


 AVENUE

COMING INTO FOCUS

It takes patience to see the images in Heather Graham's art *By Angela Hickman*

ook. Take a step back. Lean in. This is the dance artist Heather Graham watches people do at her shows, waiting until the moment when — there. Everything comes together for them and they can see the face rising out of the painting, like a ghostly polaroid or a woman projected on the canvas.

The subjects of Graham's large-scale paintings aren't always clear at first, but with movement and patience, each canvas of dark smudges becomes a face looking back at the viewer.

"If you stand there long enough, it all comes into focus," Graham says of her work, on display now at the Visual Arts Centre of Clarington in Ontario. "It's almost like [the painting] pulls you in, because you have to kind of just stay there and say, 'I know what this is. It's a ghost.'"

The searching is part of what makes it pleasurable, she says. Her work is about giving the viewer the space to think, and find the image. But her paintings aren't like the Magic Eye puzzles of the 1990s — there is no right way to look at them, Graham says. Rather, like those email word puzzles demonstrating our ability to read mis-

spelled words, her paintings demonstrate how our mental programming forms smudges of black paint into a face.

Graham was first inspired to paint faces in 2005, after seeing an intriguing photo in the newspaper. She had been painting still lifes of fruit, but returning to life drawing, which she had done as part of her training, was like a breath of fresh air.

"For me to draw a face or a human figure, it's almost like relaxing; it's like reading a book in the park or something," she says. "There's so many different ways to do a face than there is to do a pear, a piece of fruit."

Although Graham says she still looks to photos as a starting point for her paintings, she doesn't copy them, and she rarely paints anyone she knows. There is more freedom in painting from your imagination, she says, and even when she starts with a photo, she generally already knows what kind of look she's after.

"I'm not drawn to happy. I'm not drawn to a typical photograph where people say 'smile,' you know, 'cheese,'" she says. "I want the face to say 'Hey, I'm not done yet. Come back.' I want something where

there's something lingering."

When Graham sets up her easel in her sparse studio, she has very few tools in her work space: just a tube of black-brown paint, a house painter's brush, and a few baby facecloths.

"I made a conscious decision to try the house brush as a way to have a distance between me and the detail," she says. "So even if I want to complete eyelashes, I can't get there. It's a little rule I've given myself to make sure it's got some kind of abstraction."

Over the years, Graham's paintings have increased in size, and many of them are now close to four-foot-square. "The bigger I got, the more abstraction there was, and I found there was more space for the viewer to experience it," Graham says. "And I'm a viewer, too, because when I'm painting it I have to move back and forth in front of the painting to get it in view, and it can get really challenging."

■ Between the Mill and the Grain, an exhibit of Heather Graham's paintings, is on until Aug. 14 at the Visual Arts Centre of Clarington, in Bowmanville, Ont.

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From top, artist Heather Graham's *Untitled Face 3*; *face.01*; and *One More*, 2009

