

Shining a Light

In his artist's statement for *The Testament Project*, Kris Graves contends with mass media portrayals of black people in America. He describes these portrayals as tending toward two extremes: they are either demonized as criminals or idolized as celebrities. But at least they are allowed to appear, unlike in the canon of art history, where they are scarce. As a photographer, Graves thinks about the space of representation every time he frames his shot. And as staff photographer at the Guggenheim Museum, he observes who gets to appear in the institution's photographs and who does not, as well as under what circumstances and in what light.

Graves shines a spectacular light on his subjects, one that gives over the space of representation to them. He recruits their participation in how they will be depicted, allowing his subjects to select the hues that will saturate their images—colors that powerfully complicate or disrupt assumptions about what blackness looks like. He also invites their testimony, letting his subjects give voice to their experiences of blackness in contemporary America, and then he interweaves that text with their portraits in both the gallery space and accompanying publications. Graves hopes the interventions of light and text make room for individuality in blackness, rather than its reduction to stereotypes.

Parts one and two of *The Testament Project* focus on representing black masculinity in contemporary America, and now part three invites female subjects to enter the frame. Promoting any opportunity for black female subjects to be represented is particularly significant at Bryn Mawr College, where we contend with our legacy of institutional racism. Although the College was established with the progressive and then-audacious mission to educate women to the highest level, it restricted this opportunity to white women for more than four decades. The college's second president, M. Carey Thomas, was a eugenicist, who believed that one's intellectual capacity was determined by and observable from physical traits, including skin color.¹ She openly avowed the supremacy of "white races" and used this belief to justify the education of white women, whose physical traits apparently did not decide *their* intellectual capacities.²

That we should use an exhibition of photographs to address and confront this history is surprisingly appropriate. Since its early history, the medium of photography and its truth effect have been insidiously marshalled as scientific evidence of race. Louis Agassiz, the biologist and founding director of Harvard University's Museum of Comparative Zoology, used photographs in his efforts to prove his theory of racial polygenesis—the now discredited idea of the origin of the human species from several racially distinct sources. Eugenicists combined photographs of specific individuals into composite portraits in their attempt to codify criminal or racial "types" according to physical features. It was against such pseudo-scientific contentions that the sociologist and American civil rights activist W.E.B. Du Bois intervened, and he did so with an exhibition of photographs at the 1900 Paris World's Fair. This exhibition presented several albums of individual photographs under the typifying title, "The American Negro." But, instead of allowing these many portraits to cohere into a single abstract "type," Du Bois upended such essentialist logic by exhibiting the vast diversity of these individuals' physical appearances. His exhibition refused to be proof of the kind of "essential, physical racial identity sought by eugenicists and white supremacists."³

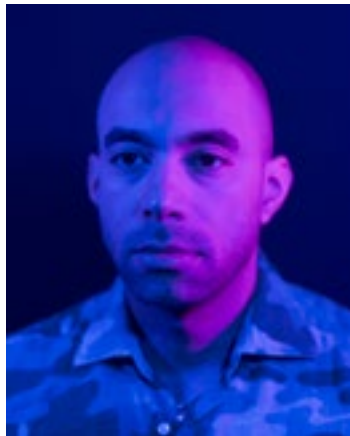
¹Florence Goff, "In Black & White: The history of African-American Women at Bryn Mawr traces a journey from exclusion to a celebration of diversity," *Bryn Mawr Alumnae Bulletin* 97, no. 1 (August 2015): 16-19.

²"Address by President Thomas at the Opening of the College, October 4, 1916," *Bryn Mawr Alumnae Quarterly* X, no. 3 (November 1916). Thomas's address of the incoming freshman class included these remarks, "If the present intellectual supremacy of White races is maintained, and I hope that they will be for centuries to come, I believe it will be because they are the only races that have seriously begun to educate their women."

³Shawn Michelle Smith, "Photographing the 'American Negro': Nation, Race, and Photography at the Paris Exposition of 1900," in *With Other Eyes: Looking at Race and Gender in Visual Culture*, ed. Lisa Bloom (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 77.



Corey



Clarence



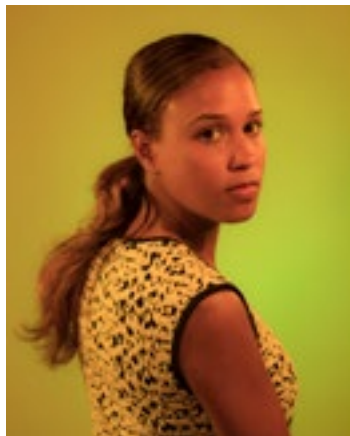
The Entrepreneur



Nnamdi



The Advertiser



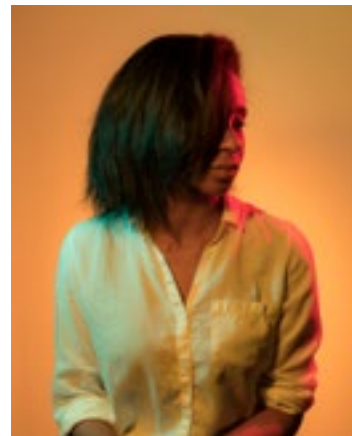
Tiffany



Tiffany



Lauren



Lauren



La Toya



Busola

The Testament Project has a similar motivation. Graves explores representations of black Americans not to essentialize blackness, but to portray individuals—individuals whose claimed or named blackness has interfered with their opportunities for more particularized representation. That this could be the case is heartbreakingly nonsensical to Graves. The people he photographs are his friends, his family. Each of them is a whole world, irreducible to a single generic identity, a single racialized image. But, Graves also knows the power of representation. So he shines a light and allows each to appear in his or her uniqueness.

When he lights his subjects, Graves does so by abandoning the conventions of three-point lighting—the technique used for most photographic portraiture—in favor of the more dramatic effects of stage lighting. Catching Corey between the red-orange spotlight that illuminates his face and the yellow-green tint that surrounds him has the effect of putting him on stage. As he looks out, past us, his eyes slightly raised, we await his performance. Could this be Hamlet about to speak his searching soliloquy? The deceptively simple, yet stunning device of the Day-Glo spotlight lets Graves remind us that posing for the camera is a performance—a performance of the self for the photographer. It is this collaboration that yields a portrait. And, while a portrait may aspire to represent its subject truthfully in the rich complexity of his or her unique identity, it simultaneously reduces the subject to surface appearances. An individual, this individual, contains many selves, and the theatricality of Graves’s portrait affirms that this image is but one representation of a lifelong performance. Throughout his series, Graves often returns to the same subject, as in his portraits of Clarence, Nnamdi, Tiffany, or Lauren, insinuating the impossibility of the task of total photographic representation. His is not the logic of the photo-ID, which operates according to faith in the self as singular and the photograph as accurate. Instead, Graves’s photographs underscore the futility of this desire for a truthful photograph or a singular authentic self.

In doing this, Graves joins a history of artists who combine photography with devices of the stage and screen to assert that the self is something we continuously perform, rather than something that exists apart from these performances. Whereas artists such as Cindy Sherman and Claude Cahun used costumes and masks to destabilize gender categories and the criteria of sexual difference, Graves uses theatrical stage light to affirm the social construction of race, specifically blackness.

What is blackness? Does it correspond to skin color? Do we think we see it? What does it look like? Is it visible against the black backgrounds in Graves’s portraits of men? Do we name it, despite the overwhelming pink or intensely blue appearance of *La Toya’s* or *Busola’s* skin? When Graves bathes his subjects in vibrant washes of colorful light, he alters the appearance of their skin color—the very location of difference we use when we think we recognize race on bodies. Doing so relocates blackness from the realm of the visible—it is not recognizable as skin color in these portraits—to the domain of discourse. When we name his subjects in terms of race, we racialize them according to our own assumptions, and we participate in producing race as something that is socially, economically, and politically meaningful. When we think we recognize his subjects’ blackness despite the green, purple, or orange appearance of their skin, we see the subtlety with which the social construction of race operates to reinforce racial coherence, division, and hierarchy. As Patricia J. Williams writes, “Blackness is and isn’t a color. It’s kind of political—it changes. Sometimes it’s what the law says it is, sometimes it’s what other people think it is, sometimes it’s whatever you say it is.”⁴

⁴Patricia J. Williams, preface to *White: Whiteness and Race in Contemporary Art*, by Maurice Berger (Baltimore: University of Maryland Baltimore County, 2004), 16.

To affirm that race is not an unchanging objective essence but rather a mutable social construction is not to suggest that it doesn't matter. Our culture has made race meaningful and its meaning continues to change in ways that have real effects on our social organization, our identity formation, and our lived experiences. This summer's continued racially-motivated violence against black-appearing people, even by police, reminds us just how real the effects of race are in contemporary America. Reflecting on the role of images in this context, MoMA curator Thomas J. Lax writes, "At their best, pictures—on Instagram or at a museum—can offer a space of both meditation and change where anger, fear, and ambivalence can coexist."⁵ Accordingly, Graves's pictures are pictures at their best. They not only offer a space of representation to their subjects, shining a different kind of light on them, but they also provide a space of encounter, shining their light back at the viewer, who may experience a strange mixture of sympathy, fear, identification, or alienation, among other things. By using light to alter the appearance of his subject's skin color, Graves reminds us that race is produced, named, contested, and made meaningful in the encounter between viewer and viewed. We interpret race like we interpret photographs, according to our own beliefs, politics, desires, and experiences. In this way, despite Graves's best efforts, much like Du Bois's, whether we reduce these individuals to stereotypes, imagine the fullness of their personhood, or identify with them is up to each one of us.

Entering the Rare Book Room this fall at Bryn Mawr College means encountering the imposing portrait of M. Carey Thomas by John Singer Sargent amidst the photographed faces of 20 black-identifying subjects. As such, the exhibition offers its own testament, in at least two senses of the word—as evidence of the existence of something and as instruction forward in the wake of a death. *Kris Graves: The Testament Project* gives us an opportunity to bear witness to the trauma of institutional exclusion, to attend to the persistence of traditional privileges, and to imagine a path forward toward transcendence and transformation. Let this exhibition be an invitation for institutional reflection, self-examination, conversation, and change.

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⁵Thomas J. Lax, "How Do Black Lives Matter in MoMA's Collection," *Inside/Out: A MoMA/PS1 Blog*, July 9, 2016, http://moma.org/explore/inside_out/2016/07/09/how-do-black-lives-matter-in-momas-collection.