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[Home](#) [Opinion & Ideas](#) [The Chronicle Review](#) [Arts & Academe](#)



[Previous](#)

← Monday's Poem: 'Yizker Bukh,' by Erika Meitner

[Next](#)

Conference Considers Dearth of African-American Artists, Designers

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Architect Craig L. Wilkins, design scholar Carol Tulloch, and art historian Kymberly Pinder at the Parsons conference (photos by Jonathan Grassi, courtesy of Parsons)

By *W. Ian Bourland*

Why are there so few black artists and designers? The conference, *Black Studies in Art and Design Education: Past Gains, Present Resistance, Future Challenges*, held last weekend at Parsons: The New School for design, investigated both the causes and possible solutions for what is arguably a disproportionate paucity of students and instructors of color in the fields of art, architecture, and design.

Although many of the themes discussed by panels composed of veteran educators and practitioners were not new, Black Studies was notable for its emphasis on concrete and pragmatic solutions for educators. The timing, moreover, could not be better: On the one hand, humanities and arts budgets within higher education have been roiled by recent economic challenges; on the other, the wider marketplace has capitalized on work by black and other minority practitioners during the past five years. The Phillips de Pury's 2010 "Africa Auction" was highly lucrative for the auction house, and artists such as Glenn Ligon, Kara Walker, Yinka Shonibare, and Julie Mehretu have been the subject of marquee exhibitions in major global institutions, including the Whitney and Smithsonian museums.

Conference organizers Coco Fusco and Yvonne Watson, faculty members at Parsons in fine art and fashion, respectively, densely packed the two days. The first explored curricular reform and issues of recruitment and retention over the course of three panels, while the second took on questions of student experience and direct involvement with the "black community."



Artist Pepón Osorio at the conference

In outlining the scope of the problem, many speakers and audience members spoke about their own experiences of isolation during their professionalization process, and also the comparatively minute numbers of students of color in the courses they teach. Others, such as the Cornell professor Van Dyk Lewis worked more diagnostically, suggesting that in England, minority students were tracked into non-fashion and design courses of study, and noted that "fashion itself is inherently racist." The Columbia architecture professor Mabel Wilson discussed the connections between institutions, networks of knowledge and power, and racial thinking. She argued that not only was race thinking articulated in the instruction of architecture, but that we are not by any means enjoying a "post-racial" moment—racial domination merely manifests itself in less obvious ways. The designer Michele Washington, by contrast, traced a genealogy of signal black practitioners in the field of graphic design, but indicated that absent real efforts to increase the visibility and viability of educators of color,

black designers would continue to be the exception rather than the rule.

The impact, according to panelists on the first day of the conference, is a vicious cycle of art and design education alienating students of color, who in turn do not consider the arts as a trajectory of higher learning, and so on. Indeed, with respect to art and design, a key theme that emerged was the question of self-selection. Students of color—especially those from economically challenged areas—may elect an education in business or pursue shorter-term commitments to athletics. Moreover, upon reaching schools of art and design, such students are often outnumbered, and educated in curricula that are inflected by assumption of taste and aesthetic value—for instance, giving priority to abstractions such as architectural Modernism, or failing to teach rudimentary techniques such as proper mixing of pigment to depict non-white skin tones. According to the Detroit-based architect [Craig Wilkins](#), the situation for faculty of color can often be equally daunting, as they too are caught in a publish-or-perish cycle that rewards work only on more mainstream topics, or on projects that appeal to entrenched civic or economic interests.

Much of the work on the second day of the conference, then, was to address this mixture of demographic and institutional path-dependency. The art historian Kym Pinder, of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, offered lessons from her roles as faculty and administrator. She advocated pragmatic measures such as simultaneously hiring full-time instructors that emphasize a more diverse set of personal and research perspectives, and adding non-Western requirements across majors.

In the panel on “Black Community Engagement,” each participant demonstrated ways in which curricula and professional design practices could serve as a model for shifts in pedagogy. The [urban designer Damon Rich](#), for example, highlighted his own exhibition and research projects, which seek to shed light on the connections between socioeconomics, race, and current events such as the foreclosure crisis. He suggested that an “urban pedagogy” would not only attempt to connect abstract forms of knowledge to the communities served by educators, but that the city itself can function as a sort of meta-classroom for a range of interlinked disciplines. His direct involvement with pre-college students reflects how the study of art and design references their daily lives and can open on to a wide range of careers down the line.


Rich’s talk, as well as [the industrial designer Stephen Burks](#)’s discussion of his own international efforts to link Senegalese artisanal craft with high-end product design, underscored the ways in which art and design are complexes of knowledge and applied skills that cut across a wide network of academic study and professional opportunities.

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