

Heather Graham

'*so lightly here*', the Art Gallery of Peterborough's current exhibition of nineteen oil paintings by Toronto artist Heather Graham, collects works of intimate portraiture that establish, with a remarkable lightness of touch, a beguiling sense of both presence and absence. To experience this body of work is to enter a world of soft-focus, delicate shadow and blurred edges where we gaze upon strangers intimately treated. Some of these portraits seemingly float to the canvas surface and dissolve into a visual static of gray on white as we draw nearer. Coupled with this recent series of twelve monochromatic, illusory pieces, is a set of earlier works - five coloured paintings that possess a quiet eroticism evoked through warm flesh tones and alluring shades of red. These are sensuous images: some have the calmness of sleep, some a private passion; they recall frozen moments, presenting mouths slightly open as if in speech, captured in time and reproduced on canvas with a sensitive awareness of the fragile possibility for shared experience that exists between the painting and the viewer.

Graham's work is based on a collection of images that range from childhood photographs of the artist to evocative portraits selected from print media. The images have intriguing titles such as "and if", "and there is no", "until the" and "not for," manifesting an anonymity by using what the artist terms as "in-between words" - suggesting an action in progress, an interruption to a flow, or a larger moment or essence whose capture by representation is the challenge of the artistic process, by word and/or image.

Photography, possessed of an inherent, hard-edged realism that can mechanically represent the object-in-the-world with a minimum of artistic intervention, makes a fascinating starting point for Graham's collection of soft-edged works. There is a movement in these works from the concrete photographic object-ness, a trajectory arced by the artist's subjectivity, that unabashedly formulates a personal vision towards the subject matter. It's a movement from clarity to obscurity, from colour to neutrality. Through a process of reduction, these paintings come to illustrate the possibilities that a new mode of representation opens to our experiences of each other. We see presented in these works a development, a new attempt by the artist to represent, and to gain access to the essence that her photographic sources hold in latent possibility.

As the work progresses, the blurred lines and soft-focus are transformed to close cropping and a raster-like quality to the paint on the canvas. We also witness Graham's method of application evolve from the softening of lines with the wide stroke of the household paintbrush, to the rag-daubed surface of the monochromatic paintings. These developments in form and technique allow Graham to confront her subjects more forcefully, to represent segments of the face with an arresting intimacy that at times evokes the broken surface and amorphous edges found in a magnified detail of an old-masters work or the impressions left on a death-shroud by the face it covers.

Five of the paintings collected in *so lightly here* form a series that represents Graham's larger project *writ small*. These works portray a single face in differing sizes, degrees of focus and intensity. Experiencing this series of images, the viewer is made aware of the skill with which Graham handles the medium as a painting evident in the contrasting gray tones of the canvases. By revisiting the same image and revealing differing levels of detail, while managing the play of light and shadow, these paintings work in tandem to offer the possibility

of mastering the essence of the painted subject, while negating the singularity of this possibility through the variety of responses this single face can provoke. The viewer looks deeply, attempting to capture the face that has floated to these multiple surfaces, working without the tantalizing hard-edges Graham's work successfully negates.

The appeal of Heather Graham's work lies in the intimate and controlled access she reveals to the viewer from these captured private moments of strangers. There is much on offer here; a moment of emotion removed from context, brought before us for our engagement. This is an art of the anonymous image, an urban art. Graham controls our gaze, allows us as viewers to linger on and search out the essence that has called upon her. These are the intriguing people we catch fleeting glimpses of on the streets of our cities; those who we pass everyday, but never really see. We are drawn to look; there is something in the face, an emotion, and an experience that compels us to gaze longer. Yet, outside of the gallery we are not permitted; there is the world around us, context, barriers, that prevent us from satisfying our desire to watch. Graham invites our gaze to dwell luxuriously. There is tenderness in her depiction that imparts a sense of security to our viewing. She invites us to look upon these images with eyes of desire. There is no artistic suture being performed. We are carefully led into this, Graham sharing our desire for the image presented, without question or scrutiny of our participation. Instead she shapes it, lovingly invites us to meditate with prolonged and profound pleasure on these public texts that contain an essence she's compelled to work with. Accessing this essence requires a deft touch. One simply can't reveal it; it is too fragile, subject to disintegration, to evaporation on contact with the air. Any substance that these works possess would disappear if the essence could be extracted bluntly and displayed. Instead, through a process of application and reduction Graham is able to access the elusive qualities in her subjects.

By softly presenting these faces, Graham honours the mysteries they possess. She in turn creates art that has both intangibility and completeness in our experience of it. The faces presented are protected in their ambiguity; they do not make themselves completely present on the canvas. We wish for their completion in the way we wish to possess their image, but we must be content in their obscurity. They remain elusive; if we come too close they reveal themselves to be dots on canvas. The viewer must perform an interplay with the canvas, approaching and retreating. And this interplay, this back and forth, this adjusting, is at the heart of what informs Graham's representation. Through a perceptive movement back and forth from the works, we mirror what Graham performs in her capturing and reproducing of a fleeting essence; moving in and out with Graham's eye and brush we are invited to be her co-creators.

Building from reducing, a purposeful blurring of the image that reveals as much as it distorts, Graham's painterly presence is felt in these works by the aura of fleeting representation her images evoke. Working photography's hard-edge against itself, capturing more than the visual totality mechanical reproduction claims as its own, so lightly here realizes frozen moments with an animation that is utterly compelling. These faces will haunt the viewer long after their viewing, and will awaken a longing for the fleeting glimpse of the quiet passion of others that, although oftentimes unseen, dwells at the heart of the experience good art can produce.

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