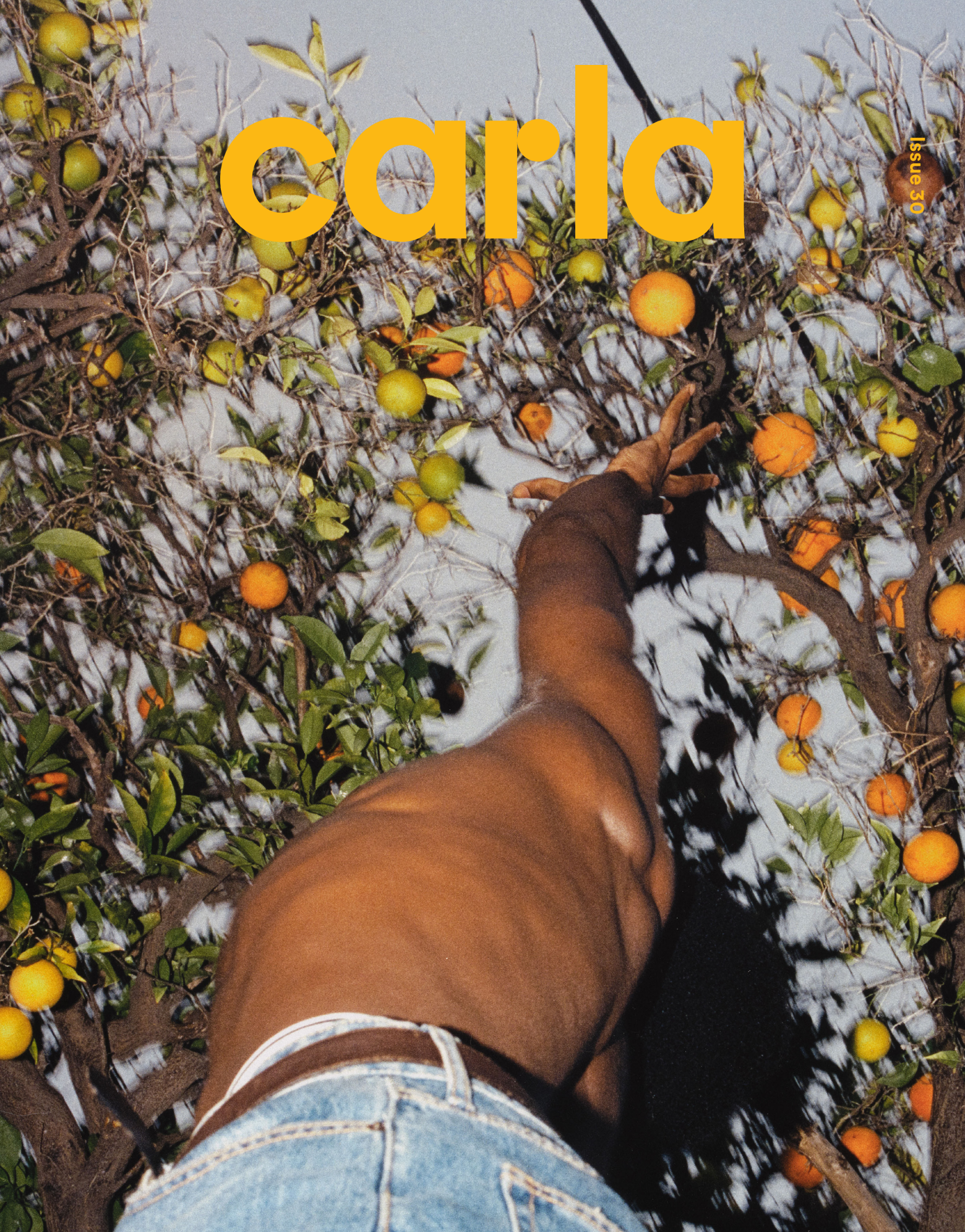



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Clifford Prince King, *Between Us Quickly* (detail)
(2019). Archival pigment print on Canson Rag
Photographique 310GSM, 30 × 20 inches.
Edition 1 of 5, 2AP. Image courtesy of
the artist and STARS, Los Angeles.

Opacity and the Spill

The Photographs of Clifford Prince King, Shikeith, and Paul Mpagi Sepuya

Clifford Prince King's photographs touch me like scenes from a half-remembered film. In *Hi-Lite* (2017), a young man, dressed only in plaid, cobalt blue boxers, spreads himself out expectantly on a bed while someone's foot nudges the soft bulge of his crotch. The image is cropped tightly: an excerpt of a torso, thighs, a leg, and a sprinkle of hair that meanders up a thigh. In *V* (2022), a portrait framed by a raspberry red drape, another shirtless man—with eyes drifting downwards and black hair parted into chunky twists—looks away from the camera, quietly refusing the unspoken demands of traditional portraiture. Sitting with King's clipped torsos and averted gazes is an exercise in disorientation, leading me to adjust my expectations of what a portrait should do and show. His images propel a montage of sensations, pulling me closer to the tender parts of myself. A self-taught artist, King often works with friends, lovers, and those in his creative community—their scenes muddling the lines between candid and staged.

King's focus on his friends and lovers echoes, in particular, the work of two other contemporary photographers, Shikeith and Paul Mpagi Sepuya. The three artists are broadly linked by their focus on the textures of queer Black intimacies, building upon the legacies of artists like filmmaker Marlon Riggs, who created art devoted to Black men loving Black men during a period marked by its omnipresent

homophobia, racism, and puritanism—his experimental documentary *Tongues Untied* (1989) unspools as a freewheeling journey into the emotional landscapes of the Black gay community. In contrast to King's poetic reveries of queer Black men in the midst of domestic scenes, Sepuya photographs in a studio environment and employs collage elements and mirrors, exploring the questions that bloom when two or more bodies merge with the tools of the photographic medium. Across photography, installation, film, and sculpture, Shikeith's work captures Black figures in moments of ecstasy, prayer, possession, and speculation, their bare skin dotted with sweat or blue pigment like a physical manifestation of psychic longing. The work of these three artists pushes past the limits of portraiture, reimagining the genre as a site of co-creation that involves not only the artists but their subjects and viewers.

I've noticed that profiles on King, Sepuya, and Shikeith often applaud their work as an expansion of Black masculinity through their challenging of traditional representation. Headlines often recycle a similar narrative: *i-D* announces that King “celebrate[s] the beauty of queer Black masculinity”;¹ *NPR* writes that Shikeith “Showcas[es] A Different Side Of Black Manhood”;² and *AnOther* says that Sepuya is “Capturing Queer Masculinity.”³ Shikeith points out: “We all get the same headline... I always joke about it with my friends. We're making so many different kinds of things and we just get boxed in, and it's so frustrating.”⁴ As the artist laments, these readings tend to minimize the elements *beyond* identity in each artist's work, glossing over discussions of how, for example, abstraction operates aesthetically or formally within their photographs, or how their methods upend myths around the objectivity of the camera. Understanding their work solely through the frame of representation traps these artists in stagnant conversations that treat identity as a box to check, draining the specificities and creative artistry from their work. For me, beyond a conversation around identity and representation, each artist offers

a different entry point into visibility, embracing strategies of concealment that seem at odds with the desire to be seen.

In *RASPBERRY BLOW*, King's second solo exhibition at STARS in Hollywood, which closed in early September, figures were blurred, backs turned. A face peeked out from a crevice between two doors. Viewing the photographs was like being dropped into a scenario that was still in the process of unfurling, leaving me to gather a loose narrative between what was shown and what was left obscure. In a conversation with Sepuya (himself a friend and collaborator of King) hosted by the Robert Giard Foundation earlier this year, King touched upon anonymity, noting that in one sense, the impulse to conceal derives from an instinct to protect oneself. It is an act of safety. He added that, within his photographs, anonymity also allows space for others to step in, inviting them to use their imagination and experiences to fill in the mysteries posed by the images.⁵ King's unwillingness to fully expose his subjects evokes Martinican philosopher and poet Édouard Glissant's demand for the right to opacity, a counter against hegemonic efforts to categorize and dominate.⁶ Opacity refuses our culture's transactional impulses, forcing us to look deeply. It also pulls into focus the limits of visibility and representation, and how a surface fidelity to these concepts can lead us to reinforce the very binaries that we wish to escape.

Shikeith's figures seem to thrive in this opaque state, moved by spirits that are invisible and ever-present. Born and raised in Philadelphia, Shikeith credits his grandmother as a monumental creative influence. Through her, he developed an appreciation for the uncanny aspects of living, where hauntings and spiritual revelations collide.⁷ In *O' my body, make of me always a man who questions!* (2020), a shirtless man arches backward, his sweaty torso floating beneath the outstretched hands of two men dressed in black suits. The scene is all limbs, an exercise in elision—the omissions allow us to tune into

the unseen energies conjured by the movement of hands and other body parts. Shikeith makes a language from these invisible forces, spinning ghostly tales of transcendence. *Visiting Hours* (2022) depicts a man sleeping on a sparse bed, his face nestled into the crook of his arm. The scene is bathed in a darkness made potent through the use of chiaroscuro lighting. A shrouded figure cloaked in a white sheet holds the man like a wounded lover. "Eyes—those proverbial windows to the soul—are always closed, down-cast, or cropped out," Zoë Hopkins writes of his work in *Artforum*. "Their inner life eludes our sight."⁸

In a conversation with *i-D*, Shikeith explains that he sees visibility as a starting point, rather than a destination, for photography: "The medium also lends itself to other possibilities outside of these direct representations to something that's more abstract and happening beneath what we see."⁹ In making this claim, the artist reveals how photography's overemphasis on visibility can lead us away from the opaque forces that characterize living. Shikeith's portraits center these abstractions of the mind, body, and soul. In an *Aperture* profile, the multimedia artist describes how the word "spill" guides his artistic vision, describing the spill as a "queer shape."¹⁰ Conjuring the properties of water, a spill connotes a sense of liberty, an inability to be confined or controlled. I see similarities between opacity and spill. Both express a desire for a mode of being that defies efforts to label. Like opacity, the spill buckles against calls for order and cohesion, tracing these concepts back to their colonial origins. As Teju Cole notes in his essay on the links between the history of photography and the spread of European imperialism, "photography during the colonial rule imaged the world in order to study, profit from and own it."¹¹ Embracing the spill opens up new approaches to image-making. Instead of studying their subjects, King and Shikeith enter a dialogue with them—a mutual exchange that transforms both subject and photographer.



Clifford Prince King, *Hi-Lite* (detail) (2017).
Archival inkjet print on Canson Rag Photographique
310GSM, 30 × 20 inches. Edition 1 of 5, 2AP.
Image courtesy of the artist
and STARS, Los Angeles.





Shikeith, *O' my body, make of me always
a man who questions!* (detail) (2020). Archival inkjet
print on Canson Infinity Platine. © Shikeith.
Image courtesy of the artist and
Yossi Milo Gallery, New York.

Like King and Shikeith, Sepuya turns away from the photographic impulse to dissect and profit. Born and raised in Southern California, Sepuya pulls apart the mechanics of photography and the artist studio—composing his frames with smudged mirrors, velvet drapes, tripods, lighting equipment, intertwined figures, test prints, and hands pressing camera shutters. (Though, in his recent *Daylight Studio* [2021–ongoing] series, he sometimes empties the frame of all figures, honing his gaze on the props and materials of the studio—rugs, pedestals, cushions—a sly reimagining of the elements of early portrait photography.) His pictures interrogate the relationship between subject and photographer, both of whom are often present in the picture. For *Dark Room Studio Mirror* (2021–22), a suite of images included in his recently-closed solo exhibition at Vielmetter Los Angeles, Sepuya photographed friends and lovers in his studio, lighting the scenes only with red safelights. The images were each exposed for a few seconds, warping the models into foggy apparitions.

Sepuya's *Dark Room Studio Mirror* (OX5A5668) (2021) shows two men bathed in red light and positioned in front of a camera and tripod, their movements a spillage of kneeling, bending, and gazing. The images look into a mirror on which fingerprints and other smears from past models and visitors are visible, adding another layer of ghostly cloudiness. What remains is the thrum of forms, a snapshot of the quixotic modes of relation and being that underlie all interactions. Sepuya's portraits recover the portrait studio as a site of queer sociality, where the boundaries between creative, platonic, and erotic are in constant flux. As he notes in an interview with *Elephant*, "That convergence...has a lot to offer when exploring photography as a medium of construction and desire, of looking and knowing we are being looked at."¹² For Sepuya, the spill extends to the medium itself, a way of pulling apart the embedded power dynamics of photography.

It's exciting to see artists who are actively resisting the extractive demands of visibility, especially against the pressure to define oneself in terms that are legible and marketable. Though I am granted intimate proximity to these artists' loved ones through their images, it is an intimacy that hinges on the assertion of the subject's privacy and on the acceptance of an ongoing recalibration between divulging and withdrawing. As King said in an interview with *Ebony*: "Sometimes that 'thing' you've been looking for for so long is right in front of you. By being present and looking deeper, you can find it."¹³ While their practices deviate in key ways, King, Shikeith, and Sepuya embrace concealment as a different mode of seeing and being—one that, to borrow the words of Hilton Als, "let[s] the mess come in."¹⁴ This mess, like the blurs and smears in Sepuya's images, brings us closer to the imperceptible and perceptible forces that exist within ourselves and between others, a boundlessness that spills over all of us.

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