

# Graham Foundation

## For Immediate Release



## Martine Syms: *Incense Sweaters & Ice* September 26, 2018–January 12, 2019

Opening Reception: Wednesday, September 26, 2018, 6–8:00 p.m.

Chicago, (September 14, 2018)—The Graham Foundation is pleased to present an immersive installation by Los Angeles-based artist, and self-described “conceptual entrepreneur,” Martine Syms. At the center of the exhibition is Syms’ first feature length film *Incense Sweaters & Ice*. Through the daily life of the main protagonist—Girl, a traveling nurse—the project explores the proliferation of ways in which one’s image is captured and transmitted in public and private life—from surveillance cameras to smart phones—and the ways one moves between looking, being looked at, and remaining unseen. The film is also a meditation on the three cities in which it is set—Los Angeles, California; St. Louis, Missouri; and Clarksdale, Mississippi—and how place lives on in its subjects, informing emotional and gestural landscapes across generations.

Painted vibrant purple, the Madlener House first floor gallery walls are offset by patterned violet filters on the windows, providing a setting for viewing the film that resembles a special effects backdrop. Purple is a color Syms uses for its multitude of implications, and also simply to make the viewer say or think “the color purple,” a reference to Alice Walker’s 1982 novel. The film moves across three screens in the exhibition, requiring the viewer migrate through the space to follow the narrative. Exploring the idea of an expanded cinema, the second floor galleries feature work that extends the film, including a wall-scaled text painting *GIRRRLGIRLLLGGGIRLGIIRL* (2017)—suggesting the vernacular greeting, “girl,” with various inflections—and a suite of 12 images overprinted on vintage movie posters marketed to African American audiences. The exhibition includes a augmented-reality (AR) phone application available for download, called *wyd m?*, named for the acronym—*what are you doing right now*—that is used in the incessant lexicon of

electronic communication and social media. The app activates the AR features—GIFs and videos—over the poster’s surface and brings the narrative full-circle back to the film. Collectively, the video, the app, and visitor engagement within the installation, realizes a real-time participatory collage.

From a karaoke bar in Los Angeles’ Korea Town, to an archetypal pitched roof house in St. Louis, the film depicts the geographies and spaces—both emotional and physical—that Girl navigates. The architecture and urbanism of her everyday life emerges as the film traces her movement across the American landscape and a route that reflects a reversal of the Great Migration, as she moves from her Los Angeles home, through St. Louis, to a clinic in Mississippi, and the generic hotel room she rents while on assignment. The conflation of private and public—a contemporary state of Foucauldian panopticism—underscores the fluidity of these definitions.

The intimate access to Girl’s day-to-day life highlights familial, cultural, and gendered inheritances. As such, we see Girl transform herself for different situations: the club, a first date, and work. In a long sequence of Girl getting ready, the soundtrack features a set of personal rules: “The hair on your upper lip should remain visible at all times. It adds an air of masculinity.” “Your right side is your good side.” These preemptive aphorisms counter potential invisibility with what Syms calls having an extreme presence. Girl’s narrative is counterbalanced by scenes with Mrs. Queen Esther Bernetta White, who orates from a purple tonal stage and lectures on grooming, comportment, and power. Together, the contrast of Girl and Queen underscores how cross-generational social mores provide moments of tension in the culture of ubiquitous surveillance alongside charged histories of blackness, identity, and femininity.

This exhibition is the result of Martine Syms’ selection as a 2018 Graham Foundation Fellow—a new program that provides support for the development and production of original and challenging works and the opportunity to present these projects in an exhibition at the Graham’s Madlener House galleries in Chicago. The Fellowship program extends the legacy of the Foundation’s first awards, made in 1957, and continues the tradition of support to individuals to explore innovative perspectives on spatial practices in design culture. Recent Fellows, including Syms, David Hartt, Brendan Fernandez, Torkwase Dyson and Mark Wasiuta, join alumni from the original class of Fellows, such as Pritzker Prize winning architects Balkrishna V. Doshi and Fumihiko Maki, designer Harry Bertoia, photographer Harry M. Callahan, sculptor Eduardo Chillida, experimental architect Frederick J. Kiesler, and painter Wilfredo Lam, among others.

*Incense Sweaters & Ice* premiered at The Museum of Modern Art, in an exhibition curated by Jocelyn Miller, as part of the Elaine Dannheisser Project Series in 2017. In Chicago, *Incense Sweaters & Ice* is organized by Graham Foundation director Sarah Herda, and Ellen Alderman, deputy director, exhibitions and public programs.

In conjunction with the Graham Foundation exhibition, Syms’ work, *SHE MAD: Laughing Gas* (2016), is on view in Gallery 295 at the Art Institute of Chicago.

**Martine Syms** works in video, performance, and publishing. She received her BFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Her work has been shown at the Museum of Modern Art, New York; Camden Arts Centre, London; Sadie Coles HQ, London; Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; the Berlin Biennale; Manifesta, Zurich; the ICA London; Bridget Donahue, New York; the Gene Siskel Film Center, Chicago; White Flag Projects, St. Louis; the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York; the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia; and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago. Her work was featured in *Surround Audience*, the New Museum’s 2015 Triennial. From 2007 to 2011, Syms was codirector of Golden Age, a project space in Chicago focused on printed matter; she is also the founder of Dominica, an independent publishing company dedicated to exploring blackness as a topic, reference, marker, and audience in visual culture. Syms is represented by Bridget Donahue, New York; and Sadie Coles HQ, London.

**RELATED EVENTS**

Wednesday, September 26, 6–8:00 p.m.  
Opening Reception

Wednesday, October 24, 6 p.m.  
Mario Gooden: ARCHITECTURE EVENT / HORIZON  
Talk

Wednesday, January 9, 2019, 1:00–4:00 p.m.  
Fay Victor: I SEE you. Do YOU SEE you?  
Vocal Workshop and Discussion

Wednesday, January 9, 2019, 6:00 p.m.  
Fay Victor with Mike Reed: Experiments in Communicating Message  
Artist Talk and Performance

**ABOUT THE GRAHAM FOUNDATION**

Founded in 1956, the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts fosters the development and exchange of diverse and challenging ideas about architecture and its role in the arts, culture, and society. The Graham realizes this vision through making project-based grants to individuals and organizations and by producing exhibitions, events, and publications.

**THE MADLENER HOUSE**

Since 1963, the Graham Foundation has been located in the Madlener House, a turn-of-the-century Prairie-style mansion designed by Richard E. Schmidt and Hugh M. G. Garden. Built 1901–02, it was later renovated by prominent modern architect Daniel Brenner. The 9,000 square-foot historic home now hosts galleries, a bookstore, an outdoor collection of architectural fragments, an extensive non-lending library of grantee publications, and a ballroom where the foundation hosts a robust schedule of public programs.

**BOOKSHOP**

The Graham Foundation's bookshop, designed by Ania Jaworska, offers a selection of new, historically significant, and hard-to-find publications on architecture, art and design, many of which have been supported by grants from the Graham Foundation.

**GALLERY HOURS AND VISITOR INFORMATION**

The galleries and bookshop are open to the public Wednesday through Saturday, 11 a.m.–6 p.m. Admission is free. Group tours are available by request.

**ACCESSIBILITY**

The second-floor galleries and the third-floor ballroom, where events are held, are only accessible by stairs. The first-floor galleries and bookshop are accessible via outdoor lift. Please call ahead to make arrangements.

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**MEDIA CONTACT:**

High-resolution digital images are available on the press section of our website; email Ellen Alderman for the press login or additional information. Press tours welcome by appointment.

Ellen Alderman  
Graham Foundation  
ealderman@grahamfoundation.org  
+1 312-787-4071

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Images: View of Martine Syms: *Incense Sweaters & Ice*. Courtesy of Bridget Donahue, New York. Photo: Nathan Keay



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Images: Martine Syms, *Incense Sweaters & Ice* (still), 2017, Los Angeles. Courtesy of the artist and Bridget Donahue, New York