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Among Friends

In 2005, Paul Mpagi Sepuya was making zines and mailing them around the world. Twenty years later, they reveal how early he grasped the charge of photographing the people around him.

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Against a white wall, Nicolas sits for Paul Mpagi Sepuya bare-chested, his eyes closed. There's a calm to the image, the kind that typically exists between people who trust each other. "He was a stranger who replied to a Craigslist ad I put up," says Sepuya, who was 22 when the two met. The photographer, now 44 and based in Los Angeles, laughs when he remembers it, as if recalling a more permissive time. An exhibitionist who became a friend, Nicolas sat for Sepuya again and again over the next few years, eventually becoming the first subject of *Shoot*, a zine of friends and lovers published between 2005 and 2008.

Sepuya made seven issues, each photocopied on legal-size paper at the Warhol Foundation offices (where he worked at the time) and stapled by hand. He mailed copies to friends and strangers around the world from his home at 144 Powers Street, a rowhouse in East Williamsburg, part of the eastward drift of artists priced out of Manhattan. It was the mid-aughts, and Sepuya was finding his footing in the downtown scene that Lizzy Goodman would later document in *Meet Me in the Bathroom* (2017), which chronicles the meteoric rise of the Strokes, Yeah Yeah Yeahs, and LCD Soundsystem amid a post-9/11 New York. Everyone was meeting everyone in spaces like Lux and 169 Bar. Everyone was an artist, knew one, or wanted to be.

Today's reprint of *Shoot* arrives almost exactly 20 years later, alongside "Focus. Desire," a survey of Sepuya's work from the last two decades, on view at Fotomuseum Winterthur in Switzerland. Organized around three recurring spaces in his practice—the studio, the archive, and the dark room—the exhibition includes the zines themselves, displayed in vitrines alongside portraits, printed matter, and archival material from the period. What the show makes clear is that Sepuya's subject has never just been the person in front of him, but the act of looking itself. In the photographs he's become known for, mirrors, curtains, cut prints, tripods, and the camera stay in view, turning the studio into a place where desire, concealment, and collaboration are all part of the composition.

Where the exhibition traces the full arc of a mature practice, the zines are a reminder of the ambitious young artist who came of age at a time when queer photography ran toward the stylized and overtly erotic, like David LaChapelle and Greg Gorman's images that left nothing to the imagination. Sepuya stripped everything back: No styling, no props, no shadows deployed to

sculpt a perfectly chiseled physique. “They are tame,” he says of these early portraits, recalling that when the zines first circulated, “the images were presumed explicit, even though they weren’t.” When I ask whether desire was already the animating force in the work, he disagrees. “I was meeting all these people in queer spaces,” he says. What drew him in was the charge of curiosity in them—an openness where someone “could be a lover,” or, as he puts it, a kind of “queer friendship between two men that also involves rolling around in bed.”

When I mention the resemblance to Warhol’s *Screen Tests* in these early works, Sepuya lights up. “I was obsessed as a teenager,” he says. “I owned all of Paul Morrissey’s tapes.” The influence is clear—but unlike Warhol, Sepuya wasn’t interested in turning his subjects into celebrities. He was drawn to the unguarded, in-between moments when a person slips past self-presentation, revealing themselves rather than a persona. He was equally captivated by *Interview* magazine, which made his eventual move from San Bernardino to New York feel, in some ways, preordained. Landing a job there assisting Photo Editor Peter Matra seemed only natural. Sepuya returned west in the 2010s to complete his M.F.A. at the University of California, Los Angeles. Today, he still lives in the sunny sanctuary, making photographs and teaching as an Associate Professor in Visual Arts at the University of California, San Diego.

Sepuya finds his past slightly vertiginous now. “It’s wild to be thinking about things you made from a time so widely historicized,” he says. “There’s something earnest about it.” From the outside, his trajectory might seem neat—his New York years giving way to the usual markers of art world success—but that tidy view belies the unpredictability, intimacy, and experimentation that defined the journey here. Two decades on, those friends, that house, and the trust captured in his earliest portraits still shape the work he makes and the life he leads.