



Installation shot of Mary Graham's 'Value Test: Brown Paper' at the MoAD. Images via MoAD

ARTS + CULTURE ART CULTURE

Striking probe of colorism leads to artist's first solo show—at MoAD, no less



By EMILY WILSON MAY 1, 2024

When **Mary Graham** first started working on her paintings about the paper bag test—an actual comparison that used to be administered to see if a Black person's skin was light enough to gain them admittance to colorist privileges—she was still a student at San Francisco's California College of the Arts. She experimented, using scraps of the infamous brown paper bags, as well as plastic bags to explore consumerism and the things we carry in addition to colorism and classicism.

But her interest deepened upon graduating in 2022.

"As soon as I got out of school, something just kind of happened in my brain, and I thought that I should take these paintings a little more seriously," she told 48hills. "I wanted to mount them on canvas and make real paintings out of them and find proper reference material and create composite photographs."

The resulting oil paintings she made of fictional women on brown paper bags so impressed the jurors for the Museum of the African Diaspora's **Emerging Artist Program** that they selected Graham after a highly competitive process. Her show, entitled *Value Test: Brown Paper* will hang in the MoAD through May 19.

Graham said her father had first mentioned the paper bag test to her, but he didn't go into much detail. She thought it might be related to passing as a white person, or even be a myth. But after talking to her friends, colleagues, and mentors, as well as doing her own research, including a reading of Lawrence Otis Graham's *Our Kind of People: Inside America's Black Upper Class*, she was shocked to find that at some social events and parties, a brown paper bag hung by the door and women, in particular, had to show that their skin was lighter than the sack to enter.

"It's about Black high society, and [Lawrence Otis Graham] says, yes, they literally did the paper bag test and would host paper bag parties," Mary Graham said about the book. "There continues to be this kind of ingrained, colorist bias in Louisiana and Washington, DC. Those are two places that people seem to cite where there's this kind of old classism that's tied in with colorism."

With the development of Black college, there came Black sororities and fraternities. "The Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority used to have a reputation for only admitting light-skinned members," Graham said. "You had to pass the paper bag test in order to be admitted."

Key Jo Lee, chief curator at MoAD, says the committee was impressed by Graham's technique as well as the relevance of her work.

"This idea is so endemic to the African American community specifically, although colorism impacts all communities," Lee said. "But she's able to utilize these almost Renaissance techniques—her handling of oil paints is really, really gorgeous, and it makes a very contemporary point."

Graham's use of composite photographs for her images is fascinating and effective, Lee thinks, making them feel familiar without anchoring them to a specific person.

"I'm always interested in artists who think about Black stories as universal stories," Lee said. "By making the identity of her sitter ambiguous, she actually broadens the impact and the potency in a really interesting way."

Artists who have previously taken part in MoAD's emerging artists program include **Rodney Ewing**, **Cheryl Derricotte**, **Nimah Gobir**, and **Trina Michelle Robinson**. Often, it is a big help to their career, Lee says. Along with getting a hard-to-come-by solo show at a museum, artists also get an honorarium, and are invited to VIP events and on trips—for example, Lee is taking some of the former artists to the Venice Biennale this year.

Graham grew up in Philadelphia and chose to attend CCA in part because her dad lived here in the 1970s and '80s and continues to have a lot of strong local connections. She counts herself lucky to be a studio assistant for artist **Lava Thomas**, who acquired some of the pieces in *Value Test*. Graham met Thomas (who recommended she read *Our Kind of People*) when she went with **David Huffman** and **Bridget R. Cooks** to a lecture that Thomas gave. Graham had seen the artist's *Mugshot Portraits: Women of the Montgomery Bus Boycott* on view at the Rena Bransten Gallery.

"Her conception of that work really resonated with me, and we had a nice conversation about her use of graphite on paper, and that deliberate choice and also uncovering the history of these women that we had never heard of who had incited the civil rights movement."

After some of Graham's CCA peers got involved in MoAD's emerging artists program, she decided to apply.

"I thought that it would be such a tremendous honor to show work at the Museum of the African Diaspora, and especially show this work, because this is the first time that all of these paintings have been shown together," she said. "It's also my first solo show. And it's my first museum show. There's really not a better venue for this work in particular, I think."

VALUE TEST: BROWN PAPER runs through May 19. Museum of the African Diaspora, SF. Tickets and more info [here](#).