

Art, critical consciousness and anti-racist agency

'Business as usual' will not suffice for art educators if social and racial justice is to be achieved and unspoken norms, knowledge and assumptions within education are to be challenged. Jo Barber, assistant head of school at Aspire Alternative Provision in Buckinghamshire, and a member of the NSEAD Anti-racist Art Education Action Group, explains how art can give us agency in creative anti-racist praxis

As art educators, if we intend to be agents for social and racial justice, 'business as usual' schooling will not suffice. Art and design provides us with great opportunities for anti-racist practice, to challenge unspoken norms, knowledge and assumptions about culture, power and identities.

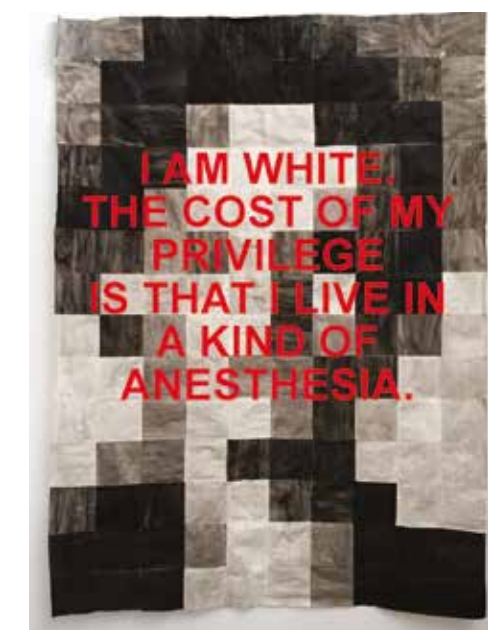
Left XEbony G. Patterson. EP 18-16 ...when they grow up... Beads, appliques, fabric, glitter, sequins, buttons, costume jewellery, trimming, rhinestones, plastic alphabet letters, birthday ribbons, pins and glue on hand-cut watercolour paper. Courtesy of the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago. © Ebony G. Patterson, 2016

Right *Cost of Privilege*, 2017, from *White Anti-racist Studies* series. Ink on paper. Courtesy of Peggy Diggs

Essentially, as art and design educators, we need to navigate ourselves away from unconsciously and unintentionally perpetuating racial inequalities. This involves being mindful of how our socialisation, gender, positionality and privilege affects implicit assumptions, as well as ensuring we don't unintentionally disempower and exclude diverse students. It also means exploring our racial identities, constructed perceptions of race and becoming cognisant of what has influenced our perceptions and practice.

As art and design reveals introspective aspects of ourselves, so too can it challenge our usual frame of references and provide us with rich visual sources to contextualise, explore, discuss and question taken-for-granted ideas and beliefs about race. Through using counter-narratives we can reflectively critique privilege and unconscious bias. By developing our receptiveness to different truths and experiences, we can demystify hidden meanings, making visible the often-invisible narratives and power structures. Acknowledging that assumptions are based upon socially inculcated messages, we can deconstruct stereotypical misconceptions and unlearn misrepresentations of racial identities. United with individual reflection, we can develop our critical consciousness and racial literacy. In so doing, we provide opportunities for our students to engage with different perspectives that may otherwise have been dismissed. Making art culturally relevant to the diversity of students' voices, we can develop students' cultural confidence for better educational outcomes.

In challenging misconceptions of racial identity, artist Peggy Diggs makes 'whiteness' visible. Diggs unveils hidden racial assumptions to encourage anti-racist agency. She engages observers through dialogue, interviews and overheard conversations around ideologies of 'whiteness' and leaves the spectator to question the problematics of the dominant ideological constructs of race. With *Cost of Privilege*, her pixelated portrait reveals no detail of personal identity, but is obscured and unseen, leaving a vague reflection of reality. This ambiguity with the bold texted message powerfully reminds the viewer of their obliviousness to 'white' privilege. ▶





Diggs further develops these predicaments with *Oblivious* from her *Being White* series. The white paper clothing with text from interviews form basic protective wear – like skins which are fragile yet simultaneously restrictive in quality. It serves as a reminder that socialisation forms a safety barrier, protecting the dominant ‘white’ ideology and stereotypical understandings of racial identity. Only through demystifying the hidden, implicit, socialised norms and unconscious biases can we begin to consciously see a different perspective and reframe constructs of race.

Firelei Báez challenges the arbitrary constructs of racial identity based upon the fluid categorisations of skin colour and hair texture. In her series *Can I Pass?*, Báez explores these measured identity markers as a psychological and personal journey through self-portraiture, influenced by ‘Casta’ paintings which originated in colonial Mexico during the 18th to 19th century. Historically, these paintings implied a hierarchy of social status according to skin colour – the lighter hues awarded the higher status. This is a concept which Báez interconnects with the ‘paper bag test’ of the USA, which qualified black Americans access to



‘white’ privileges if their skin tone matched or was lighter than a paper bag. Similarly, the hair test was a Dominican Republican measure whereby the more the hair flowed under a fan, the ‘whiter’ attributes a person possessed. Báez colour-matched her forearm and drew a silhouette of her hair for a day each month. Depending upon the daylight, phenomenologically tones and colour perception changed, making the test temporal. Metaphorically, this aligns

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with the fragility of the construct and hierarchy of race through markers such as skin hue.

Whilst Báez confronts historical and sociological context, Jamaican visual artist Ebony Patterson challenges cultural imagery and media narratives. Her exhibition series *When they grow up* opposes racial misrepresentation of black American children. These photographic portraits are set in exuberant, bold, joyful colours with glitter, beads and familiar childhood toys. Patterson conjures a celebratory feel, reclaiming childhood innocence and visibility through



expressions and wording such as ‘worthy’. These innocent black children are memorialised; juxtaposed against a surface riddled with bullet-like holes. Patterson addresses the systemic brutality black children face, such as 12-year-old Tamir Rice, whose name appears on toy brick as a tragic reminder of how a toy gun in the hands of a black child is misinterpreted, resulting in being shot by police. The artist contests the hegemonic stereotypes of ‘black’ identities being associated with loss of innocence and guilt.

Similarly, the photographer and street artist JR challenges stereotypes of young black males with his *Portraits of a Generation, Ladj Ly*. JR armed a black youth with a video camera, provoking the viewer and playing as though the camera is a gun. He has assumed

the hegemonic stereotype of being deviant and hyper-masculine. We see an individual acting a part, aware of the stereotypical assumptions and media representation, and confronting the viewer to question beyond their initial interpretation of a young black man holding a gun. The split-second misinterpretation deserves further interrogation, opening questions around implicit assumptions and the representation of racial identity. With this, JR questions the construction of black youth as problematic; the systemic categorising of beliefs and cultural behaviours.

American artist Kehinde Wiley offers a different perspective to JR with his *New Republic* paintings. Wiley empowers ‘black’ individuals whom historically had been omitted from cultural narratives. His male

models are posed to replicate and replace royalty or ancient mythological characters from imperial Western tradition. They wear contemporary urban clothing, their own cultural capital rather than suits normally associated with power and privilege. Instead of creating stereotypical images of homogenised, hyper-masculine males, he gives his models individuality, solitude, gentleness and grace. He raises the status of these men, their unavoidable presence and personhood through realism and monumentality, and reclaims a new position for black men in the history of representation and politics of racial identity.

These are but a few examples of artists that we, as educators, can utilise to critique histories, reframe and challenge implicit racialised assumptions. Through our resolute

openness, development of our critical consciousness and racial literacy, art can give us agency in creative anti-racist praxis. ■

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Above left *Ebony G. Patterson. EP16 ...they were just boys... (...when they grow up...)*, at Studio Museum. Beads, appliques, fabric, glitter, ribbons, and adhesive on digital print on hand-cut matte photo paper, with hand-embellished plastic toy guns. Photo by Adam Reich. Courtesy of the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago. © Ebony G. Patterson, 2016

Left 1a. *Oblivious*, 2019, from *Being white* series. Paper, thread, watercolour. Courtesy of Peggy Diggs

Above *Portrait of a Generation, Hold-up, Ladj Ly* by JR, Les Bosquets, Montfermeil, 2004. Courtesy of JR