This research paper examines the work of two photographers, Robert Mapplethorpe and Paul Mpagi Sepuya, to explore the homoerotic gaze in contemporary photography. Both in harmony and in contrast, the two photographers work with the issue of the body and desire that relates to their positionality as openly gay artists. Drawing on the seminal work of Jacques Lacan, I undertake in-depth visual analyses of Mapplethorpe’s early polaroid work, Untitled (The Dancer) (1974), and Sepuya’s Darkroom Mirror series (2017) to analyse how these works use the mirror to produce a triangulated gaze relation between the model, the photographer, and the viewer. In so doing, I propose an alternative reading of the gaze in art history as homoerotic and subjectively liberating, rather than gendered and objectifying.

Drawing on the work of the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, I explore how Mapplethorpe’s and Sepuya’s choice to confront the structure of desire through the reflectivity of the mirror re-enacts the misidentification of the ideal image for the photographer, while at the same time the exchanges of the gaze with their subject in front of the mirror articulates a homoerotic desire that requires the dialogue between both participants.

I examine the complexity of the triangulated gaze by undertaking an in-depth analysis of two body of works that explicitly use the mirror as an interior framing device of the photographer, subject, and viewer: Mapplethorpe’s Untitled (The Dancer) (1974), and Sepuya’s Darkroom Mirror series. Drawing on the work of the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, I explore how Mapplethorpe’s and Sepuya’s choice to confront the structure of desire through the reflectivity of the mirror re-enacts the misidentification of the ideal image for the photographer, while at the same time the exchanges of the gaze with their subject in front of the mirror articulates a homoerotic desire that requires the dialogue between both participants.

**RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

- What does the role of mirror play in articulating desire for Mapplethorpe and Sepuya?
- Is the photograph, a reflection of the mirror image, itself a misrecognition?
- What does the arrangement of the photograph reveal about the relationship between the photographer and the photographed subject?
- How is the gaze triangulated? Is it between the photographer, the photographed subject, and the viewer?
- Does the viewer assume the position of the artist or the voyeur?
- What is the connection between the mirror as a framing and the mirror stage? Does it relate to the image/screen split?
- Where is the homoerotic gaze situated in Lacanian psychoanalysis? How does it differ from feminist psychoanalytic feminism’s conception of spectatorship?
- Does the queer gaze or homoerotic gaze fracture the heterosexual male gaze? If so, does it function as a form subversion?
- How does Sepuya’s work explore the tension between visibility/invisibility, subjectivity/objectivity in the schema of the gaze within the contemporary (post-HIV/AIDS crisis) context?

**THESIS**

**OBJECTS OF STUDY**

Leon Hsu is a Taiwanese-Canadian art historian and writer. His research explores the intersection of semiotics, Lacanian psychoanalysis, and queer theory in post-war and contemporary photo-based art. He is a recent Visual and Critical Studies graduate from OCAD University.

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