

QUESTIONS: LOVA DE STADEVIC . ANSWERS: PAUL MPAGI SEPUYA

The formal method you apply to your work is one approach to a more viable portraiture, but your work consists of different aspects. While some works seem to concentrate on problems of form and space, others are based on language or literature.

What is the inner connection between your photo and video installations and your zines?

The line connecting these three seemingly different kinds of work is a shared beginning – how does the process of portrait making both define and burden those relationships represented. Between the photo and video installations and the zines are the different ways the image/objects are experienced, revisited and re-contextualized over time. The photo installations are about the weight of physical objects and the possibility of re-arranging through time, the video installations are often two-channel projections where the competing or complementing gazes fall in and out of sync over time, and the zines were a way of letting go of images and letting them be taken apart by the fanzine culture.

How has your work process, or your work in general, developed or changed?

Over the past few years I've become really interested in the narrative authority of the artist. I began making portraits as a way to figure out my relationship to my friends, and men and sexuality, and the working process is one of constructing a story to explain these things. But when you consider both sides of the subject-object relationship, as well as that of the community of viewers who may play a role in that, the idea of the artist's (my) authority is upended.

In this new body of work you really get to see how, while the portrait remains the backbone of my process, the space around it has expanded to include more of the issues surrounding the cross-currents of the gaze. And I am looking more at how the photograph exists as multiple objects across different spaces.

But my working process is very much the same: I still make portraits the way I have since the beginning – it's just me and my friends and my Mamiya RZII. Very casual. I have begun to play around with digital snapshots and many new works (the Landscapes and Bedscapes and collage works in the studio) have come from that and expanded and I think complimented the portraits.

Much of your work makes use of formal concerns, posing questions about the specific nature of photographs and knowledge. How do you challenge, rather than corroborate preconceived notions in photography as a medium and does the experience become an abstract exercise?

The experience doesn't become an abstract exercise because even when I apply abstract idea I may have to a project [the authority of an artist, as explored by Lawrence Durrell, for example in *Alexandria*], it's concretely affects the person or people involved. The work feeds back into ongoing conversations and connections between us. That abstract exercise affected the relationship I have to the object of that work.

I don't know what preconceived notions of photography as a medium are left, but as long as truth isn't one of them I'm fine! The link between photography and knowledge is one of suggestion, and it's editing and context that really flushes that out. I've always paid particular attention to the presentation of the work and how it shapes the knowledge or experience that is suggested to the viewer. I like opening a space for the viewer to complete the circuit by opening a space for them to potentially enter into and alter the order or arrangement or take something away.

The portraits you've made so far are of people whom you know personally, but whom most viewers do not. Is the relative anonymity of the subjects a central part of the process?

The anonymity of the subject's identity is not central, and certainly there is a circle of people who know who everyone in the work is. The anonymity of the conversation, experience, or relationship at the point of making the portrait is more central. I was just having a conversation earlier with another artist about how both of our bodies of work come from personal experiences but the specific details need to be let go of, or transformed into a discussion of possible circumstances and more universal experiences.

In the Beloved Object Amorous Subject series, through the uniform structure and plain approach of the work, the relationship you have to the subjects, seems neutralized. Was the fact that you knew each person a fact that you wanted to address, avoid, or get around?

That I knew them all is indeed something that I wanted to address, and at the same time I wanted to neutralize, or present on the same level, all of these friendships, acquaintances, romantic interests. All stripped down and present in a uniform fashion - to look at all of these types of connections mediated first by sexual or visual attraction.

Is the gender and sexual orientation discussion a crucial point of reference for you and if so, do you depend on the viewer translating your work as political?

These are both issues that come up in my work but that I am not directly addressing critically in the making of the work. I have not, for example, explored the definitions, whatever they may be, that the people have given to their sexuality. But an underlying sexuality is one of the jumping off points to these friendships. Similarly with gender - there have been very few women or trans people in my portraits but they are there. And with the work about family, it has been more about place and the relationship to that than the trans-national racial and ethnic identities.

But this content is all there. It is content that I indirectly bring up, and when it's questioned or addressed it's my responsibility to answer. The viewer is free to look at the work politically and I hope it can participate positively or negatively in those discussions.

How do you create a unique means for people to perceive one another?

I'm not sure if I would say there is a unique means I create, because an echo is not something anyone invented like a Greek myth. Each piece is like a trapped echo between two people that others are privy to hear. But you can never make out what was first uttered. And hearing an echo makes you self-conscious of your own voice.

Viewers will always have their own ideas about a work or build up their own fictions. How open do you want your work to be understood?

I think it's pretty open and touches on familiar and challenging themes about why and how art is made. I'm not a storyteller though I think I'd like to inspire a few.