

Lonnie Graham: A Conversation at the Table

The Fabric Workshop and Museum

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

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www.fabricworkshopandmuseum.org

Pennsylvania Artist of the Year Lonnie Graham explores relationships and community through his multi-faceted work "A Conversation at the Table." In collaboration with The Fabric Workshop and Museum and fifty participating artists and art organizations from the Philadelphia area, Graham facilitated a monumental project addressing three aspects of humanity—the mind, body, and spirit. Using the table both metaphorically and literally as a meeting place where people build, forge, and sustain relationships, the resulting exhibition documents the interventions and collaborative processes.

Known for his portrait photography, Graham includes large-format black and white Polaroid portraits of his collaborators in the exhibit. The unframed digital prints border two gallery walls, directly engaging the viewer. By choosing to present unframed digital reproductions, the emphasis shifts away from the photograph as an art object to the photograph as document or evidence.

Interactivity both within and outside the museum is an important element of the exhibit. The "Mind" section includes multi-layered projects. Clarissa Sligh, Blaise Tobia, and Virginia Maksymowicz collaborated to create the "The Contemplative Mind," an intimate meditation chamber where visitors can sit, reflect, and listen to sound recordings of previous conversations. Outside the chamber, Andrea Paulsen's "First Memories" allows viewers to write their first memory of life and read others' memories. Sophie Sanders' video "Unspoken Truths" documents people relating a previously unshared thought to someone whom they loved or who loved them. "Respond in Kind" by Robert Martin and Tara Tallman uses the postal service to reach people outside of the museum context. Selected people are given an original photographic postcard to send an acknowledgement of appreciation to a significant person in their life.

The "Body" component of the exhibit includes projects manifested within the community. In "Secret Family Recipes," the Asian Arts Initiative produced and disseminated recipes of home remedies for healing the body to seven community garden locations throughout Philadelphia. M.W. Dora Graham's (the artist's five-year old daughter) project "Political Fruit" addresses issues of poverty and nutrition by handing out fresh fruit wrapped in beautiful screen-printed scarves to homeless people. Another work entitled "Seed



Installation shot from "Lonnie Graham: A Conversation at the Table" Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia, mixed media, 2006

Bowl Project" involved the Expressions of Love Choir, who handed out small bowls containing seeds for individuals to plant and share.

As the most intangible aspect of humanity, the exhibition's "Spirit" section is presented as the most concrete. In conjunction with the Clay studio, artists created dozens of clay vessels symbolizing the resting place of the spirit or soul. In our fractured world, people seek connection and peace in a variety of ways—yoga being one of the most common. Yoga means the unity of mind, body, and spirit. When the three elements are unified, the person achieves wholeness. Exploring this idea of interconnectedness on a larger scale, Graham uses the artistic practice of collaboration as a catalyst to promote healing and stop the erosion of community. Traditional exhibits create a dialogue between the artwork and the viewer. Breaking this traditional paradigm, Graham extends the dialogue into the community, forging connections between disparate people, asking them to reflect upon the commonality of their humanity. The traces of his interventions will remain long after the exhibition closes.

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