

ARTIST RESEARCH: Mary Borgman

1 November 2022

FIN110 Fall 2022

Dale Graham



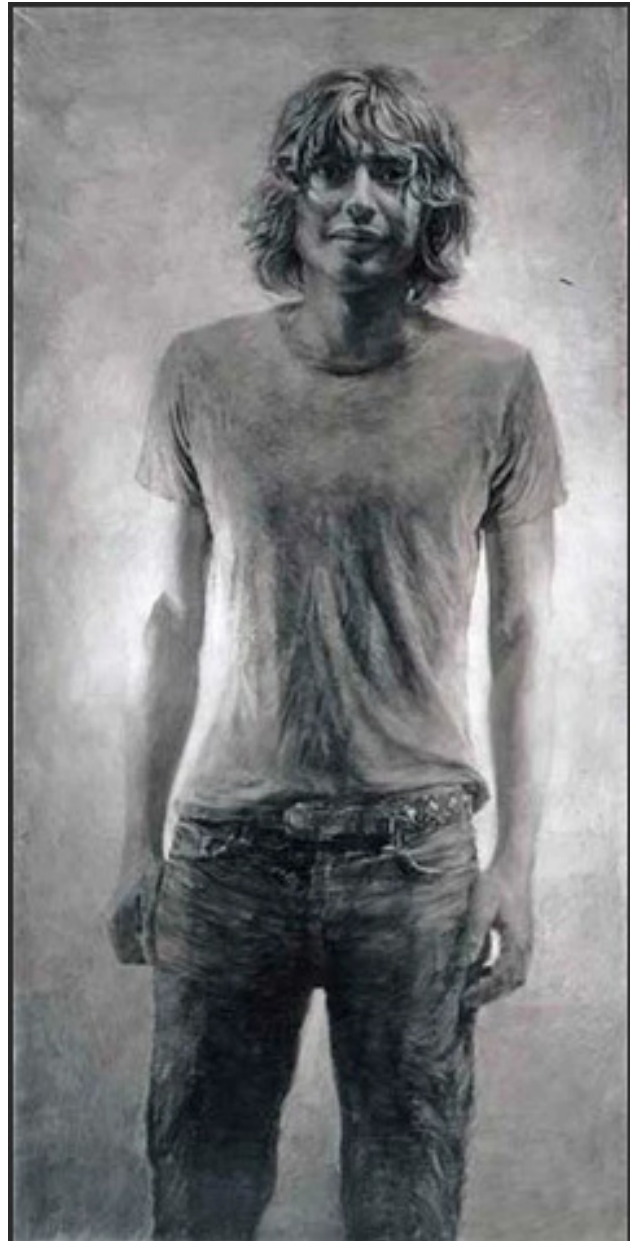
Officer Dana

Charcoal on mylar

57" x 43"

2004

www.duanereedgallery.com/mary-borgman



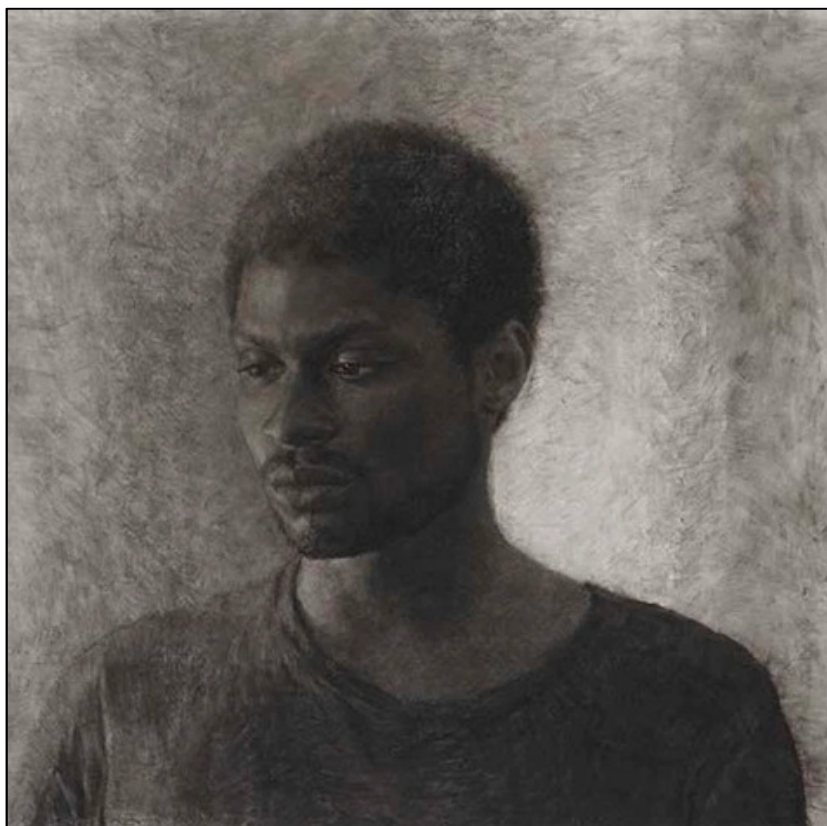
Portrait of Chris Rubin: Standing

Charcoal on mylar

87" x 45"

2004

www.duanereedgallery.com/mary-borgman



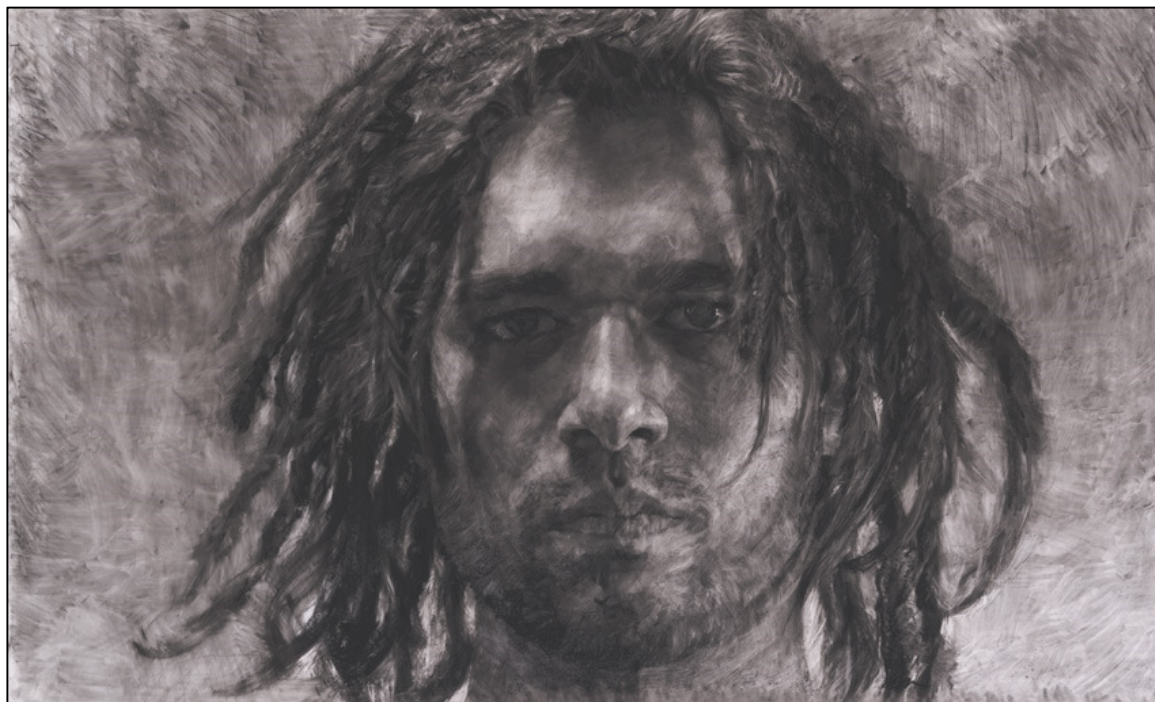
Portrait of Damian Deneer

Charcoal on mylar

41" x 50"

2017

www.duanereedgallery.com/mary-borgman



Alex Quatrano

Charcoal on mylar

Unable to determine dimensions

2011

<https://npg.si.edu/exhibit/drawing/borgman.html>



Tomiwa with arms crossed

Charcoal on mylar

80" x 41"

2008

<https://npg.si.edu/exhibit/drawing/borgman.html>

ARTIST'S STATEMENT:

**Smithsonian Institute
National Portrait Gallery, 2012**

Formerly a professional sign language interpreter, I now translate into drawings the personalities and dignity of individuals. My subjects are often people I spot on the street. I can't say exactly what attracts me to them, but almost immediately I have a vision of the finished portrait.

I work with charcoal on frosted Mylar. This translucent film allows light to pass through all untouched and erased areas of the drawing, imparting a subtle luminosity. My process involves constantly changing the marks, values, and movements until the formal energies support my intention.

Once I've lived with it, I continue to make minute adjustments in facial expression to emphasize the subject's personality. When I can feel the subject's presence, I know it's done.

The subjects assume frontal, uncompromising poses and look directly at the viewer. The larger-than-life size format magnifies the intensity of the subject's gaze, turning the observer into the observed.

Source:

https://npg.si.edu/exhibit/drawing/p-op-ups/statement_borgman.html

ARTIST BIO: MARY BORGMAN

- Born 1959 (current age 63) in St Louis, Missouri, USA
- earned BFA in graphic communications at Washington University in St Louis 1982, with first career as sign language interpreter. Career change after the onset of fibromyalgia
- earned MA and MFA in 2001 from Fontbonne University in St Louis
- lives and works in St Louis, Missouri. Senior Lecturer in Washington University Fine Arts faculty as of 2019-20. Possibly retired now, unable to determine with online search.
- EXHIBITIONS: private art galleries and public collections Chicago, Santa Fe, Florida, Kentucky, Michigan. Omaha, Illinois, and New York from 2002 to the present. Smithsonian Institute National Portrait Gallery 10-month exhibition 2012-2013.

Sources https://bulletin.wustl.edu/about/prior/Bulletin_2019-20_grad_art.pdf

<https://npg.si.edu/exhibit/drawing/borgman.html>

<https://www.duanereedgallery.com/mary-borgman>

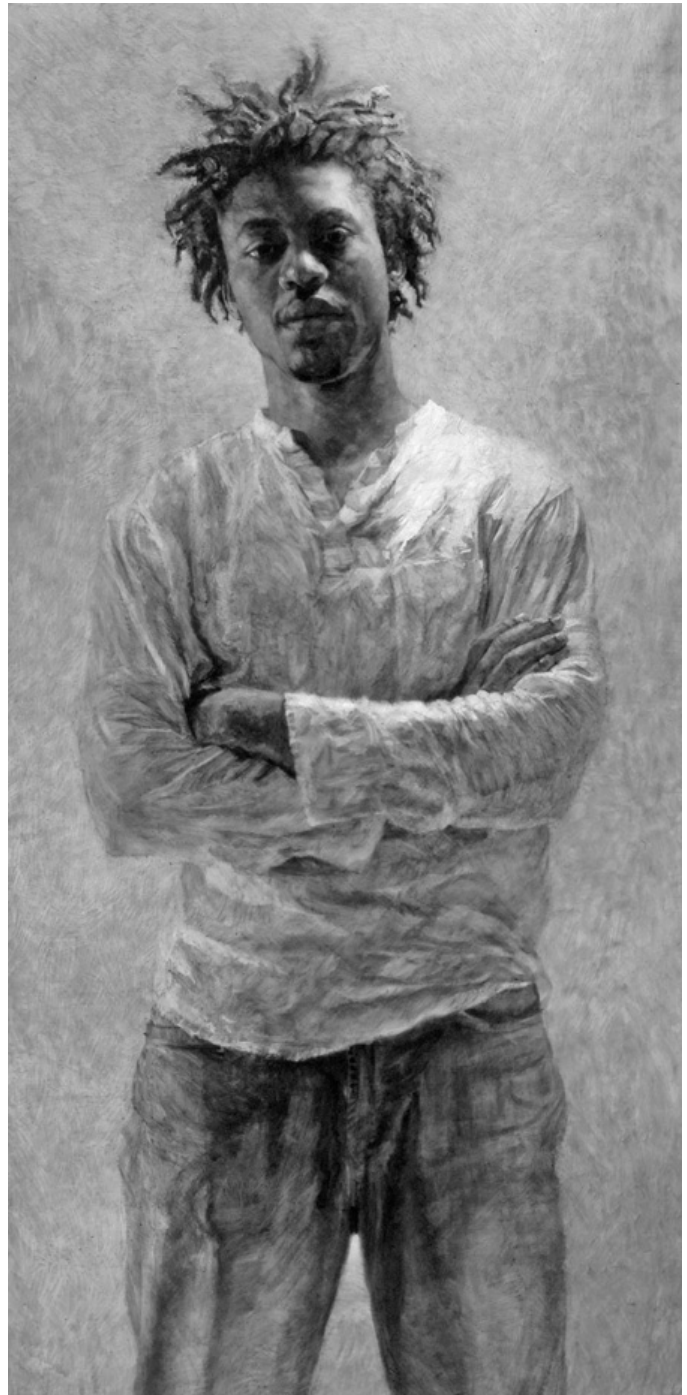
TYPE OF WORK / DESCRIBE THEIR PRACTICE:

- Borgman draws charcoal portraits on frosted mylar, in large format.
- Her subjects are most often people she encounters by chance, invites to her studio for carefully lit photo portraits, always in frontal pose and gazing directly into the camera. She takes as many as 100 photos, varying the lighting throughout.
- She draws from the photograph, not from life, and uses a lengthy selection process to choose the image that she feels best conveys the personality, sensibility, and dignity of the individual.
- Drawing process involves long strokes of charcoal that are smudged, erased, blended, and reworked repeatedly. (<https://www.artistsnetwork.com/art-mediums/drawing/mary-borgmans-larger-than-life-charcoal-portraits/>)
- *"I work with charcoal on frosted Mylar, a polyester film. This tough, translucent support allows me to aggressively build up marks and then work the charcoal with erasers to reveal a luminous quality of light." "The larger-than-life size format magnifies the intensity of the sitter's gaze and infuses the portrait with a psychological presence."* (<https://www.newamericanpaintings.com/artists/mary-borgman>)
- Prefers synthetic charcoal because slightly its sepia cast complements warm skin tones. Mylar advantages are luminosity and toughness, the disadvantages are that it accepts really dark tones only on first application, not after repeated reworking. (<https://www.artistsnetwork.com/art-mediums/drawing/mary-borgmans-larger-than-life-charcoal-portraits/>)

ANALYSIS OF MARY BORGMAN'S WORK:**Tomiwa with Arms Crossed**How is the work made?

- Synthetic charcoal marks, blending/smudging, and erasures on frosted mylar.
- Drawn from the artist's own photograph of the subject
- Initial marks are fast and sweeping, switching between charcoal and eraser, working from the general to the specific.
- Then she turns the image sideways to better focus on values, movements, shapes and marks, until the portrait emerges.
- Then she returns it to upright orientation to refine the portrait, often over many months.
- She also places a mirror across the room to allow constant checking of the portrait while refining the work.

(<https://www.artistsnetwork.com/art-mediums/drawing/mary-borgmans-larger-than-life-charcoal-portraits/>)

**Tomiwa with Arms Crossed**

Charcoal on mylar

80" x 41"

2008

<https://npg.si.edu/exhibit/drawing/borgman.html>

What are the formal elements of the artwork?

- The key element is the value of the marks -- white through grey through black – and the texture of the marks. They are applied then reworked to develop a dramatically-lit clothed human form as the central positive space. The surrounding negative space has more uniform size of marks and a smaller range of values.
- The composition has roughly horizontal and vertical symmetry, with the centrally-placed crossed arms being a horizontal line, head and chest above (darker circle over lighter rectangle) balanced by trunk and legs below (light rectangle over darker rectangle).
- The key principles of composition are balance (as described above) and movement. Movement is created at the micro level by the energy and waxing and waning of the marks and erasures, and on the macro level by the eye being drawn from feature to feature on the human figure – the halo of hair, the intense gaze, the bright shoulder, the crossed arms, the spread legs, the wrinkles of the fabric.
- Secondary principles are domination (there is no question about the central figure of the work – and the figure is larger than life-size with direct gaze at the viewer to compel attention) and unity (the background, textures, details are all in service to delivering the essence of the figure from the artist's perspective).

What is the context of the work?

- Borgman produced this work in 2008. She was a semifinalist at the Outwin Boochever Portrait Competition in 2009 at the National Portrait Gallery in the Smithsonian Institute, so it is reasonable to assume this piece was either one of the submissions to that competition, or at least part of the body of work as she was refining her technique.
- Borgman is explicit about her intent to portray the complexity and humanity of her subjects: "I try to honor the people I am drawing by centering them in the format and shooting from slightly below their eye level. Then I choose an expression that exudes intelligence, self-awareness and complexity." She acknowledges that the intensity of gaze she favors "...may also be related to the many years I communicated in sign language, which is based on sustained eye contact" (source: <https://www.artistsnetwork.com/art-mediums/drawing/mary-borgmans-larger-than-life-charcoal-portraits/>)
- The majority of her subjects are non-Caucasian Americans. They are uniformly young, I found no elderly subjects. Her focus on the dignity, strength and vulnerability of her subjects in the current US context of racial tension offers quiet commentary on social inequality and social justice.

Describe the content/subject of the work (What the artist says about the work)

- I was unable to find artist commentary specific to this piece, but many magazine articles or exhibition notes include her comments about her work in general. Here are some:
 - *"I work with charcoal on frosted Mylar. This translucent film allows light to pass through all untouched and erased areas of the drawing, imparting a subtle luminosity. My process involves constantly changing the marks, values, and movements until the formal energies support my intention." "The larger-than-life size format magnifies the intensity of the subject's gaze, turning the observer into the observed." "Once I've lived with it, I continue to make minute adjustments in facial expression to emphasize the subject's*

personality. When I can feel the subject's presence, I know it's done."

(https://npg.si.edu/exhibit/drawing/pop-ups/statement_borgman.html)

- *"Drawing in charcoal is immediate. There is no lag time; I don't have to wait for anything to dry. Instead, I can see and act almost simultaneously."*
(<https://www.artistsnetwork.com/art-mediums/drawing/mary-borgmans-larger-than-life-charcoal-portraits/>)

What is the mood of the work? (What do I feel about it?)

- The subject Tomiwa feels to me that he is standing his ground, staking out his position, asserting his right to be. I find the mood more sombre and thoughtful than threatening.
- The textured background / negative space feels very staged, very intentional.
- I am delighted by the details, wrinkles in the clothing, kinky hair – all convey a self-conscious individuality which is very humanizing.
- The lighting lends a quality of theatre or drama, to my eye, which detracts a bit from the genuine-ness of the subject.
- On the other hand, the luminous quality of the light introduces something transcendent, elevating. Maybe the drama mixes up with the individuality/humanity to create someone "hyper-genuine", to stand for an elevated concept more than a down-to-earth person.
- My take on her work was influenced by one reviewer in the NewCity Art online magazine. Jason Foumberg commended her for the hours of working and reworking that produce drawings infused with emotion and presence. However, he observed that her long practice of working from photos rather than from life leads to her sense of form being "soft and puffy, and her volumes don't assert themselves into space". I agree with him, at least in finding that the luminosity, movement, and emotional tone of her work is more successful than the three-dimensionality of the portraits. (<https://art.newcity.com/2012/01/17/review-mary-borgmanann-nathan-gallery/>)

How might the work inspire / influence my studio practice

- Inspiration to work more with charcoal.
- Challenge myself to work more from the general to the specific. I tend to move too quickly to fine detail when drawing. Her ability to create an ultimately very detailed drawing after starting very gestural and large, adding and subtracting, focusing on value, makes me want to learn to trust that process more. Do it!



Photo: <https://claudeniyomugabo1325438.wordpress.com/2015/02/24/mary-borgman-artist-research/>