

The Portrait That Looks Back: Exploring the Queer Expanded Presence of Collage in the Portraiture of Paul Mpagi Sepuya and Mickalene Thomas

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Abstract

This paper seeks to unpack the revolutionary potential of collage. By virtue of its form, collage has the potential to radically subvert or complicate traditional narratives and structures as well as to articulate the fragmentary experiences of contemporary life. Tracing the legacy of collage first through Dadaism and the Harlem Renaissance, collage has historically been a way of responding to the failure of the systems that shaped society. Black artists and Dada artists deployed collage as a tool to express radical messaging and cultural critique. As a methodology for an expanded visual culture, contemporary artists Mickalene Thomas and Paul Mpagi Sepuya use collage to visually articulate queer identities, orientations, and desires through portraiture. The gesture of collage shifts the priority of portraiture away from representation and toward the vitality of disconnections, complications, and incompleteness within an image. Employing Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* as a strong theoretical foundation, this paper articulates the value of disorientation through collage, demonstrating how fragmentation and hybridity are valuable tools that have the capacity to create space for an expanded visual culture that represents black, queer futures.

Keywords: Collage, disorientation, portraiture, queer presence, cultural critique, phenomenology

Introduction

Collage is a quintessentially queer art form. Through both juxtaposition and intermingling,

works of collage remain open to new ways of being and relationality. By virtue of its form, collage holds space for the potential to radically

subvert or complicate traditional narratives and structures. For this reason, it is a productive tool and methodology for creative work that is geared toward the realization of an expanded visual culture. As stated by Jack Halberstam in *The Queer Art of Failure*, “collage precisely references the spaces in-between and refuses to respect the boundaries that usually delineate self from other, art object from museum, and the copy from the original ... in this respect, as well as in many others, collage seems feminist and queer.”¹ As a way to rewrite history and broaden futurity through both positive production and negative destruction, I am interested in exploring collage as both an active impulse and interwoven ideology that brings different mediums, ideas, and desires into adjacent conversation.

While collage was a key artistic output of the European avant-garde, art historian Julie Crooks has argued that these forms were largely informed by a hybridized, multiracial, and transatlantic world.² As a technique that the American art historian and essayist Clement Greenberg described as “a major turning point in the whole evolution of modernist art,” collage is born from the desire to express dissent toward social structures and political strategies that contributed to illogical and fragmentary experiences of modern life.³ As such, collage has a demonstrated revolutionary potential that can be traced back to two important early twentieth century art movements: Dadaism and the Harlem Renaissance. As a way of responding to the failure of the systems that shaped society, Dada artists and Black artists deployed collage as a tool to express radical messaging and cultural critique.

Both Dadaism and the Harlem Renaissance were avant-garde social movements that came into being in the early twentieth century and operated as alternative lenses to view social and political issues in an arts-based framework. While Dada artists were directly responding to the horrors of World War One, the Harlem Renaissance was a collective response to a far longer history of violence, slavery and trauma. Consistent between both movements was the desire to create new conditions for social relationships and artistic production through direct criticism of dominant societal norms. Importantly, the consideration of race and social stature is important in defining the politics of privilege that each movement arises out of. Yet, their connection becomes meaningful when specifically focused on their shared interest in collage as a way to articulate radical messaging and cultural critique in accessible ways. While the movements were short lived themselves, they left good models, and their legacies have mobilized countless art movements that have similarly concerned with issues of self-determination, social consciousness, and political activism.⁴ I believe there are meaningful traces of these key qualities of Dadaism and the Harlem Renaissance in the work of both Paul Mpagi Sepuya and Mickalene Thomas, as contemporary artists who engage with notions of identity and desire through collage.

Sepuya and Thomas work with collage as a way to visually articulate queer identities, orientations, and desires through portraiture. As deeply relational works, what we aren't allowed to see becomes as powerful as what is shown. The gesture of collage thus shifts the priority of

¹ Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 136.

² Julie Crooks and Andrea Andersson, eds., *Mickalene Thomas: Femmes Noires* (Toronto, ON: Art Gallery of Ontario, 2018), 17.

³ Jeanine Parisier Plottel, *Collage* (New York: New York Literary Forum, 1983), 122

⁴ “A New African American Identity: The Harlem Renaissance,” National Museum of African American History and Culture, accessed March 14, 2018, nmaahc.si.edu/blog-post/new-african-american-identity-harlem-renaissance.

portraiture away from representation and toward the vitality of disconnections, complications, and incompleteness within an image. Sepuya uses collage to invite the process of layering and fragmentation into his practice as a way of disrupting and deconstructing traditional portrait photography. The reorientation of the gaze toward black, queer bodies is echoed in Thomas's collaged painting work that negotiate gender and sexuality by way of a nuanced and pointedly interventionist visual language. In an interview, Thomas has claimed that "collage has always been a form of creativity within African Americans: who we are is a collage in itself [...] all of us within the diaspora are always working within several spaces of our world and those particular identities play a part in my work and play a huge part within collage."⁵ For this reason, these artists are drawn together for their exploration of desire, temporality, and presence as it is personally, socially, and politically articulated. Collage is important to both Sepuya and Thomas as the methodology for articulating these visual explorations in ways that evade cohesive or unanimous translation, instead granting the work to rest in a perpetual state of becoming.

In studying the practices of both artists as they relate to collage, I am most interested in drawing connections between the ways in which their work is able to interrogate problematic structures both within and outside of the art world. Using photography as both an anchor to their practice and an interventionist methodology, Sepuya and Thomas place significant emphasis on situating blackness and queerness as starting points

for translating and unpacking their portraiture. It is here that Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* becomes useful as a way of articulating the value of disorientation in works of portraiture. Ahmed states: "a queer phenomenology would function as a *disorientation* device ... allowing the oblique to open up another angle on the world."⁶ Thus, for Ahmed, "moments of disorientation are vital" and are imbued with the possibility to create new worlds.⁷ In this context, collage becomes a key illustration of the many ways that disorientation can be visually translated. While Sepuya and Thomas employ distinctly different pictorial logics, their analogous objectives demonstrate how fragmentation and hybridity are valuable tools that have the capacity to make space for an expanded visual culture that represents black, queer futures.

Section I: The Orientation of Queer Spaces

"The collages are about bringing together all of the material in the photograph — these are not collages that are glued and pasted down. They come together in the image and then they disperse."⁸

— Paul Mpagi Sepuya

"Objects also have their own horizons: worlds from which they emerge, and which surround them. The horizon is about how objects surface, how they emerge, what shapes their surface and the direction they face, or what direction we face, when we face them. So if we follow such objects, we enter different worlds."⁹

— Sara Ahmed

⁵ "Mickalene Thomas," Vimeo, Paris Photo, September 10, 2018, vimeo.com/289057551.

⁶ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 172.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 157.

⁸ Paul Mpagi Sepuya, "Dialogues – Artist Talk: Paul Mpagi Sepuya," YouTube, Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, 22 August 2019, www.youtube.com/watch?v=dajTuYkrPHs

⁹ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 147.

By probing the tropes and histories of the photographic studio, Sepuya explores queerness and blackness as technologies to orient his medium, its roles, and methods, situating queerness and blackness as starting points for reorienting photography from the ground up.¹⁰ As compositions created in front of a lens and recorded in a single shot, his works are intricate layerings of time, space, and materials that only exist at a specific moment, from a specific perspective. It is important for Sepuya that all of the qualities that are visible in a portrait physically exist in space, in such a way that the photograph reveals its own making upon close and careful inspection. An important condition in making the photograph is Sepuya himself, and he can be found in all of his photographic collages in some capacity. For this reason, for Sepuya, the studio is an important and deeply personal point of orientation. As an experimental and often erotic space, Sepuya's studio operates as a staging ground for desire, where intimacies are free to unfold in the privacy of the image.¹¹ In the representation of queer intimacies, Sepuya makes the choice to interrupt the gaze and explore the visual and conceptual potential of fragmentation as a way of re-orienting the viewer's engagement with a portrait, thus expanding the possibilities of queer subjectivity and expression. In this way, the studio can be understood as a site that "reframes and manipulates, condenses and expands the subjects and relations brought into it."¹² Ultimately, Sepuya photographs black and queer bodies from within a queer black man's world, as the safe space of the studio creates the conditions

for a reconceptualization of what it even means to be oriented.

Ahmed's theoretical project in *Queer Phenomenology* is primarily concerned with how we are located in space and time as bodies. In asking what it means to be oriented toward or away from objects, ideas, cultures, and people, she traces lines that guide the world-engagement possibilities (or lack thereof) that exist at the intersection of gender, race, and sexuality. Ultimately, orientation involves aligning body and space, and this alignment "produces lines."¹³ In further considering how we inhabit space, Ahmed is interested in possibilities for bodies to extend themselves. Thus, for Ahmed, being oriented in a space extends the reach of the body. Phenomenology, as a philosophical discipline which privileges lived engagement with reality, is useful for Ahmed as a conceptual framework that can be used to think about how we understand embodiment. In *Queer Phenomenology*, Ahmed adds texture to this realm of inquiry by claiming that "the surfaces of bodies as well as objects are shaped by histories of contact."¹⁴ By focusing her study particularly on the conditions and failures of orientation, Ahmed is interested in exploring the worldly relationships and behaviours that guide what we move toward, and what we move away from. Notably, for Ahmed, different ways of directing our desires, different orientations, mean "inhabiting different worlds."¹⁵ I believe we can find these "different worlds" in Sepuya's studio, where all of his photographs are taken. As both a safe space and a staging ground for any sort of

¹⁰ "The Conditions: Paul Mpagi Sepuya," *team (gallery, inc.)*, 2019, www.teamgal.com/artists/paul_mpagi_sepuya/exhibitions/403/the_conditions.

¹¹ Paul Mpagi Sepuya, "Dialogues – Artist Talk: Paul Mpagi Sepuya," YouTube, Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, 22 August 2019, www.youtube.com/watch?v=dajTuYkrPHs

¹² Antwaun Sargent, "Picture Yourself in the Queer Photographic Space of Paul Mpagi Sepuya," *Vice*. March 23, 2017. www.vice.com/en_us/article/aeq94p/paul-mpagi-sepuya-queer-photographic-space.

¹³ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 14.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 151.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 168.

desire, Sepuya creates the conditions for capturing the softness and vulnerability of the contemporary queer male body, exploring the productive and critical power of longing.¹⁶ Moreover, Sepuya only photographs people with whom he has a personal relationship with, and who are often also artists. For this reason, the space becomes collaborative and generative in such a way that certain overlappings make their own kind of personal, interpretive sense.

Similarly, “Thomas’s portraits and staged scenes reflects a very personal community of inspiration — a collection of muses that includes Thomas herself, her mother, and her friends and lovers, emphasizing the communal and social aspects of art-making and creativity that pervade her work.”¹⁷ Thomas stages these portraits at “home” — or at least a personal archetype of home — as collaged domestic spaces with vibrant patterns and a 1970s aesthetic. The decision to collage and build the space from different elements echoes Sepuya’s photographs as a desire to express an explicitly queer space. As black bodies, they reside comfortably among other objects in the frame. This is in many ways a depiction of proper orientation, but the collage alludes to a precise sort of failure as well: by re-orienting the portrait’s relationship to the “straightening” effect of whiteness, Thomas and Sepuya’s portraits demonstrate how blackness is able to queer the popular conception of a discontinuous image. These failed orientations make visible a complex intersection of visibility that expands, rather than collapses, the image: “in refusing to represent any kind of illusory wholeness, collage unmasks the

constructed nature of narrative, discourse, and other representational forms.”¹⁸ In other words, their work draws its strength from the precisely queer quality of its (dis)orientation.

Section II: A Disoriented Clarity

“Our world is a mix of collaged images and information that we constantly have to sift through. Our world is constantly being covered or layered by some new form or idea, ideology of culture. As individuals we have to take parts from different elements to create our own world. I’m interested in a form of amalgamation, an overload of information – what does one do with that? How do you make sense of that? How do you ground yourself with all of these things that are going on? How can you create something new with all that information?”¹⁹

— Mickalene Thomas

“The point is not whether we experience disorientation (for we will, and we do), but how such experiences can impact on the orientation of bodies and spaces, which is, after all, about how the things are ‘directed’ and how they are shaped by the lines they follow. The point is what we do with such moments of disorientation, as well as what such moments can do — whenever they can offer us the hope of new directions, and whether new directions are reason enough for hope.”²⁰

— Sara Ahmed

Sepuya and Thomas thus demonstrate through their work the virtue of *disorientation*; in the creation of “new worlds” through failed

¹⁶ “Reimagining the Image: Paul Mpagi Sepuya,” *International Center of Photography*, accessed March 29, 2019, www.icp.org/events/reimagining-the-image-paul-mpagi-sepuya.

¹⁷ “Muse: Mickalene Thomas Photographs and Tête-à-Tête,” *Aperture Foundation NY*, aperture.org/exhibition/muse-mickalene-thomas-photographs/.

¹⁸ Maria-Carolina Cambre, “Immanence and Collage Heuristics,” *Visual Arts Research* 39, no. 76 (July 2013), 84, doi:10.5406/visuartsrese.39.1.0070.

¹⁹ Laster, Paul. “Mickalene Thomas: Fully Exposed.” *FLATT*, 2018, flattmag.com/features/mickalene-thomas/.

²⁰ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 158.

orientations. In these disorienting circumstances, people typically blink, and then look again, in the attempt to process and perhaps resolve the complication. More specifically, Sepuya's "Mirror Studies" demonstrate this idea most thoroughly as a series of work that brings mirrors into the studio space as a complementary instrument to the camera. As fragmentary images, discrete connections. Mirrors were initially introduced to Sepuya's practice by way of necessity: at a time when his studio and photographic materials were in transitory flux, the mirror became a new space to hold the clutter of unresolved material. In this way, the mirrors complicate the role of photography in Sepuya's practice, becoming "a way to reorganize his material and contain multiple spaces in one image, thus complicating the gaze on the subject."²¹ As a tool of compression and latency, the mirrors create a dizzying loop of relationality between the subject as image and the image as subject.

As portraiture set in motion, Sepuya disrupts the roles of artist and subject as well as challenges the traditional role of the viewer as simply a passive receiver of artworks. Implicitly, the mirror plays an important role in representing both the artist and subject as well as the materials that created the work. By including these visual references, the work operates as a mirror that is temporally displaced from the original scene that it now represents in perpetuity. Thus, as a representation, the mirror does not function "properly" for the viewer as a device for reflection, but despite this failure, continues to conceptually draw the viewer into the captured intimacy of the

scene. In this moment, I believe Ahmed would argue that something "queer happens: precisely when bodies meet that would be kept apart if we followed the lines given to us."²² By complicating the gaze in this way, the viewer is challenged to look beyond the surface and reconfigure new "alignments" between the body and its place in the world that are not necessarily "in line" with conventional expectations of photography, specifically with regard to its capacity to capture reality in an "objective" manner.²³ In this way, the use of collage demonstrates the queer potential of "crossing" lines and failing to return to them, leaving the work open and impossible to fully grasp.²⁴

Take, for example, Sepuya's *Self-Portrait Study with Two Figures* (2015). In this photograph, bodies and objects become oriented toward each other *through* disorientation: "objects and bodies disrupt the image, creating disorientation in how things are arranged."²⁵ In almost seamless transition, Sepuya's body — photographed in the past, printed, and adhered in parts to the mirror's surface — lines up with the tripod leg and camera, which exists only through the mirror's capture of itself in that moment. The timelines between visual captures are overlapped in unison, and the experience of looking becomes a sort of visual decoding. In Ahmed's words, the "two entities, a subject and an object, 'co-incide' (the hyphen suggesting the way that different things happen at the same moment)."²⁶ The white spaces on the wall between the photographs adhered to the mirror feel haunted by the abrupt stop and start of images, but it is precisely this failure to connect

²¹ Paul Mpagi Sepuya, "Dialogues – Artist Talk: Paul Mpagi Sepuya," YouTube, Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, 22 Aug. 2019, www.youtube.com/watch?v=dajTuYkrPHs.

²² Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 149.

²³ *Ibid.*, 142.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 155.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 151.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 39.

that completes the image as a whole. The viewer may perhaps feel obligated to try and fill in the blanks and complete the image because they are not met with direction but rather *space*, which implicitly invites action.

In challenging — or “queering” — traditional conceptions of photography, a medium hailed for its communication of “reality” as an objective perspective, Sepuya’s collages necessarily remain conceptually open such that any interpretation is never univocal or final. Moreover, Sepuya’s work is especially compelling because it is fully present — nothing is hidden or digitally manipulated; everything exists in a common physical frame when the photograph itself is taken. The visual confusion we experience in looking at his photographs is entirely self-implicated and draws attention to the specific version of orientation that our minds have been trained to expect. We, as viewers, do not expect the reach of an image to be cut off or discontinued. Sepuya’s photographs demonstrate how in “this moment of failure, such objects that ‘point’ somewhere else make what is ‘here’ become strange.”²⁷ This precise deviation from linear lines of sight thus expands the possibilities of the portrait through its disorientation.

Mickalene Thomas similarly expands the potential of collage through processes of disorientation. While Sepuya’s collages unfold reality through fragmentation, laying everything bare for the viewer to piece together, Thomas instead folds several aesthetic genres into her paintings as a way of disorienting and critiquing art historical tropes through the production of

portraits that exude a powerful queer black femininity. In this way, Thomas demonstrates the vitality of disorientation in the production of “new worlds” as a direct response to the difficulty that queer and black bodies have inhabiting spaces that are defined as straight or white.²⁸ This creation of new worlds through collage demonstrates how disorientation can be specifically positive and productive in its failure to inherit established lines or directions. This can also be taken to a deeper, more metaphorical level: the refusal to inherit conventions of traditional painting is, in Thomas’s case, a refusal to inherit one’s own disappearance and thus trace lines — through queer moments of deviation and disorientation — for a different genealogy: “one that would embrace the failure ... as a condition of possibility for another way of dwelling in the world.”²⁹ Hence, much of Thomas’s work functions as “a personal act of deconstruction and re-appropriation — both of images she has created herself and images that she has singled out as influences.³⁰” Yet, “rather than fully reject the white male artistic tradition, Thomas, in her adamant exposure of queer Black women’s sexuality, revises them.”³¹ In looking to — and pushing up against — the Western history of genres and constructs, Thomas pulls from a multitude of different sources to authenticate her own visual language.

Working with photographs and other media, Thomas creates highly constructed representations of a particular view of the world that privileges various layers of presentation, perception, and masking. In this process, the methodology of collage is fundamental. In taking advantage of the mutability of collage, Thomas’s

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 160.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 111.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 178.

³⁰ “Muse: Mickalene Thomas Photographs and Tête-à-Tête,” *Aperture Foundation NY*, aperture.org/exhibition/muse-mickalene-thomas-photographs/.

³¹ Jill Glessing, “Mickalene Thomas,” *Border Crossings*, May 2019, bordercrossingsmag.com/article/mickalene-thomas.

work “presents a plethora of references, negotiations, and aesthetic choices which, when brought together (or collaged), create new possibilities for seeing a range of beautiful Black bodies.”³² Take, for example, *Marie Femme Noire Nue Couchée 2* (2014), a collaged painting that references the long tradition of reclining nude portraits of women in both formal qualities and nomenclature. The work is thus layered in both materials and meanings, in such a way that welcomes analytic, rather than communicative, dialogue. Imbued with multiple references in the form of patterning, staging, and gaze of the subject, “it is not prescriptive, but expansive; it absorbs not only all the histories of its combinatory elements, but all the associations living in the mind and experience of its viewer.”³³ Understood in this way, Thomas is doing something very similar to Ahmed’s theoretical undertaking, in the refusal to take up the inheritances of the discourses they are working within at face value (the discourse of art history and phenomenology, respectively), and consider the ways in which other ways of knowing and being can inform and disorient contemporary thinking.

Section III: A Conclusion; For Now

“The fragmentation started with me trying to use the studio as a recurrent backdrop, which gradually transforms yes holds onto information. I’d layer prints on the wall, forming informal collages, and also blow up and crop things to then reconstitute elements relation to a person or space by pulling parts together on the mirror surface. Then I’d photograph myself through the gaps within those fragmented parts—not with the intention to further

hide or obscure, but to bring something I had related to, that was dispersed throughout all that material, to one whole piece again.”³⁴

— Paul Mpagi Sepuya

“It’s about making sense of all these things that are in your everyday life, and deciphering this information to use it practically. To make sense of that, you take all of the components and you make it your own. When you do this you are sourcing various aspects of society: cultural, metaphorical, and spiritual, and combining them in a pastiche, which is collage.”³⁵

— Mickalene Thomas

Through collage, both Sepuya and Thomas find ways to employ the many forms of disorientation to communicate queer and black subjectivity and expression while simultaneously complicating notions of objective physicality through various methods of tactile intervention.

When understood through a more specifically socio-political lens, collage becomes a powerful tool to speak to the diasporic experiences of fragmentation, migration, and transculturation. By shifting the gaze of both the subject and the viewer, these portraits communicate their “double-consciousness” through queering methodologies of deconstruction and re-building in such a way that the we may look at the works over and over again and see something new each time.

³² Crooks and Andersson, eds., *Mickalene Thomas: Femmes Noires* (Toronto, ON: Art Gallery of Ontario, 2018), 14.

³³ *Ibid.*, 9.

³⁴ Paul Mpagi Sepuya, “Dialogues – Artist Talk: Paul Mpagi Sepuya,” YouTube, Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, 22 Aug. 2019, www.youtube.com/watch?v=dajTuYkrPHs.

³⁵ Corwin, William. “The Impetus for Collage: A Conversation with Mickalene Thomas and Racquel

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