brooklyn*

All images courtesy of the artist.
Come, 2012, 19.5x14.5" Collage on paper.
All other images: 2012, Archival pigment print on rag, 31x22" (paper size: 36x24"), Edition of three.

¹ In an e-mail exchange with the artist, December 15, 2012.

² In Paul Mpagi Sepuya, *Beloved Object & Amorous Subject, Revisited*, (New York: Envoy), 9.



