



cover image: *Face 2010.03*, 2010; oil on canvas; 48×48 in.



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Heather Graham
at The Visual Arts Centre
of Clarington
July 17 – August 14, 2011
Curator: Maralynn Cherry

between the mill and the grain

The art of representing the physical or psychological likeness of a real or imaginary individual.

The preceding generic definition of portraiture would be readily accepted by many. It implies the act of an artist capturing, preserving and recording for posterity a specific individual. The work of Toronto artist, Heather Graham, challenges this comfortable summation of *The Portrait*. Thirteen large canvases completed between 2008 and 2011 occupy the main floor galleries of the VAC; each explores a face.

These explorations are anything but stable, finite or static. When viewed up close, exquisitely minimal wisps of oil paint appear almost as vapors; fifteen feet away, a face is present, believably occupying space and possessed of anatomy. This anatomy, however, is fleeting, translucent, non-corporeal. Heather and VAC Curator, Maralynn Cherry, observe that the works embody *an absence and a presence that results in a sense of temporality*.

As we wander the gallery, faces confront us, then drift away as we alter our viewing angle. In a few pieces, this hypnotic effect is heightened by the artists placement of a layer of gauze above the painted surface. The cursory oil notations float beneath this veil, and depending upon light levels, either rise up to fuse with the fabric, or submerge softly beneath it. The result is almost holographic.

Heather's portraits compel us to look, and then look again. We may ponder *psychological likeness* or emotional state, but only briefly. It seems that this, like the faces themselves, may change or vanish in an instant. My thanks and congratulations to Heather and Maralynn for this exhibition. Thank you also to Installation Technician, David Gillespie, for unwavering sensitivity to each exhibition.



Face no.5, 2009; oil on canvas; 48 x 48 in.

A Portrait: Everyone's Portrait

“A face in the end, is the place where the coherent mind becomes an image.”¹

What is this face, that moves infinite times in a second, and lingers in our memory? A portrait could, in a glance, unveil endless gestures of surprise. Perhaps, the portrait becomes everyone's opportunity to enter, for a moment, another's occupied space. The trace or beginnings of the desire to capture someone, to remember or hold onto something of them, becomes a mystery.

At first viewing, there is a sense of ethereal wonder about the mist-like apparitions revealed in the portrait works of Heather Graham. While standing in the middle of a room, amongst such paintings, it feels as though 'moments of becoming' were arising from a cluster of clouds. One is encompassed in a field of atmosphere, trying to negotiate between a geography of closeness or distance. Her painterly process allows black oil paint to mimic the nuances of drawing. The gestural strokes of a large house painting brush, or the smudges of a face cloth, on canvas, reveal a methodical and poetic sensibility that feels timeless. These surfaces open a graphic gaze that shifts from one image to another. Several works record the subtleties of mood as Graham sometimes reshapes the same face, guiding us through a complex theatre of selves. In her technical choices, Graham is remarkably conscious of just how much she wishes to keep the brush distant from detail, thus enabling a topography of what can be accomplished when less emerges.

Who are these many selves gathering before us? Their seeming anonymity is important to Graham. She removes herself from a knowledge of her subjects. There is a philosophical tempering to the layering of such a process. It is as though the artist were unraveling an unconscious distillation, reminiscent of what one can find hidden in the apparatus of the photographic lens. In fact, we could start this comparison with the refined portraits gathered in the first Daguerreotypes. Initially these photographic plates seemed to capture the aesthetic atmosphere of a painting. Graham's aesthetic sense seems to reverse this process and reminds one of the thoughtful musings of Walter Benjamin in his *Short History of Photography*. Here, in the origins of the photograph, there still lingers "the existence of this optical unconscious, just as we discover the instinctual unconscious through psychoanalysis."²

"No matter how artful the photographer, no matter how carefully posed his subject, the beholder feels an irresistible urge to search such a picture for the tiny spark of contingency, of the here and now, with which reality has (so to speak) seared the subject, to find the inconspicuous spot where in the immediacy of that long-forgotten moment the future nests so eloquently that we, looking back, may rediscover it. For it is another nature which speaks to the camera rather than to the eye: 'other' above all in the sense that a space informed by human consciousness gives way to a space informed by the unconscious."³

Graham is keenly aware of the imminent loss of "aura"⁴, an aura existing below the surface of the image that could be easily dissipated in a culture so inundated by imagery – to see the unseen, to unveil gestures that quietly emerge if given another view. This is what Heather Graham fulfills in the act of witnessing 'the other'. *Face #5*, up close, reveals smudges and a greyscale of smeared gestures moving like a river of ephemeral

Face 2011.01 (female), 2011; oil on canvas; 50 x 50 in.



forms, surfacing and disappearing. There is a natural, finely tuned morphology to these engrained strokes. Rubbed out or erased marks reveal light, illuminating the viewer's ability to focus. At a distance, the face emerges not as in a mirror; it feels as if one were viewing a self in the process of becoming. A sense of surprise surfaces here. Initially, the face seems vulnerable and diaphanous, but there is strength in Graham's ability to enliven an image that could be lost. Each eye, the nostrils and the mouth animate the viewer's sensorial engagement; these portraits shape a threshold of viewing. Movement flourishes as each face continues to transform through the focal spectrum of the viewer.

In *Face 2011.01 (female)*, the lightness and graphic acumen carry with it a classical resonance. This female could easily be found in the sketchbooks of Leonardo, Rembrandt or Vermeer. The eyes, in their sideways glance, invoke a mythic repose of knowledge emanating from a young face. One feels the muscles of the face shaping a thought or a feeling. The lips and jaw seem etched between silence and the urge to speak. To linger in this silence is to sense those moments so easily concealed by words. Time itself is suspended in Graham's faces. How does one give presence and meaning to such illusive moments? It seems as though we are floating above, or passing through, lived increments of time. Remembering leaves signs and an image marks but a pause in the duration of a life.

“all that's been wrested from doubt
 I greet, the mouths opened again
 After knowing well what silence means.
 Do we know, friends, do we not know?
 Both mold the hour of hesitation
 into the contours of a face.”⁵





A sense of filmic montage comes into play in Graham's two paintings: *Troubled Girl no. 1 & 3*. One is aware of the resemblance in both images and yet the shifts of mood and the glancing demeanors tell their own story. Neither face feels comfortable. In the splicing and editing of the gestures, a definite sense of unease is revealed. Graham's touch sets up a re-staging of the pose. Her paint underscores a frozen gesture, freeing the image for possible new readings. There is an interesting relationship in the painting of this visual drama and some of the early photographs of Cindy Sherman posing as many different women. One thinks of the lonely girl on a couch talking on the phone, the debutante crossing a New York street in her Dior dress, or the housewife hanging clothes on the line. Sherman acts out a menagerie of female roles, a motivation not unlike some of the portraits Rembrandt did of himself as biblical characters. There are so many motives involved in the complexity of portraiture. What drives the desire to re-draft a representation of someone else or, in some way, become or play the part of that person? The narrative aspects of a portrait have been a part of culture since the very beginning of storytelling. It is the role of storytellers to empty themselves in order to tell the stories that belong to a community. Somewhere in the painting, it could be possible that Graham feels like Roland Barthes in his melancholic deconstruction of the photographs in his *Camera Lucida*. From any image or story, there is so much more to tell, so much more that lives beyond the illusion of a captured moment. While alone in a subway car looking at an image of a girl selling a product or advertising a healthy lifestyle, I am never sure just how empty of feeling this face becomes. If I take the time, can I begin to imagine what she may be feeling just before the shutter snaps?

The deeper Graham explores the face the more she sets a stage for illumination itself. In a new series titled *Lost Girl 1, 2, and 3*, images of the same girl are presented as a side view, $\frac{3}{4}$ view, and a frontal view.



Lost girl 1, 2011; oil on canvas, cotton gauze, thread; 48 x 48 in.

In the entire series, the girl is wearing a large pair of glasses. In image 1, her mouth is partially open as though on the verge of saying something. The white light of the canvas dominates as the slightest amount of shading is used, allowing each face to softly emerge. Here, the artist shifts the viewer's focus from paint to the addition of carefully stitched cotton gauze stretched over the front of each face. A sense of the grain in the minute openings of the cotton gauze makes one aware of this veiled whiteness that filters the light from behind, while modifying the original focus on the surface of the canvas.

These particular works make me think of scenes from the Ingmar Bergman film, *Persona*. The psyche begins to unravel in this film, as Bergman uses both editing and camera lens to filter out a face, or to splice two not un-similar faces together. In one scene, Liv Ullman's face feels as though it were behind glass. She (Ullman) fades in and out of focus as a young boy struggles to touch her. In Graham's new images, an almost ghostly apparition is before us as this Lost Girl struggles to hide behind, not only the glasses, but also a diaphanous veil of cloth. Who is she, and why is her field of becoming, in a sense, lost? Once again, Graham reveals the depth of her endless discoveries. She is not content to leave such gleanings alone, choosing to illumine those vulnerable states that wait behind ordinary passing moments in our lives. The closer one goes to the surface of these paintings, the cloth acts like a shroud, collecting impressions of the original face. The warp and woof of fabric animates the process of viewing. It acts as a kind of sheath for



Gauze (detail), 2011; oil on canvas, cotton gauze



Lost girl 2, 2011; oil on canvas, cotton gauze, thread; 45 x 45 in.

the staging of light, illuminating and deepening our understanding of how an image speaks to us. This act, of adding layers to a work, reminds one of pinto, the under-paintings revealed in the x-rays of historical art works. Graham opens up pictorial space to an ever expanding vision. For her, there is an architecture to the face, lingering long after the person leaves their pose. Her portraits are born out of the ether that shapes the purity of space itself. She creates new openings, allowing each viewer's imagination a dramatic rite of entry into the re-reading of such portraits. The fullness of our engagement is found in the act of moving closer to, or farther away from, each face. Distance brings a panorama of faces into view or one gets so close that all recognition disappears.

Heather Graham's installation, on the third floor loft space of the gallery, presents a radical shift from her portrait works. Here, she places cotton gauze over four sculptural reconstructions of the gallery's windows. She, in essence, illuminates the source of architectural light. As the light streams through the gridded panes of glass, and casts its image on the grey floor, Graham's four window structures lean against the inner pillars of the room. They are full of light as the cotton gauze amplifies, and reflects back to us, the shifting of light from moment to moment. The faces may have disappeared, but the purity of the light source itself is primary here. The wonder of this final work is alchemical, reminding us that the very act of seeing things depends on light. Struck by the minimal nature of this installation, I think we are in the presence of a new refinement in Graham's practice. Standing here, and waiting patiently for the light to shift, one is aware of just how much these structures become light catchers. Is this not also the very essence of the craft involved in shaping a face, whether it be emerging from the darkness of a chiaroscuro painting, or almost fading away into light?

Endnotes

- 1 James Elkins, *The Object Looks Back* (Harvest Book, 1996) 200.
- 2 Walter Benjamin, *The Little History of Photography*, in *Walter Benjamin, Selected Writings Volume 2 1927–34*, transl. by Rodney Livingstone and others; edited by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Smith and Gary Smith (The Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 1999) 510–11.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 510.
- 4 “What is aura, actually? A strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance or semblance of distance, no matter how close it may be.” *Ibid.*, 518.
- 5 Rainer Maria Rilke, *Sonnet to Orpheus*, transl. by Edward Snow (North Point Press a Division of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, NY, 2004).



Loft installation, 2011; cotton gauze, thread, wood; 70×40 in.

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