

MARY GRAHAM

by Kai Newquist



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What does your thesis work investigate?

My thesis work, *Kin*, is a series of sculptural heads and faces, bearing different skin tones and facial features. The size and formal representation vary, creating a sense of the diversity of spirit and personality. Together, the faces gaze serenely at viewers, quietly abstaining from overt meaning, but it's within this space that there is a tremendous opportunity for interpretation. As viewers look at them, some might contextualize them within history, while others may place them within the context of their own lives; this one looks like a mother or grandmother, etc. To me, the work is an investigation of how we might relate to one another as family members, which speaks to broader ideas I have about our collective origins as a species. I ask viewers to contemplate this concept here.

How has your thesis project evolved since its inception?

This body of work evolved from the tiny faces I've been making since I was a little girl as a response to my affinity for portraiture. In early 2020 I experimented with making life-sized faces and felt deeply compelled to continue, despite being unsure of what it all meant. With each new face, the work would evolve and change, each piece re-contextualizing the last one. As I began showing the work, people told me how they were seeing the faces of their loved ones. It was then that I began to understand



Kin, 2021, oil paint on paper mache clay, full installation 5'x5'8"

what the work was communicating, and so it evolved again. The faces revealed themselves to be a reflection of my own values; a kind of love of humanity that I wish to share with others. It will only continue to evolve.

In your practice, is there a question you are trying to answer?

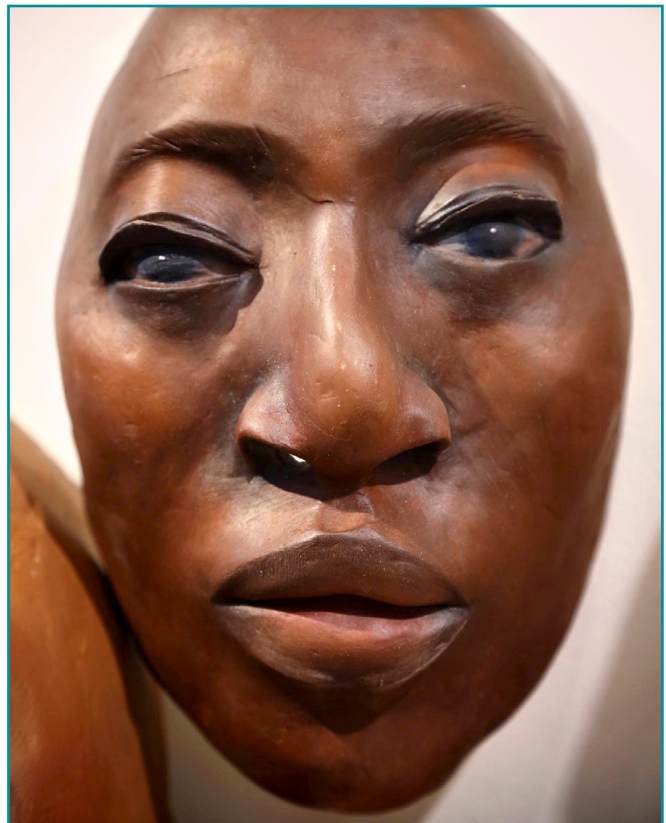
The thesis questions are very open-ended: If you recognize that this group of diverse individuals might be a family, what does that mean for you? How might you engage with people different from you? How might you begin to see others as family?

How do you approach atmosphere and color?

I suppose this work has a limited palette, as I explore the ways in which color manifests within human skin. Viewing the work truly forces one to confront these many shades of brown and pink, differently from how skin color is interacted with in life. I take a lot of care in painting the faces, I'm thinking about every color and tone found in the skin as it interacts with light. The end result asks us to don a new pair of eyes to behold what is familiar but also precious.

What or who are your major influences?

The greatest influence on this body of work is my father, Lonnie Graham, an artist, activist, and photographer. In his portrait series, *A Conversation with the*



kin no.1, 2020, oil paint on paper mache clay, 8"

World, he asked each of his subjects the same seven questions relating to culture, mortality, and the relationship between life and death. The series consists of hundreds of portraits of people from all over the world, and yet the answers he receives during the interviews are all strikingly similar, revealing this profound sense of common humanity. Having grown up surrounded by this work, and the nuance of his perspective as an artist, I inherited his love of people and acquired a deep affinity for the portrait.

What is in the future for you?

Work as hard as I possibly can, make as much work as I can. Work with communities to establish new models for education rooted in the arts and principles of DEIB (diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging). Make friends with people who are good with money, or else get rich and establish endowments, and foundations for the arts. Have some children, have a wonderful life, and die—eventually.



kin no.13, 2021, oil paint on paper mache clay, 40"

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Mary Graham is a Philadelphia-born multi-media painter and performer investigating collective ancestry as a nexus for internal growth, and interpersonal understanding.