

**Reaching for Success:
Students of Color in Art School**

By

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“A painting may inspire, but it’s people who make change.” -Titus Kaphar

I believe that my own struggles have geared my curiosity into this topic. Being a female of color in the Art Conservatory there has been many walls to try to climb. My personal story I have had to deal with also being a transfer and commuter. Which at first I thought was the original problem at the school. From talking to people who do live on campus or started here their freshman year it seems students of color never have it easy at Purchase. Why is that? For many years I thought I was alone and that no one was going through what I was. There has always been such a lack of communication and community within this art community. This is something that has been bugging me for awhile, and it has stemmed from so many other questions. Like why do certain teachers give me a hard time? Why aren't there more students of color in the graphic design program? Why is there only one 10 year professor who is of color in the whole department? Why haven't I in my 6 years of school learned about any relevant artist of color?

Purchase doesn't seem to have any research already done on this somewhat broad topic so it makes it a little harder but also allows me to set the narrative for the school. From the articles I have read and just a bit of research not many people have taken the time to talk about these issues at hand. Maybe it's one of those things that many feel is under a roof of a larger problem, but if we keep thinking that way and don't separate each issue as its own issue we will never get anything resolved. What is success for the average student of color that goes to art school? Is it being allowed to talk about racial issues through ones art? Is it being able to learn about other great artist of colors? Or is it just being comfortable enough in each class without thinking someone like a peer or professor is out to get you. Many of my peers that are like me

have experienced a wide range of situations, emotions, and experiences within these walls of Purchase. I'm just here to uncover and give a solution to help those in the future go to school with some sense of ease, knowledge, and encouragement that you aren't alone.

Within my research some shocking things came across my desktop. Later on I go deeper into gender and race but here are some brief facts. 4 out of 5 working artist in the U.S. are white. According to a national study on the lives of Arts Graduates and Working Artist a report by BFAMFAPhD, 80% of art school graduates are white. Women may make up 60% of art school graduates but only 45% are working artist. These numbers certainly don't lie and even though they may be from 2014 not much has changed in 5 years. I wanted to get some deeper knowledge from other artist of color in art school so I conducted a few interviews.

After going over my first interview I realized I didn't get what I expected. I know Aspen personally and I know there have been more incidents outside of school with her in her professional life compared to her educational experience. I want to interview her again and go a bit deeper into her answers. It really surprised me that she felt she experienced more sexism than racism especially with being in the south. It makes me wonder if I should have focused more on just women of color in the arts like I originally thought about. Regardless of how different I thought the answers would be I think this will help my research a lot. It's good to get different perspectives outside of SUNY Purchase. I think that I want to be able to compare alike artist of color in different art school settings. That way I have a solid chance to see how Purchase is different and what exactly they are doing that are failing their students in support compared to other art institutions. Going into this the idea of the framework for race and gender came up. What Aspen had to say really made me start thinking about gender in the arts. I

haven't had the experience of having many females as professors at Purchase within the design department but I did know they were there. There is for sure a greater number of male professors compared to female in that building. Why is that? Sexism has never been an issue I ever thought hard about when I would think about the issues at Purchase. I know I have seen it first hand but there is the problem of not having anyone to go to complain about these things. Aspen has also felt it in her field of work, it has me thinking about sexism in the art world in general and how that affects education. There are so many anthologies on this basic idea that breakdown the human experience and that get into how race, gender, class, and even sexuality have such a huge pull on how people succeed and end up. This brings up a conversation on social activism. How can we change? Where do we start? Race and gender are systems that limits and restrict some people while privileging others.

Amelia Jones states *"We are now once again hard put to find at the big institutions feminist shows or exhibitions of works addressing gender, sexual, and other interrelated social inequities. The larger, staid institutions move slowly and demonstrate little interest in supporting more shows devoted to work by women of the past or to current feminist art, or in implementing feminist value systems (which, in my view, must highlight issues of gender as they relate to other identifications and political exigencies)."* In her essay she goes on to discuss how galleries and other auction houses choose a "safer" type of artist which is usually a white male artist who is fitting into a middle- or upper-class value system. Is this why there is such a lack of female professors? Are these art institutions made for a middle or upper class value system?

As I have conducted interviews and plan on conducting more it has come to my attention that it seems not only here at Purchase but in other institutes there is a white male dominance when it comes to professors. I believe that this is a good example of why there seems to be not only a generational gap but also cultural gap between students and professors. I say generational because my professors have never seemed that old but when they do want to complain they bring up going to art school in the 60's and how they didn't have computers, or other things of that sort. It is true technology has made an impact on how we learn and how our individual skills develop. Unfortunately for them the era of technology boomed late 90's which means most of them were out of college and already experiencing their adult lives. Of course it isn't our fault for the better opportunities that we have so we should not be ridiculed for it. I think that I want to be able to compare alike artist of color in different art school settings. That way I have a solid chance to see how Purchase is different and what exactly they are doing that are failing their students in support compared to other art institutions. As Aspen said about the disconnect with professors because her work was more commercial than fine art really stood out to me. We have so many traditional artist as professors at Purchase and a lot of times they criticize your work based on how they were taught which is a bit silly especially in the graphic design and photography program. Those two programs most of the students are there to then graduate and go into the commercial world. Which this could mean that they might need to start catering to commercial art, something like a trade school would. Thinking about what and why I decided to go into the arts I just realized it was never to be a fine artist. It was to do commercial work or work that felt important. As far as I remember there isn't a distinction to that when you are looking for art schools or when you go to Purchase. Maybe art schools as a whole need to rethink who they are catering to. The world is changing and so are our needs.

While race and gender and age has to do a lot with how we learn and receive information our curriculum plays a huge part on how we view ourselves and each other. I can probably name a handful of dead white famous artist but through my 6 years of art school I never got the chance to learn about any important artist of color. Not to say there aren't any but there are none that have been taught from my experience inside the VA. I've taken a bunch of art history classes as well and yet still no real education on artist of color. Representation is so important to the minorities. There are so many of us as artist and we barely know each other. We don't get the popularity and attention that we deserve. If the school was to revamp what they taught in art classes it could increase students of color pride and hope. It might help encourage us to stay in art school and keep striving because we see other people doing it successfully.

Representation

I came across a great idea, that if your teachers look like you, you might actually do better in school. It makes great sense especially being a minority you are constantly looking for comfort in those we look up to like teachers and educators. *Carol Boisrond* of NPR did an article on a wide study of this. The investigation found that when understudies had educators of an indistinguishable race from them, they revealed feeling more administered to, more inspired by their schoolwork and more certain about their instructors' capacities to speak with them. These understudies likewise detailed advancing more exertion in school and having higher school desires. At the point when understudies had educators who didn't seem as though them, the investigation discovered, they announced lower levels of these emotions and states of mind.

These patterns were most obvious in black students especially black girls. Finding out that this was a study made me full of joy. People are understanding the need of cultural understanding and acceptance, but it seems that study isn't making waves as big as it should. In the United States during 2011-12 school year for elementary and secondary school 82% of teachers were white. There is a huge teacher diversity gap, but representation isn't just important as far as your teachers but also your peers.

What all this breaks down to is the need of more support from the school. As an artist more feedback from teachers is so necessary because there are so many students during critique who have trouble articulating their thoughts on your work or there are students who genuinely don't care to speak on it. I pay the school who pays the teachers for an educational lesson, not to wait for panicked eyes across the room to merely say anything constructive about my artwork. The classes are never that big which means you should have more focus from your professors but that isn't the case. As far as advising it can take up to a week for an advisor to actually respond to you, and i believe it is because all the advisors are teachers who teach multiple classes. Putting so much on these professors then trickle downs into their teaching and their attention span and that isn't fair to them or the students. With that being said there certainly aren't enough office hours available to every students needs. A lot of students do work to help pay for school. I even have an advisor who has two jobs because sometimes life just isn't easy. The school certainly needs to accommodate people better. I talked about this earlier but the makeup of professors matter. Being taught by someone who looks like you or you can relate to really helps out to not only motivate you but ease the learning process.

So yes institutional support seems to be a root of the problem but also the answer to making things better, but there are other many factors to consider. In all the art programs at Purchase you have to go through a sophomore evaluation. What this means is that after the 10 year faculty goes over certain select pieces of your artwork throughout the course of your first two years they determine if you can stay in the program or not. That is such a blow to your self esteem in so many ways. Many of the kids if not all who got into these programs had to interview with the school, show a portfolio, submit work and pray they got in. Just for them to put you through it all over again your sophomore year. Of course it's not a fair evaluation because it's all based on if the teachers "like" you or your artwork. If you ask a professor if they kick you out they always respond with that they don't but they do strongly suggest you to drop the major and pick something "easier" like painting and drawing. Which to be honest is pretty disgusting to try and degrade those departments like that. Painting and drawing isn't any easier then photography or graphic design. Those students work just as hard as everyone else. Unfortunately when those panel of teachers make up their minds they will blue ball you from taking any other class even if you are passing them. Now it is obvious the initial support from these professors are super important especially when these programs are so cut throat, and this is what leads to less of a community within the art world especially for students of color. You are already outnumbered as a student of color so it feels like you have to compete with the other students of color in your program. Instead of supporting each other I have seen people tear each other down for their own benefit in front of a class. It shouldn't be that way at all. There are many things that can help change all of this. The school for one should put better thought and care into their students. Once that happens the idea of sexism outside of education might be a lot smaller because there will be a higher rate of females graduating and taking charge of their field. Everything is connected in this world. It takes time to make change but it is so worth it at

the end. We as a school and as a community have to fight for what's right and make change. Purchase is all about Thinking Wide Open and it's about time we actually do.

Possible Solutions

It's not only the schools responsibility but also ours to speak up when we feel like we aren't getting what we deserve. All my years in school has lead me to this point of understanding and frustration. And i'm extremely proud to say that this research paper will shed light on such an important topic not just to me but to others. As I further my research and investigating I have decided to use all of this newfound information and curate an exhibition with artwork from students of color here at Purchase. I want to give them a space to show their personal works based off of the experience with race, gender, and sexuality as a person of color here at Purchase. Whether it be art full of joy or dark work exposing the struggles and obstacles it is what the artist feel and see. I want this exhibition to make people aware and give students of color a voice. Ideally it would be great to give these artist a good start in their career and sell the work for them. I've also considered going on tour with the art show to other schools to spread awareness and spark a bit of change through curriculum in art classes and treatment of students of color. A good solution that could benefit all art students is more space around the school to showcase artwork. The VA is only but so big and there certainly isn't enough space for all students to showcase personal work throughout the year. I truly believe these are simple things that can be resolved with a little more attention and love. Purchase is a good school and it has so much room for improvement.

Execution

What I expected to happen was:

- Obtain artist
- Obtain space
- Collect art from artist
- 6-8 weeks of marketing the show
- Set up of show
- 3 hours of installation
- Opening night
- 3 -5 days of show being up
- Breakdown of show

Obtaining the artist

Looking for artist to put in my show was the best part of this project. I originally wanted to only get artist from Purchase but then I realized the point was to give people more exposure then from the other artist they have already seen. I decided to take myself to a few gallery openings throughout the city to find local artist of color. I found a few artist who seemed excited about the show. All were fairly young and new to showcasing their work. Most of them all did work based on race and sexuality which I really appreciated. I had a schedule for when I wanted the work by and when to meet up with my artist to pick up said work. I had major conflicts within myself professionally when it came to trying to ask them for work and it was all because I knew i

didn't have a permanent place to showcase the work yet and I knew it wouldn't be fair to waste their time nor get them excited for a show that may never happen. I made sure to stay in contact with them and try to update them as much as possible when it came to having a set date for the show. I'm glad I was able to network and now I have various artists I can use for different occasions as well as help manage a few of them.

Results

The show never got the chance to happen. I learned the end was not the end. Despite not being able to actually have my show within Purchase I didn't give up. After being told yes and never hearing from the school again this only confirmed my suspicions about the school itself and how it was being ran. It took me months to get a half response from some department head. At a point I realized I wasn't going to get anywhere without actively chasing after it. I showed up to the office of the person who was in charge of these shows unannounced. I confirmed a space and a time frame for when my show could prevail. Even after all the hoops and the months of back and forth I did with others within the school I still after a confirmation got nothing. No follow up, no room, no help. This really disappointed me for the remainder of my days here at Purchase. At every corner there was a struggle I tried to overcome but it was nearly impossible. I was running out of time to properly market the show as well as running out of time to give my artists enough time to finish their pieces. This was a good lesson and overview of how complicated a show can be to put together. I had better luck within my internship helping put together a show but I believe it was because the nonprofit I worked for was well known and also didn't rely on free space at a school for their elite art exhibits. In the end I realized that maybe my expectations for Purchase was too high. I do hope that one day soon things get

better for all students and faculty. With the school doing constant construction for new space hopefully some of that can be utilized for students of color so that they will always have an opportunity and a safe space to showcase their works.

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