



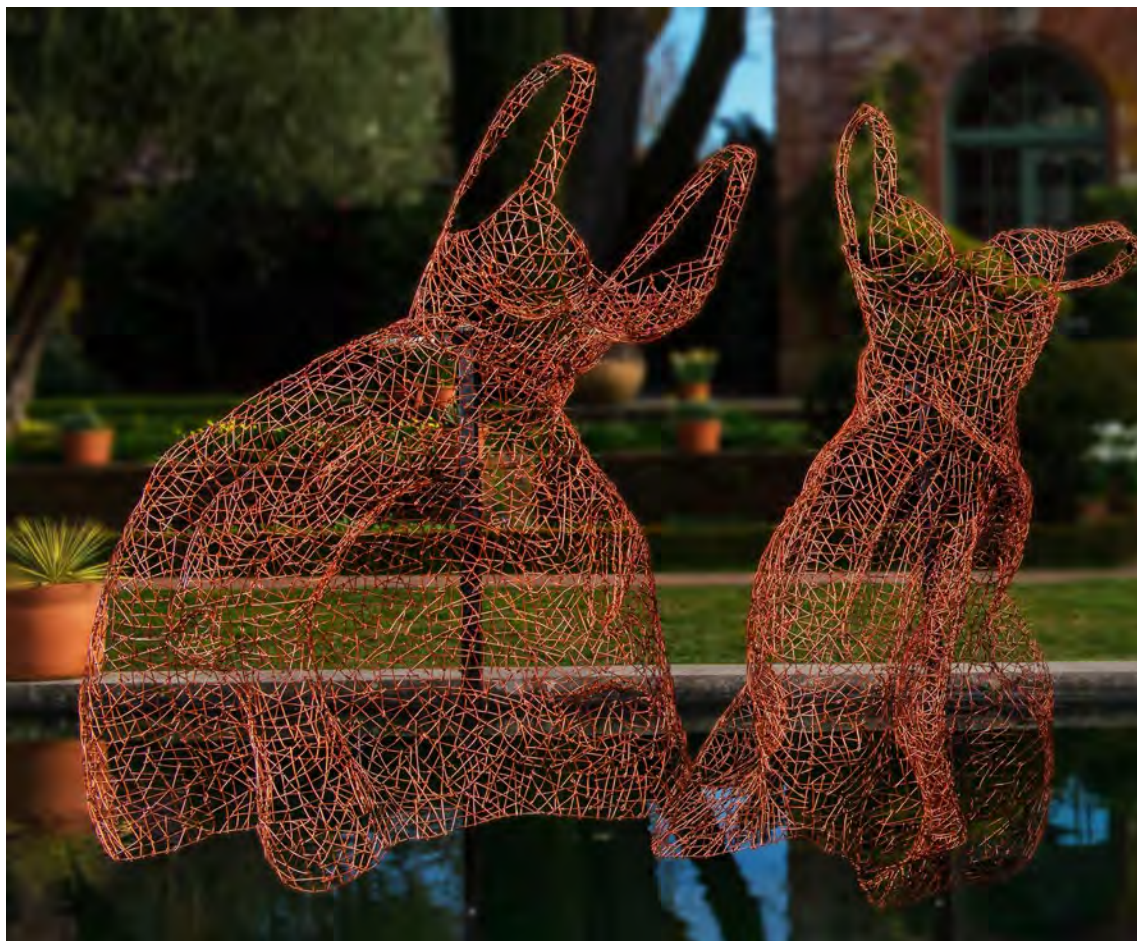
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Systemic Barriers for Black American Metalsmiths

By Velina Robinson Glass

Kristine Mays
Ancestral Spin
 (installation), 2019
 Wire
 44 x 42 x 29 in.
 Photo courtesy of
 the artist



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gainst the backdrop of the Black Lives Matter movement and the rising surge of organized white supremacy, the time to evaluate the impact of racism on Black American jewelry and metals artists is past due.

I conducted interviews with and surveyed artists, educators, gallerists, and curators over a six-month period in 2020, and through these conversations a story unfolded of the Black American jewelry and metal artist's wholesale disenfranchisement through systemic and cultural racism. This article identifies elements within the field that contribute knowingly or unknowingly to widespread racism and unearned privilege; highlights how some organizations are working to dismantle racist structures; and shares the voices of Black American jewelry and metals artists whose practices and careers have been affected by racism within the community.

Higher education should be a gateway for introducing future Black jewelry and metals artists to the field but poses significant barriers to access. The prohibitive cost of an arts education, culturally biased admissions processes, and diversity policies that group together all non-white applicants limit the number of scholarships available to Black Americans. A survey of six art colleges and universities and interviews with the directors of the Rhode Island School of Design, Temple University in Philadelphia, and Pratt Institute in New York about their jewelry and metalsmithing programs revealed an acknowledgment of the barriers to access for Black Americans; however, each school's approach and stage in the process of changing these barriers vary widely.² Of the six schools and universities, only two offered diversity scholarships and neither one was awarded to a Black American student in 2020. Of the three schools interviewed, RISD is further along in the implementation of a formal diversity plan and is proactively working to break down barriers and eliminate institutionalized racism.



Funlola Coker
Untitled, 2021
 Fine silver, sterling silver,
 artist's hair, stainless steel
 4 x ¼ in.
 Photo courtesy of the artist

David Harper Clemons

Pewter Salad Servers:
Pattern No. 1, 2020
 Cast and fabricated pewter
 10¾ x 3 x ¾ in.
 Photo by the artist

The Overlooked –
Breadbasket No. 1, 2018
 Forged and fabricated mild
 steel, copper, brass, hickory
 14 x 12 x 14 in.
 Photo by the artist



Previous spread:

Left:
David Harper Clemons
Bone Handle Spice Jar, 2020
 Fabricated pewter, bone,
 eggshell, wood
 4½ x 3¼ in.
 Photo by the artist

Right:
Funlola Coker
Portable Pillow, 2021
 Mild steel, sterling silver,
 silicone cord
 4 x 2½ in.
 Photo: Lynn Batchelder

Change at RISD was catalyzed in 2016 by the student documentary film *The Room of Silence*, which focused on race, identity, and marginalization. The film's title describes the reaction students receive during critiques when presenting work related to race or social commentary. RISD responded to a student and faculty call to action by implementing Project Thrive. Mindful that it is essential to bring multicultural students into a supportive and inclusive environment, Project Thrive was established as a multiyear student support and learning community program. Originally designed for first-generation college students and offering academic advising and peer and faculty mentorship, it has evolved to include minority and underrepresented students. RISD's Race in Art & Design Cluster Hire Search added ten new faculty positions whose scholarship, practice, and pedagogies related to the African American and African diasporas, Indigenous North American, and Latinx communities.

The pre-pandemic metals students at RISD numbered forty-seven in total with one Black American student. When asked whether RISD has adequately developed practices to recruit and retain Black Americans, Tracy Steepy, head of the Metals Department, responded, "We have been partnering with the Department of Teaching and Learning on a community outreach program called Project Open Door (POD) to provide entryways to jewelry making and studio experience for teens in Providence public high schools. We view this mission as central to addressing social equity in the jewelry field, with goals to establish pathways for the local community to the jewelry and metals BFA program at RISD and higher education in general, as well as a step towards vocational training and careers linked to the local jewelry industry." RISD's Presidential Fellowship is not directed specifically towards Black American students but designed to fit a broader nonspecific goal of diversity. The first Presidential Fellowship full tuition waiver was granted in 2021 for a student to attend the Jewelry and Metals MFA program.

Funlola Coker is a Nigerian-born metalsmith who has trained and resided in the US for the past thirteen years. Coker's ancestors returned to Yoruba after the US emancipation, and her dual residency provides her with an interesting perspective on her role within the art jewelry community. As a metalsmith currently studying at SUNY New Paltz, Coker has not encountered other Black American metalsmiths, and she feels isolated from Black American artists. Coker shared that since she is attending graduate school on a minority scholarship, she feels guilty because she is not a Black American. Similar to other artists who are raised outside of the US in communities where they are the majority, deciphering the subtle or overt racism they encounter in the US may not feel the same as it does to a Black American artist. This is just one example of the gulf between Black Americans and other Black people residing in the US.

Tanya Crane

Pink Squirrel, 2020
Copper, enamel, sterling silver, driftwood with shells imbedded
4 x 2½ x 2½ in.
Photo courtesy of the artist



Big Pimpin', 2014
Copper, enamel, 18k gold, 24k gold plated brass
25 x 8 x ¼ in.
Photo courtesy of the artist

When asked if she had any concerns about the initiatives RISD is taking, Steepy replied, “I’m hopeful of the things I see institutionally from the faculty down to the students. What I am cautious about now is how it goes from academic leadership up.” Steepy’s caution is valid. If inclusive leadership is not part of the mobilization, any attempt at long-term inclusion or diversity will not succeed.

During an interview with Patricia Madeja, Coordinator of the BFA Jewelry program at Pratt Institute, she shared that the school has implemented two scholarships to promote diversity: the Wallace Augustus Rayfield Full Scholarships and The Catbird Scholarship for Diversity in Jewelry Arts. To Madeja’s chagrin, Pratt has had only a handful of Black American students enrolled in its metals program in the twenty years that she has served as faculty and fifteen as program coordinator.

The Tyler School of Art Metals/Jewelry/CAD-CAM program at Temple University in Philadelphia has consistently included one or two Black American metals students out of a total of one hundred art students at any one time, perhaps partially as a result of its affordable tuition and urban location. Assistant professor and



program head Doug Bucci seeks to improve this number through partnering with other university departments, community outreach, and developing a candidate referral process through Tyler’s student teachers working in the public school system. When asked if the program received funds to achieve these goals, Bucci responded, “There is no budget.”

Metals Museum Director Carissa Hussong reports, “One way we support Black artists is through our *Tributaries* series. One of the three solo exhibitions planned for 2020 featured a Black American artist, but it was postponed until 2021 due to COVID-19. We are also planning a group exhibition of twenty-plus Black American artists for the summer of 2021, which will be curated by a Black American guest curator.” Hussong attributes the museum’s success to the vision of Black American curator Grace Stewart. Now the Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, and Inclusion Project Manager at the American Alliance of Museums, Stewart focused on removing barriers to access, expanding the *Tributaries* program, and “intentional tipping,” at the Metals Museum. The term, coined by Stewart, refers to addressing not just today’s inequality but historical injustice and looks to repair the damage of more than 400 years of oppression.

Under Stewart’s leadership, the Metals Museum changed a requirement that artists bear the shipping expenses for an exhibition, as the prohibitive costs excluded many Black artists from exhibitions. Stewart worked with the development team to earmark funds to cover shipping and reduced the number of exhibits mounted annually, opting for quality over quantity. Stewart stated that this transformation was only possible because of the support of the museum staff and leadership.

When asked to elaborate on what she felt were the most difficult changes required to implement a plan, Stewart stated, “The identification of barriers. You may do so by asking, ‘What is it that I do that causes harm?’ Once identified, build new systems because you cannot build a foundation on something that is already broken. Apply resources to bring about change because, in many cases, an organization’s budget becomes its value statement.”

Power-sharing at an organization’s top echelon is also essential to dismantling systemic racism. For example, a 2018 Carnegie Mellon American Museum Association report found that forty-six percent of museum boards were all white, i.e., containing no people of color. An all-white board leads to two misperceptions: first, that there is a scarcity of Black Americans available to sit on boards; and second, that the “absence of a Black voice encourages the boards to make decisions that allow “virtue signaling,” the action or practice of publicly expressing opinions or sentiments intended to demonstrate one’s good character or the moral correctness of one’s position on a particular issue, to be viewed as real change.

While universities, colleges, and museums are governed by boards, commercial galleries can choose their artists more independently, and yet Black American jewelry and metal artists are still

underrepresented. To understand why, I surveyed thirty US gallerists, and within represented artists there were only 0.1% Black American metalsmiths. When asked why so few Black American artists were represented, some common responses were: “How do I find Black American artists?” “There are so few Black Americans in the metalsmithing community.” “I buy what I like.” Or “I’ve never been approached by any Black artists.”

When asked where they look for new artists, gallerists stated that they seek recommendations from faculty at colleges and universities with metals programs; request suggestions from currently represented artists; and take note of artists that appear in trade journals. Here is where we begin to see the depth of the systemic and cultural racism in jewelry and metalsmithing. If these programs are not accepting or graduating Black students at a rate that is reflective of the population, if none of a gallery’s currently represented artists are Black, and if the gallerist is looking toward Eurocentric, Western aesthetics, then it is unlikely that these recommendations would lead to including more Black artists. As gallerists look to top trade journals, including *Metalsmith*, to identify and recruit new artists, they will find Black American artists, writers, and staff are woefully underrepresented and in some cases nonexistent. Under the leadership of owner Sandy Zane and director Jordan Eddy, Form and Concept in Santa Fe is currently working to expand the gallery’s representation of Black American artists. When I spoke with Eddy in August 2020, I asked how many of the non-white artists shown at Form and Concept were Black Americans. Even Eddy was surprised to realize that although the gallery represents an impressively diverse group, the list only included one Black American artist.

However, Eddy realized that he already had a template for expanding representation. In the summer of 2020, Form and Concept mounted *Consilience*, initially scheduled as a solo show of works by Brian Fleetwood, an Indigenous American metalsmith and a professor at the Institute of American Indian Arts. Eddy explained, “Under Fleetwood’s

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Kristine Mays

Left:
self acceptance, 2014
Wire
60 x 32 x 12 in.

Right:
grace shines upon me, 2014
Wire
65 x 32 x 10 in.

Photo courtesy of the artist

Nikeshia Breeze

The Arc of Return, 2021

Baltic birch, hand-etched
copper plates, copper mesh
96 x 48 x 18 in.

Photo: Byron Flesher

Courtesy of Form & Concept

“Why is it so often the role of minority artists to educate others on our condition and comment on our place within and engage with the society in which we live?”

guidance, *Consilience* expanded from a solo exhibition to a biographical group show that featured artists from different chapters of Fleetwood’s life. The show has caused a ripple effect: some of those artists now regularly show their work with us, and another show featuring three of the *Consilience* artists is forthcoming.”

By applying a similar approach for the April 2021 solo exhibit of interdisciplinary artist Nikeshia Breeze, Eddy was introduced to Earthseed Black Arts Alliance, a Black-led organization inspired by Octavia Butler’s science fiction novel *Parable of the Sower*. Through Breeze and Earthseed, Form and Concept has expanded Breeze’s solo exhibition to include other Black American artists. When asked for the best way for a traditional curator to expand their gallery to include Black American artists, he suggested, “Hire a guest curator!”

Then there are the accounts of gallery owners who directly try to affect the Black American artist’s aesthetic and exposure. When asked about her gallery relationships, self-taught metalsmith Kristine Mays stated, “One gallery asked me not to place an image of myself on my website. To counteract this attempt to make me invisible, I placed a large image right on my home page.” Mays, whose sculptural wire work depicts the human form, also mentioned a gallerist who suggested that instead of pursuing a new direction in her work—reflecting realistic women’s body types, particularly her now-signature tummy bulge—that she should revert to the model-thin designs she made early in her career. Mays expressed her view of systemic racism as, “There are collections presented as American jewelry, American sculpture, yet there is no representation of Black artists. Even with our lens and vision of the world,



we are still within the American arts perspective. It is all the little things that chip away at the honor and respect by denying the existences of Black artists.”

Rhode Island-based enamelist Tanya Crane says that she and other Black American artists have been bombarded in recent years with requests for their work to focus on Black Lives Matter. Her response is, “This attempt to pigeonhole my work is blatant and insulting. As a biracial artist, I find it sometimes uncomfortable navigating this world, and it is an insult to make Black Americans responsible for their content.”

Asked if he had encountered adverse



responses to the work he makes, artist David Harper Clemons recently said in an email, “I recall a couple of incidents during question-and-answer sessions after giving lectures about my work. I received comments that discount the value of the works that I execute outside of the category of social and racial commentary. The comments were offered as compliments of the work and earnest critical feedback, conveying an appreciation for how I presented the topics in a poignant and impactful manner. But the underlying encoded message was that the other work was of lesser importance and should not be explored. I have the same right as any other artist to follow the drive of my varied muses. Why is it so often the role of minority artists to educate others on our condition and comment on our place within and engage with the society in which we live?”

When I contacted interdisciplinary Detroit artist Tiff Massey for this article, she stated, “What is there to discuss: water is wet?” In 2011, Massey was the first Black woman to graduate with an MFA in metalsmithing from Cranbrook Academy of Art and the first to receive Art Jewelry Forum’s Susan Beech Mid-Career Artist Grant in 2019. In the lead up to Massey’s award acceptance during Munich Jewellery Week, she was bombarded with questions smothered in racist undertones, questions that assumed that as a Black artist she represented or spoke for all Black jewelers and metalsmiths. Tiff threw away her

acceptance speech and instead shared with her audience a list of the many racist questions she received during her stay.

Today, Massey’s mission centers around building a studio and school within a community in Detroit that has limited access to the arts. She believes that by stepping out of the narrowly defined traditional paths available to artists, the studio and school will produce a new generation of formally trained Black artists. Meanwhile, Tanya Crane has taken it upon herself to bring about small changes. “Since the beginning of this modern-day Civil War and as a result of that lack of community-based continuing education, I now require continuing education organizations where I teach classes to provide one to two scholarships to people of color,” says Crane.

Innovative ways to break from systemic and cultural racism or bypass the traditional path are being modeled throughout the country. For example, the new Black in Jewelry Coalition (BIJC) is an international nonprofit membership organization dedicated to the inclusion and advancement of Black professionals in the gem and jewelry industry. “Black people work in and support the gem and jewelry industry, yet there is a disparity in our access to resources and opportunities,” says president and co-founder Annie Doresca. “BIJC was formed to break this cycle.”

Imagine if tomorrow every gallery owner decided to include Black American artists; every museum decided that every exhibition would include Black Americans; every publication decided that every issue would include a Black artist; and every metal school committed to Black American enrollment; and then they all set about to build the infrastructure to support these new policies. The art world would then look like a lot more like America itself.

Velina Robinson Glass is a resin artist and a contributing writer to Metalsmith and Metalsmith Tech. Robinson Glass teaches at the Tampa Museum of Art and her work has been featured in 500 Plastic Jewelry Designs: A Groundbreaking Survey of a Modern Material by Lark Books.

¹ Black Americans have been identified by many terms, e.g., African American, which would include anyone from Africa, Black, Negro, People of Color, and the newest term BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color.) However, the designation of Black is the only name that we gave ourselves. History teaches us that Africa is a name made up by the colonizers and was originally the name of an English trading company. Thus, I choose to use Black or Black American. It also serves to clearly identify us as individuals that are the descendants of the transatlantic slave trade. / ² I requested information from thirty colleges and universities with jewelry and metals programs, but most were nonresponsive. To narrow my focus and move forward with this piece, I focused on the Princeton Review’s top six art schools: Rochester Institute of Technology, Temple University, Pratt Institute, Rhode Island School of Design, Savannah College of Art and Design, and The Fashion Institute of Technology.