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OCTOBER 2024

Paul David Henderson

Championing Equity

Photographed by Vincent Gatti



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Art provides a powerful lens through which we can explore and understand the layers of identity, heritage, and history. Through this exploration, artists can enlighten personal and shared experiences, encouraging viewers to engage with their own backgrounds and histories. This dialogue between art and identity develops a deeper appreciation of the artwork and the broader historical and cultural contexts it represents.



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Exploring Identity, Heritage, and History through Art

by *Geraldine Zialcita*

As a child, **Mary W.D. Graham**, who grew up in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, was surrounded by art and beauty. Belonging to a family of artists, this was the first world Mary knew and what would shape her path of becoming a visual and performing artist. "During the first three years of my life, my mother brought me with her to work at the Fabric Workshop Museum in Philadelphia. I spent the days playing in the studio, looking through materials tests from former exhibitions, painting on mylar with India inks, and taking naps in the museum archives. I was exposed to the work of giants like Marina Abramovic, Kara Walker, and Louise Bourgeois. I grew up witnessing the intersection of cutting-edge contemporary art and the traditional craftsman principles critical to the development of all groundbreaking work," she shares.

Mary completed her BFA in Individualized Studies from the California College of the Arts. Aside from her parents being a significant influence in her life and career, Mary's extended family included painters, arts administrators, and artists who had established thriving public programs within their communities. "Art for me was not just a tangible part of my

reality, but also woven into a code of ethics, and part of the matrix from which personal and cultural transformation could occur," she informs.

Since her family valued art, it was no coincidence that Mary would nurture her creative expression and receive full support from her family. "I find it significant that I can trace my artistic impulses back to my childhood and to catalytic moments of viewing advanced artwork that I could not yet intellectualize—moments which nestled within my psyche and continue to inform my process today." She smiles.

Mary draws inspiration from artists or movements who have been instrumental in her precise approach to figuration and portraiture. "The painters I look to for their handling of materials and sensitivity to light and composition include the legendary Rembrandt (born 1606), Henry Ossawa Tanner (1859), Andrew Wyeth (1917), Barkley L. Hendricks (1945), Robert Pruitt (1975), and Jennifer Packer (1984). The full list of artists whose work deeply inspires me is very, very long but also includes photographers, performers, mixed media and installation artists like Sonya Clark, Ann Hamilton, Lorraine O'Grady, the

Saar family, Carrie Mae Weems, and Deborah Willis," she briefs.

When asked to describe her art and style and why this method resonates with her, Mary states, "I consider myself an interdisciplinary artist—I work in painting, sculpture, and vocal performance. Through these different mediums, I study the notion of 'the ancestors' as a conceptual and spiritual medium through which we might gain historical, interpersonal, and introspective insight. Using the veneration of my own lineage as a starting point, I explore themes of generational love, collective human origin, our relationships with the unknown, and history. In my visual work, I'm primarily concerned with portraiture. I mostly work representationally, utilizing a level of precision and care in my depictions of the figure. My compositions are relatively minimal. By working the way I do, I hope to draw attention beyond the painting and into a more contemplative space."

Mary's work is deeply rooted in African-American spiritual traditions. While exploring the concept of "the ancestors," Mary discusses how her personal lineage and cultural heritage interpret this idea and how it manifests in

her visual and performance art. "The concept of 'the ancestors' elegantly addresses essential aspects of our humanity; acknowledging our lives, our family ties, our deaths, our connection to all living things, and forces beyond our comprehension.

"I'm the daughter of a white mother and a Black father and was brought up with pride in my identity, my Blackness, and my lineage. I grew up hearing stories about my ancestors and their continued presence in my life despite having passed. I felt comforted with the knowledge that because they form my genetic code, they are always there to guide me. 'Ancestor worship' is a remnant of West African spiritual tradition and harkens to a time when the role of the artist or craftsman within a community was to create objects that could bond a person with the divine, nature, or the ancestors.

"I try to approach my work with all of this in mind, and as I make work addressing history, I view it through the complexity and intimacy of a shared human lineage. I'm attempting to incite a sense of care to repair, to heal, to love, and to reconcile with the unknown."





Mary's distinctive style involves painting women on paper bags, exploring the complex themes of colorism and privilege. Her series, *Value Test: Brown Paper*, references the historical paper bag tests once used by the Black upper class to determine eligibility for entry into elite fraternities, social clubs, and events—allowing access only to those with skin lighter than the brown paper bag. Mary goes on to explain, "It meant that folks darker than the bag with the same level of acumen were systemically excluded from certain colleges, jobs, and opportunities to access key resources and build generational wealth."

"It's important to note that the practice was developed within the context of a white supremacist society which had already granted a level of privilege to lighter-skinned and mixed-race Black people as a means of dividing communities and stifling Black liberation. Around the time of the fight for civil rights in the early '60s, the *Black is Beautiful* movement largely put an end to the use of the paper bag test. Since then, institutionalized colorism is no longer as prevalent in the United States. Colorist bias is not gone, however, and the paper bag test still lives on within our cultural memory."

"Discussion of skin color within the Black community is never truly a shallow one. The topic arouses memories of family, peers, and loved ones and a deeper history dating back to enslavement. I first learned about the paper bag test through a remark that my father made. He had explained that if you were lighter than the bag, then you could pass, and if you were darker, you couldn't." The statement stayed with me into my adulthood, sparking my own inquiry into internalized racism and colorism.

"The portraits in *Value Test: Brown Paper* are fictional, meaning that the work also reflects a level of introspection. Mining the internet for photographs to collage together in Photoshop, I created composite portraits to use as references, from which I rendered the women's likenesses in oil on brown paper. Through each portrait, I ponder the implications of my own intersecting identities—my gender, class, parentage, complexion, and the way these identity performances are perceived/racialized in the present, and how they may have also been interpreted throughout time. As much as the work is rooted in history, it is just as much about confronting viewers with questions as a means of sparking a process of healing: What will we do now? This is what happened; now how will we move forward?"

Since 2006, Mary has exhibited, collaborated, and performed across the country. From 2019 to 2023, she was a commissioned artist for projects at Burning Man, including *Andromeda Re-Imagined: A Sanctuary in Deep Playa* and *The Museum of No Spectators*, and in 2024, she held her first solo exhibition at the Museum of the African Diaspora as part of their Emerging Artist's Program. Her work has been featured by CBS News, 48Hills, and the MoAD Journal. Graham has also been awarded residencies at Black [Space] Residency in San Francisco, California; Haystack Mountain School of Craft in Deer Isle, Maine; and Anderson Ranch in Snowmass, Colorado.



"I've learned from my mentors that it's vital for artists, particularly emerging artists, to be clear about the narrative around their work and to advocate for themselves."





Aside from colorism, Mary's work touches on consumerism and classism. She expounds on how these ideas are woven into her paintings, expressing the message she hopes to convey about the "things we carry," both physically and metaphorically. "The use of the brown paper bag in *Value Test: Brown Paper* represents a common point of reference amongst Black folks within art and discourse. The strength of this reference almost outshines the subtleties of the brown paper bag as an art material. Indeed, bags imply *holding and carrying*. Brown paper is used to wrap cuts of meat from the butcher, dispose of tree and foliage clippings, carry one's groceries, hold one's lunches, and wrap one's packages. It's a material that speaks to transition, transference, and ephemerality of the highest degree: destined to be garbage.

"I've treated the paper differently in each painting, obscuring it with pigment in some, and allowing it to stand out by contrasting its shape and tone with the substrate in others. I wanted the women subjects to be in ownership of the environment that they seem to emerge from. The color and *world* of the bag behind them represent unspoken life experiences, shared history, and culture; indeed, everything that we each *carry*."

In her visual and performance work, Mary is known to strive for simplicity and stillness. She defines the impact her viewers could derive from this contemplative space. "I use simplicity and stillness as a way of *calling in* the viewer

and centering attention. In *Value Test*, I'm calling viewers to think about colorism. In my performance work, I'm calling viewers to the present through a slight disruption of routine, to experience the song together," she states.

To add a feather to her cap, Mary is also a vocalist. Her performance art combines music and visual art. She uses these two forms of expression to interact and complement each other in her work. "My performance art draws from the classical training I received as a singer. My improvisational performance practice began informally during my first few years living in San Francisco, as I would sing in public spaces to keep my voice trained, and out of a desire to share my song. I began recording these performances at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, when I sang in my neighborhood to the quarantined residents of North Beach, Chinatown, Coit Tower, and Russian Hill. In the present, the practice is ever-evolving and is fundamentally an exploration of the medium of song as a tool for *calling* both inward and outward and initiating shared experiences of beauty.

"The visual work and performance work come together in a video installation piece I did entitled *Calling*, which is a projection on silk in front of an eight by six foot painting. In the video, I sing to the viewers, and while the music crescendos to fill the space with sound, the massive red painting in the background fills the viewer's vision and imagination. Together the components form a kind of poem as I think about

processes of being called to a beyond, or called toward the ancestral realm," she relays.

What Mary loves most about being an artist is that art allows her to understand humanity and serves as a way to study history. "I think that artists serve a kind of elusive function in society. Very often we are laying the groundwork for the future by responding with great sensitivity to the present. We're trying to address social problems; we're acting as historians and scientists, researchers and scholars—the full value of what we do on all of these levels is sometimes not realized until much later, for better or for worse," she expresses.

Mary believes the most important lesson she's learned is that there's still an immense universe of knowledge waiting to be discovered. She understands that if her best work is yet to come, the only way to reach it is by focusing on the path directly in front of her and continuing to move forward.

When asked about the challenges she's faced, Mary shares that she occasionally encounters people who make assumptions about her grasp of her own subject matter, influenced by biases against her age, race, or gender. When these moments affect her more than they should, she says that she recognizes it as a reflection of her own self-doubt and insecurity. She also expresses gratitude for her support system, saying, "It's important to note that having a family of folks within the field and even coming from a loving family where my creativity was encouraged has put me in a good

position to pursue the career I want to pursue. It's challenging at the moment trying to balance making a living while also trying to advance my career, but I'm very lucky to be here."

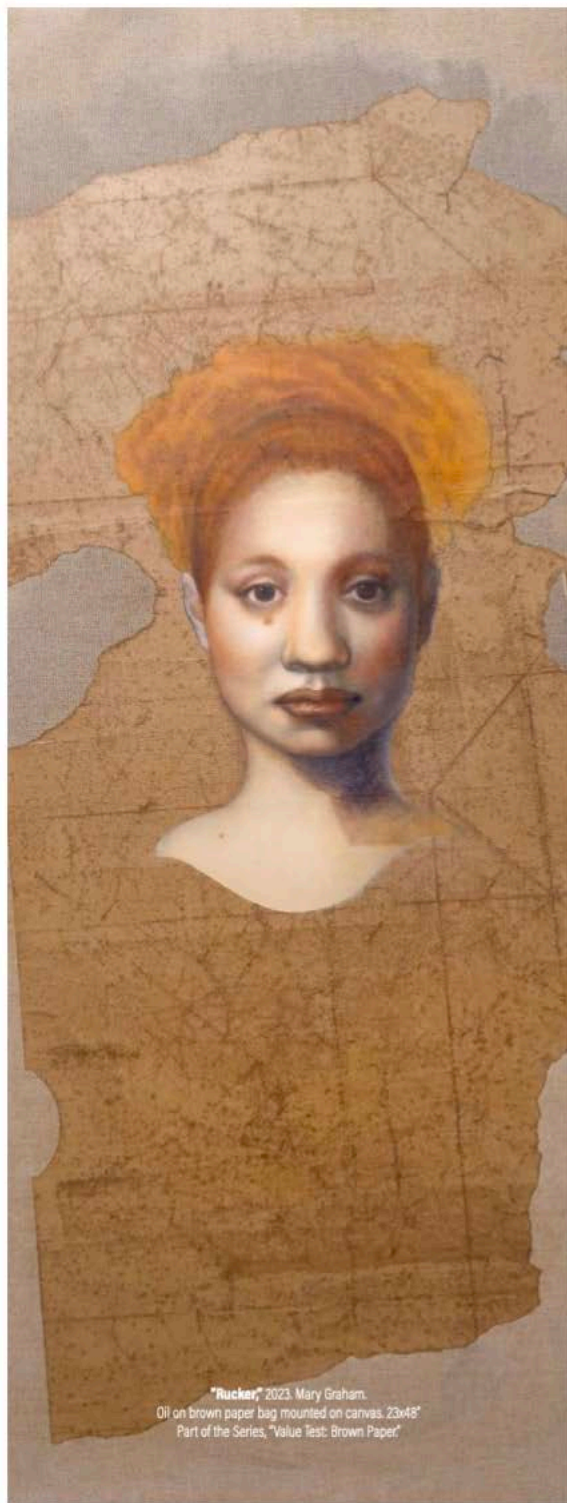
Mary works as a studio assistant to three artists, all of whom have generously shared their wisdom from long careers in the arts. She finds herself in a transitional phase as a young adult and emerging artist, balancing the need to make a living and gain critical professional experience. At home, she focuses on advancing her own career—researching, writing applications for grants, fellowships, and residency programs. She participates in exhibitions and stays in touch with gallerists, curators, and event organizers. She coordinates with collectors, ensures loan agreement forms are signed, safely packs her artwork, and delivers it to its destinations.

She acknowledges that keeping a work/life balance is a steep learning curve, but one that many artists start with. "Importantly, *making* the artwork is what justifies all of this labor. Daily studio time serves as a liaison between work and the joy and peace that come from doing what I love to do. I'm most at peace when I'm making things, so I unwind by cooking delicious meals for myself every week, sewing my own clothing, writing music, and taking on DIY projects slightly beyond my skill level. Despite everything I've described, days of rest are an important part of the routine as well."

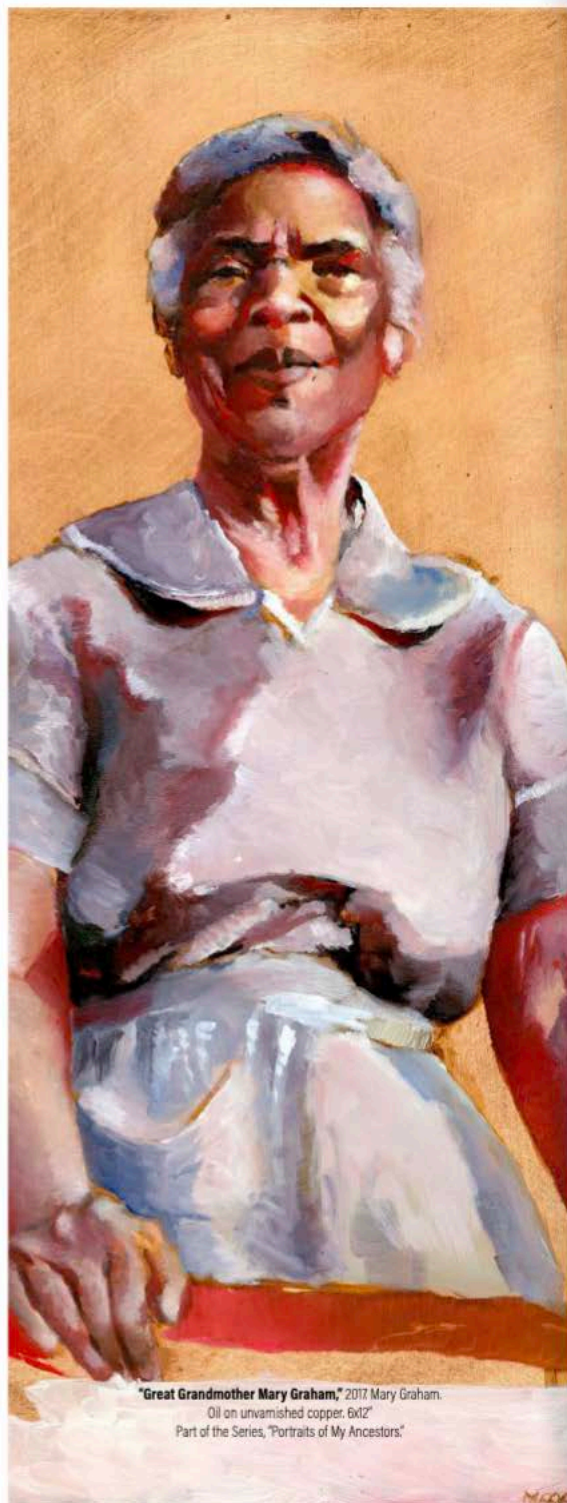


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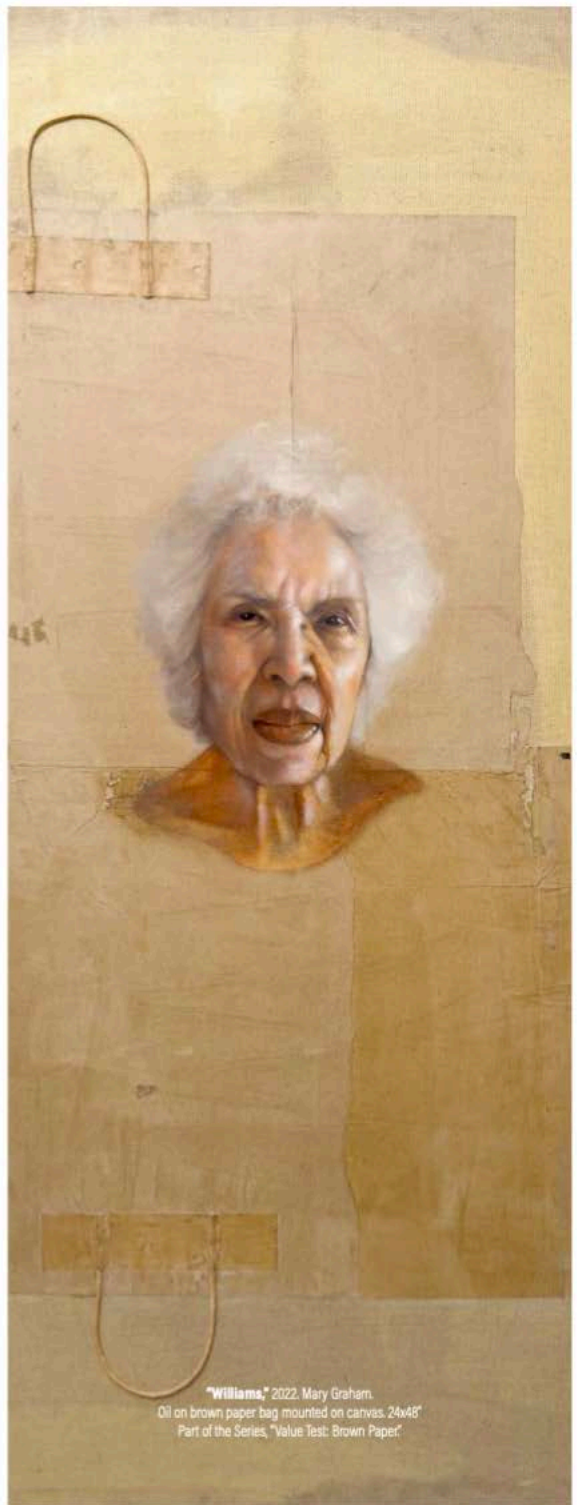
"Rucker," 2023, Mary Graham.
 Oil on brown paper bag mounted on canvas. 23x48"
 Part of the Series, "Value Test: Brown Paper"



"Great Grandmother Mary Graham," 2017, Mary Graham.
 Oil on unvarnished copper. 6x12"
 Part of the Series, "Portraits of My Ancestors."



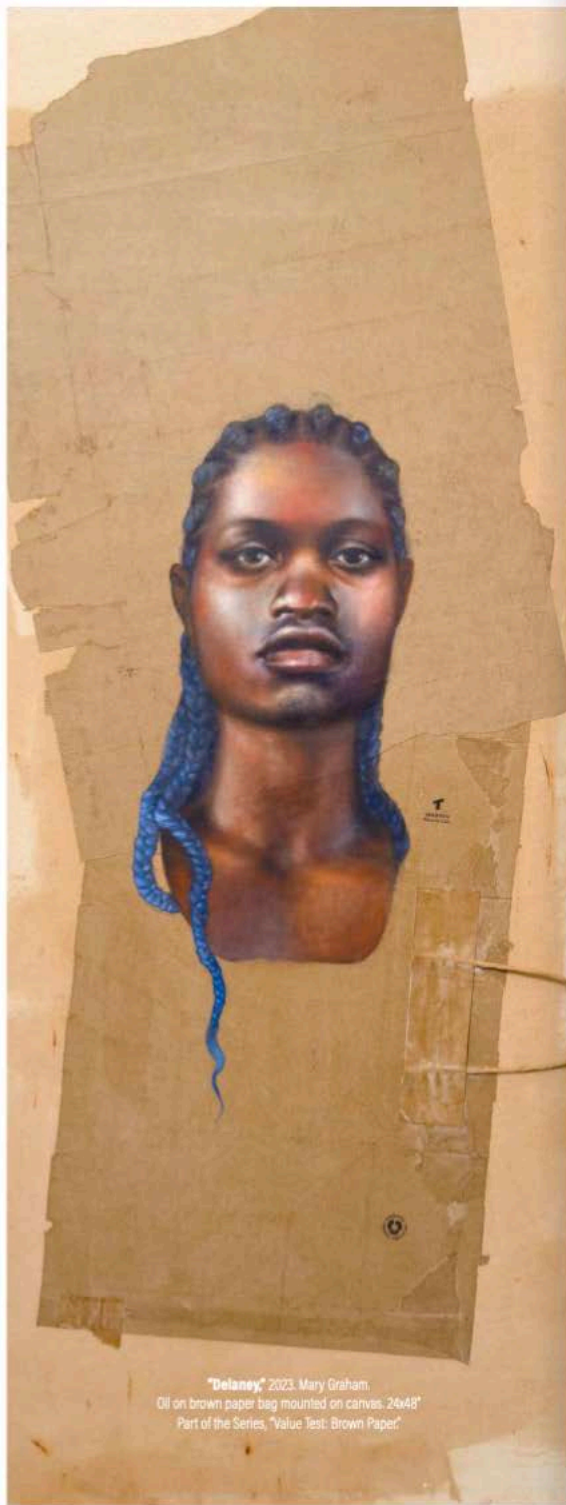
"Syphax," 2024, Mary Graham.
 Oil on brown paper bag mounted on canvas. 24x48"
 Part of the Series, "Value Test: Brown Paper."



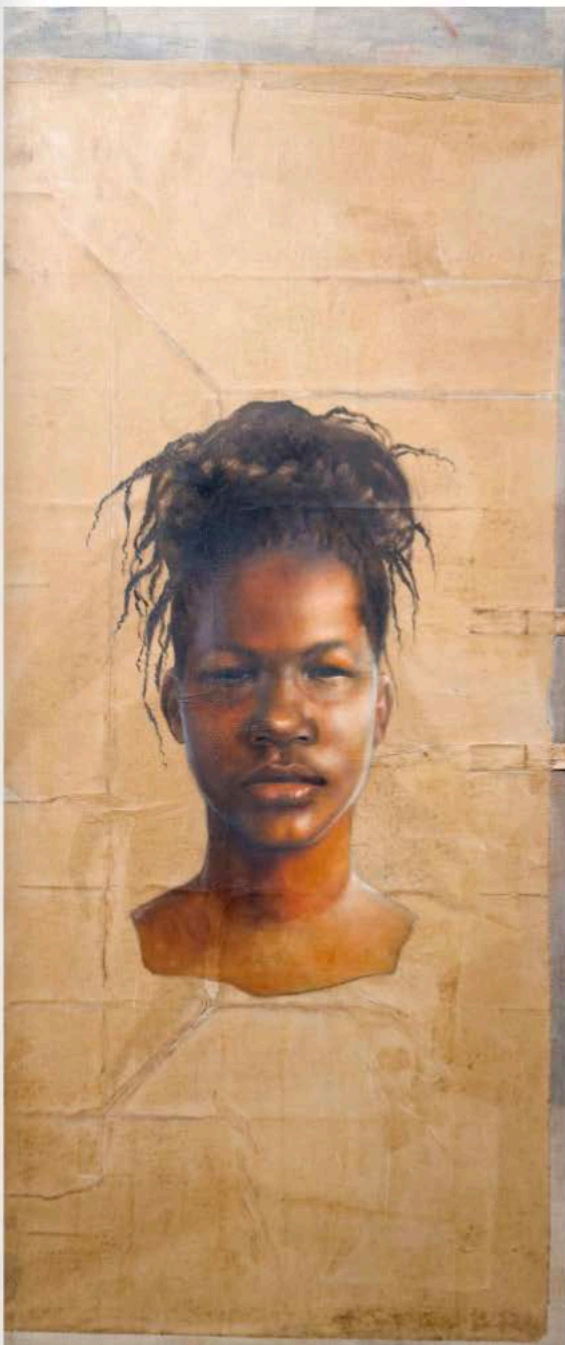
"Williams," 2022, Mary Graham.
 Oil on brown paper bag mounted on canvas. 24x48"
 Part of the Series, "Value Test: Brown Paper."



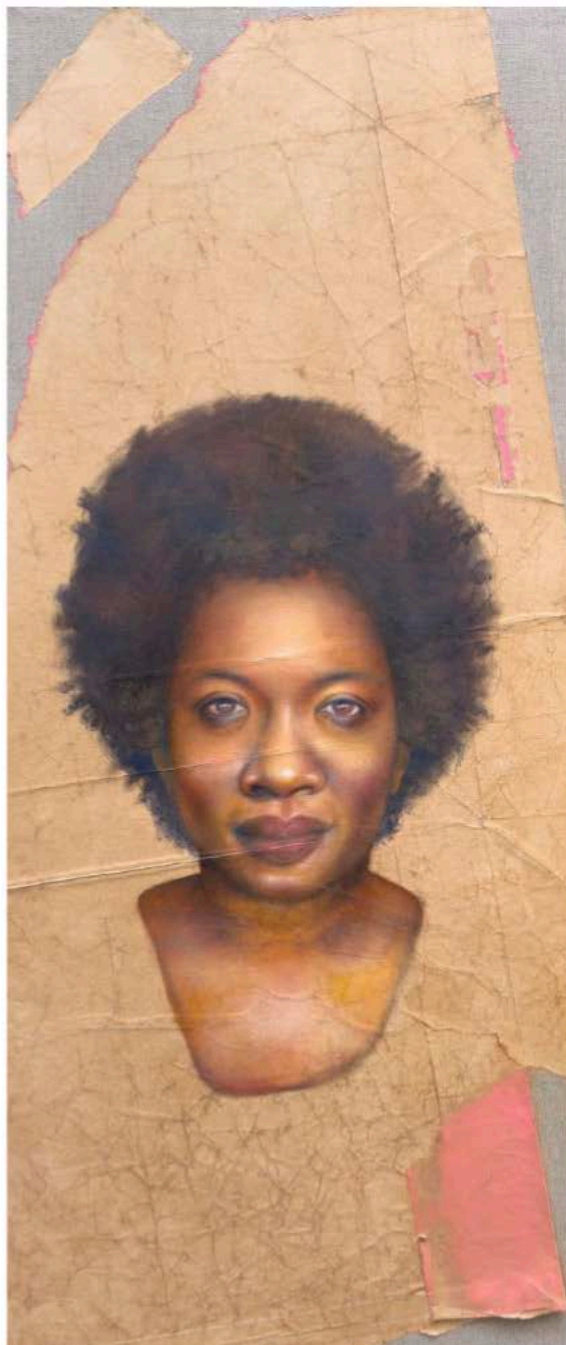
"Bishop," 2023, Mary Graham.
Oil on brown paper bag mounted on canvas, 23x48"
Part of the Series, "Value Test: Brown Paper"



"Delaney," 2023, Mary Graham.
Oil on brown paper bag mounted on canvas, 24x48"
Part of the Series, "Value Test: Brown Paper"



"Purvis," 2023, Mary Graham.
Oil on brown paper bag mounted on canvas, 23x48"
Part of the Series, "Value Test: Brown Paper."



"Quander," 2024, Mary Graham.
Oil on brown paper bag mounted on canvas, 24x48"
Part of the Series, "Value Test: Brown Paper."



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Through her work, Mary has traveled around the globe to Mexico, Japan, Kenya, South Africa, Peru, Morocco, Indonesia, and India. Mary has a piece in the Root Division auction exhibition from October 8th through 24th. In November, she will have new work featured in a show at the Berkeley Art Center, curated by Charles Lee and Hannah Waiters. She also has some exciting shows scheduled for 2025. Mary is in the process of applying to graduate schools this winter. Currently, Mary is focused on expanding her *Value Test: Brown Paper* series from twelve to twenty-four pieces by next year. She feels the emergence of a new body of work on the horizon and is working towards bringing her current work to a natural conclusion.

Mary concludes her story with advice to young artists exploring their own lineage or cultural roots through their work. "I've learned from my mentors that it's vital for artists, particularly emerging artists, to be clear about the narrative around their work and to advocate for themselves. I have learned to stay introspective. I think through and write about what I'm making and why I'm making it, and I do research to contextualize what I'm doing. For me, being in the community of other Black artists, scholars, and writers has been vital, as each of us has the opportunity to tap into a deep knowledge base and exchange ideas as it pertains to the cultural context of our work."

Mary's passion for exploring complex themes like identity, heritage, and history is evident in her art. Her work combines detailed craftsmanship with personal and cultural insights, encouraging viewers to think critically about these issues. By challenging conventional views and exploring the legacies that influence us, she makes a significant impact on contemporary art. Mary W.D. Graham's commitment to personal development and broader societal questions marks her as a notable and evolving artist and an inspiration to all.