

Stephanie Syjuco

BROOKLYN RAIL

Being: New Photography

by Phillip Griffith
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Being, MoMA's current iteration of the "New Photography" exhibition series, assumes an unwieldy, ambitious title but offers work often in portraiture, that appeals to our intimate understandings of our selves. The exhibition includes seventeen photographers, all under the age of forty-five, from ten countries—each of whom makes their first appearance at MoMA. Though the title risks an inchoate open-endedness, evoking a gamut of associations from overly abstract notions of connectedness to hyper-particularized navel-gazings, Being stakes out a middle ground for photography's enduring power to picture the individual's place in relation to others.

Stephanie Syjuco's black-and-white self-portraits are stylized, nearly straight-faced send-ups of ethnographic approaches to portraiture. Set against busy, patterned backgrounds that cheekily use the black-and-white format to disorienting effect for figure and ground, the images in the Cargo Cults series (2013–16) pose Syjuco in "ethnic" costumes. Looking closely, you clue yourself into the joke: price tags from major chains like the Gap still hang from the "ethnic" garb that Syjuco purports to document.

Andrzej Steinbach's black-and-white series *Gesellschaft beginnt mit drei* (2017) plays on the formal compositions of group portraiture by switching out three subjects in a series of three poses and costumes, so that each has a turn at each position and costume in the composition—standing, seated, and crouching. Steinbach breaks his group composition into seven individual photographs, focusing attention on individual subjects by cropping the others out of each successive image. But as the portraits focus more on the individual, Steinbach flirts with fashion's codes of androgyny to abstract their gendered particularity.

This breaking of the frame and surface by the composition of Steinbach and Syjuco's portraits, as well as by the gender-coded play of pose and costume, runs through much of the work in *Being*. This play is especially evocative and resonant in works by Sam Contis and Paul Mpagi Sepuya. The fractured surfaces and frames of Sepuya's portraits make use of a tantalizing technique involving photographs of mirrors, with and without other photographic images affixed to them. What is reflection? What is collage? Which parts belong to which bodies? These portraits and studies draw us in by enticing us to suss out the bodily and spatial dynamics they scramble—a challenge to our sense of visual perception that is as pleasurable as it is confounding.

In *Mirror Study* (4R2A0857) (2016), a triangular fragment of a photograph (a portrait fragment that reveals a man's bare legs and crotch as one foot arches back toward a hand that grabs hold of it) hangs at the center of a mirror. From out of the study's frame, an arm with a darker skin tone

adjusts the bottom of the triangular fragment, while the presumably real-life arm of the fragment's subject seamlessly aligns with the arm pictured in the fragment. The study pairs and crosses arms and legs in a surrealistic layering of space and perspective that, as in so many of Sepuya's portraits, expresses the confusions set off by desire between and within bodies; he describes the spaces of his portraits as analogous to the backrooms where queer love, friendship, and creativity happen. Space is perceived only in part, and bodies fumble for their own parts and those of others—not in the dark of a club here, but in Sepuya's studio.

Contis's photographs and untitled two-channel video work (2018), created out of material from her series *Deep Springs*, explore the intersections of landscape, masculinity, and coming of age at the isolated Deep Springs College, a men's college in the California high desert that enrolls no more than thirty students at a time. In the exhibit's still images from the *Deep Springs* series, a late adolescent boy lounges on green grass in the sun, wearing a blue denim dress over his pants (*Denim Dress* [2014]); in *Embrace* (2015), the camera catches a bear hug askance, with only arms and shoulder in frame; in *Echo* (2015), one young man reaches around the body of another from behind, as if to teach him how to complete a task with his hands.

These tender encounters, punctuated by signs of a less forgiving reality, like the bright-red splatter of animal blood in *High Noon* (2014), are set in the mythically masculine cowboy landscape. But the untitled video sets landscape and bodies, both human and animal, side by side. In one pairing of the two channels, a view of the rocky desert with a mid-range depth of field plays beside a close up of two boys' backs as they float beside each other and rest shoulder to shoulder in a body of water. At another point, a cow laps up water in a color frame while the camera focuses on the dribble from the animal's mouth back into the trough. Contis's photographs and video, like Sepuya's images, are mindful of questions of representation, of how and where we appear as subjects of photographs, while never neglecting the edges of representation where we butt up against someone or something else.

Sepuya and Contis's emotional capaciousness and generosity continue in Carmen Winant's *My Birth* (2018), a site-specific installation of found images of childbirth, many taken from didactic books like *Our Bodies Ourselves*. The images are cut into irregular shapes and attached with blue painter's tape and DIY aplomb to two facing walls in a short passageway between galleries. Images of childbirth could seem of the utmost cliché in an exhibit entitled *Being*, but Winant's collection of images pictures childbirth and care with a frankness not commonly encountered in public space in this country. The installation reminded me of a friend's high school bedroom, papered in magazine cutouts of movie stars and other celebrities, and drew out a welling of other emotions and associations as I moved along the walls. I watched, too, what Winant's installation drew out in others: a young woman's comic revulsion, coupled with her incessant return to certain images; two young men and their nervous, fascinated laughter; the majority of visitors progressing slowly and silently through the work, paying careful attention to as many images as they could.