

heather graham: Reminds me of M

The concepts of time and memory, and the link between them are at the heart of Toronto artist Heather Graham's work. Over a period of roughly a decade and through diverse media, Graham has recorded the passage of time as a gradual process of physical, visual change, and has explored its psychological effect on subjective perception and cognition. She sees images of people and objects in her paintings and videos as evidence and representation of time or as a way to capture and still its fleetingness. But this can only be achieved if the images serve memory, real, imagined or associative that generates a personal meaning.

In Graham's monochromatic painting series of close-up faces, the spectator is confronted by unidentified, generic and vaguely perceptible renderings of women. Using minimal paint to both create and erase an image, first by broad applications achieved through household paint brushes, and then by elimination through rags, the artist incites tension between appearance and disappearance, presence and absence.

Anonymous faces come into focus only at a distance; the closer one approaches, they begin to dissolve into atmospheric chaos. The spectator is taken on a journey from one state to another. It is a simulation of the course of time from beginning (life) to end (death). Graham forces the spectator

to take his/her time, to carefully observe as the images materialize or recoil depending on the point of reception. The spectator's engagement is essential to the eventual manifestation of the faces as if emerging from the fogginess in which they are enveloped. Without the spectator's gaze confronting and beholding the image, it cannot be brought into view, nor the face into a metaphorical existence.

In a secondary series of faces of young women, Graham depicts some with full or partial body form. This time she introduces colour, albeit still employing a restricted palette of reds and blues veiled in white. The idea of time as a process of actualization in space is yet again insinuated through the semi-materialization of the image from an infinite and nondescript background to which it remains linked, never to be fully and independently formed. But here, it is nostalgia, conveyed through subtle, soft colouration of idealized, youthful faces that best suggests an idyllic far gone era, perhaps a reminder of innocence lost that leaves the spectator with a feeling of emptiness, melancholy or regret.

Graham further examines the idea of the spectator as a necessary participant, if not an indispensable component of an artwork, in her videos. The videos demonstrate random interplay

of light and shadow on blank surfaces, and indistinct, suggestive shapes that metamorphose into blurred and mysterious visions. These symbolize a continuous state of transformation when one thing replaces another, and to which the spectator stands as witness. Physical changes can only be understood through the private connotations they arouse in the spectator.

The spectator is often inserted into the work as another objectified projection, an interruption or a modifier of events. Reminded of a personal experience, a feeling or a thought, the spectator can fill in the unknown and complete the work thus giving it a subjective meaning that would soon be redefined by the next encounter with another visitor.

Sharona Adamowicz-Clements
Senior Art Curator

Unpack the Sun, Part II

Since 2013, I have been taking photographs and videos of natural sunlight as it entered my studio space. I also took photographs of shadows of American artist Alexander Calder's mobiles at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris and the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Unpack the Sun is a two-channel video projection of sunlight moving across two walls. Daylight is portrayed in undulating geometric patterns. Repetition renders a hypnotic rhythm of movement as a way to order and slow vision. Interruption and dissolve will still time and create blanks that will allow for a subjective experience for the viewer. Reoccurring shapes symbolize loss, forgetting and the persistence of memory.

Part II shows the sun's light shifting location on my dark studio walls. The sunlight penetrated through circular openings in the curtains hanging by a window in the studio creating binocular-like shapes that were projected onto a wall. Patterns created by outside leaves moving with the wind became projected through these openings. Flickering light punctuates the dark studio mimicking how memories return. I have interrupted the video with still photographs of shadows of Calder's mobiles. The shadows are woven into the sunlight's patterns of leaves that move and repeat almost hypnotically. Details of the mobiles, that at first fit into the two binocular shapes, gradually replace the sunlight patterns and extend onto an adjoining wall.

Unpack the Sun Part II, 2014-2015
Two-channel video
Duration: 04:04 minutes
Production and special effects: Tom Hillman



Time Waits

Time Waits is an unaltered video of shadows falling across one of my paintings that is leaning against my studio wall. The painting, a portrait of man, is partially obscured by silhouettes of outside leaves moving with the wind. The video image comes in and out of focus. One side of a telephone conversation is overheard. The sound is rhythmic and repetitive; the words stand in to signify the passage of time. The audio begins before the image can be clearly seen adding to a sense of eavesdropping.

Time Waits, 2015
Video loop with audio
Duration: 02:00 minutes
Production and special effects: Tom Hillman



title forthcoming

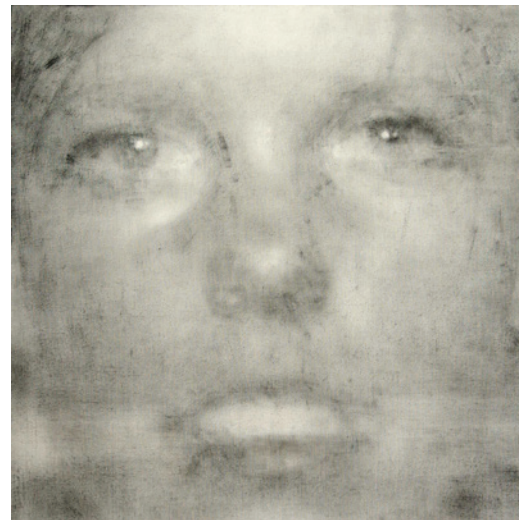
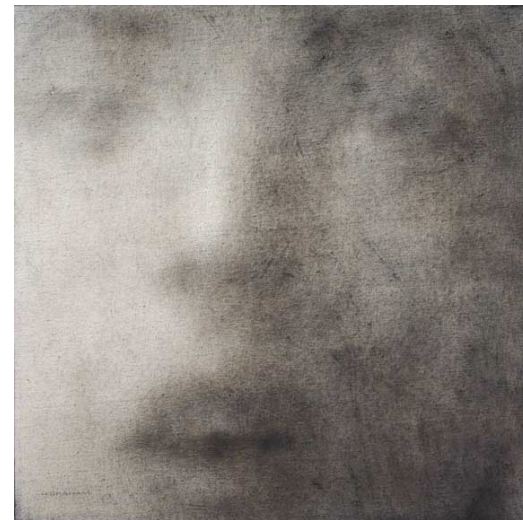
title forthcoming is about the experience of perception. It explores the notion of seeing something and then no longer seeing it, immersing the viewer in the work by heightening an awareness of looking.

This is a series of moving graphite drawings. I think of each frame as a complete image that I ordered into a sequence using stop-motion. I interrupted the video and used white screens to visually illustrate memory and how the eye sees an image after it is gone—an after image. A visual trance unfolds through the course of time. Flickering and blurred images produce a series of blanks or negative spaces for the viewer to fill in as an attempt to capture the image. The image becomes clear at the end of the video but for only a moment; time renders a sense of brief clarity. Perception offers a fleeting illusion that both absorbs and disorients the viewer.

Accompanying sounds used to suggest the passing of time begin with pages turning in a book, rhythmic ticking, watch winding and finally the noise of applause to signal an ending.

The video monitor is in an enclosed space which the viewer enters through an opening in curtains. Using a motion-activated sensor, the video begins when the viewer enters and approaches the screen.

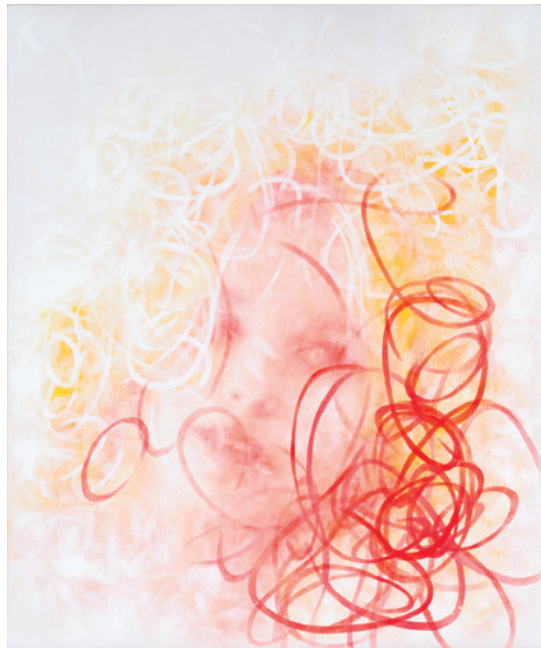
title forthcoming, 2012
Video with audio motion sensor
Duration: 00.42 seconds
Production and Special Effects: Tom Hillman
Post-production: Pendulum Entertainment Inc.



Vanitas: Portraiture as Still Life

Heather Graham's series of grey and white paintings of human faces are not portraits; at least not in the traditional sense. They do not mean to represent a visual likeness of a real person. Instead they are an unusual take on the theme of vanitas, a genre of symbolical paintings that reached its height in the Netherlands in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. These paintings reveal attractive displays of material possessions including elegant arrangements of (sometimes decaying) fruit, (wilting) flowers and human skulls that provoke deep contemplation on the transience of time and the futility of earthly pleasures in light of human mortality. These images evoke a certain sense of sadness, even eeriness associated with loss and death particularly as they imply beauty and life to be false temporal conditions fated for destruction through an aging process, the cycle of life.

The same could be said of Graham's work. Except here, still life has been replaced by faces of ethereal, spectral-like quality that are the result of softly rendered, almost abstract features. Anonymous faces with limited outlines and details to define individual attributes refer to generic past lives nearly erased and forgotten by time. The monochromatic paintings themselves, reminiscent of old photographic prints whose images fade with time, suggest the inevitability of impermanence. The images, like the once living people they capture can only persist in memory as haunting apparitions lacking clarity of the here and now. They can best be preserved as still life images to awaken a memory or persist as one.



Quiet Timeless Beauty

In her preoccupation with ideas about the passage of time expressed as change, Heather Graham set out to explore it by sequentially recording a single maple tree which caught her attention at Riverdale Park in Toronto. It was during the summer and autumn months of 2015 that Graham frequented daily the tree recording the effect of weather on it, and, in time, its falling leaves until it would be barren, nearly erased by the whiteness of the expectant snow. What would remain of its new, slender and leafless frame during its cyclical dormant phase? Only a visual compilation stirring a memory of its past beauty and glory!

One day, Graham noticed a man walking in the Park with a framed photo in hand. His destination was another smaller tree which was covered with colourful ribbons. As a quiet, removed bystander, Graham observed the stranger and others who gathered around the decorated tree for what seemed a private solemn occasion, but soon resumed her original objective to document the grander maple tree.

Respectful of its special significance to the stranger, Graham kept her distance from the memorial tree but noticed how it too changed over time, not just through the course of nature but by human presence. Flowers in containers and other ornaments were placed on branches to replace fallen leaves.

As the seasons changed and autumn turned into winter, the cold weather made it difficult for the artist to spend hours outdoors pushing her into the studio where she undertook to paint images of women. Previously she worked on a painting series of haunting monochromatic visages. Her new project took a different turn that evolved into colourful depictions of angelic feminine forms and faces. They, like their predecessors, also manifest out of sweeping smoky ether but in this offshoot series, the blushing, rosy reds and sensual sfumato serve to promote a romanticized vision of delicate and vulnerable femininity. Unlike the earlier works, they do not necessarily threaten to disappear into oblivion. Their subtle delineation primarily conveys a sense of contemplative and timeless beauty.

A number of faces are mildly obscured by doodles and decorative patterns that were made of overlaid stencils of flowers and leaves. These are the various objects adorning the small tree that remained etched in the subconscious of the artist and which revealed themselves spontaneously from the recesses of her mind. The artist soon realized that she was painting the solitary small tree which was probably planted in remembrance of a deceased person. The poignant symbolic value of the tree signifying both loss and memory has now inadvertently and by complete chance merged with the new painting project in which faces like trees act as memory banks of past lives.

Credits and Notes

TEXTS

Pages 1, 7, 8 Sharona Adamowicz-Clements

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IMAGES

Clockwise from top left.

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- *Pink I*, 2016; oil on canvas; 44"x 50"
- *Reminds me of M*, 2017; oil on canvas; 20"x 22"
- *Pink II*, 2016; oil on canvas; 60"x 60"
- *For W*, 2017; oil on canvas; 20"x 24"

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- *face no. 12*, 2009; oil on canvas; 45"x 45"
- *is*, 2008; oil on canvas; 45"x 45"
- *face no. 5*, 2009; oil on canvas; 48"x 48"
- *through*, 2007; oil on canvas; 40"x 40"
- *exit still*, 2007; oil on canvas; 20"x 20"
- *face2010.02*, 2010; oil on canvas; 48"x 54"

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Acknowledgements

First, thank you, to the viewers who took the time to visit my exhibition.

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me of M

