

# *Where are the Black Graphic Designers at CalArts?*

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**NOT MANY BLACKS** have been fortunate enough to attend the CalArts Graphic Design Program — *not many at all*. I started putting together a list of Black designers at CalArts, and so far, there are 20 people on that list, including myself. Let me break it down: **Over 25 years from 1995 to 2020, an estimated 20 Black students graduated from the Graphic Design Program at CalArts, that is less than 1% of the graphic design students.** I believe the list is incomplete (although I'm unsure to what degree), and it only goes as far back as 1995. So some people are missing between 1970 and 1995. I sent my list to Lorraine Wild to see if she could help me fill in the gaps and give me some names before 1995, and she said, *"Your list is interesting and, to be frank, humiliating."* And I agree, **it's ridiculous!**

When I attended CalArts' visiting day — I don't remember being worried or concerned about the possibility of being the only Black person in the program. I was the only Black potential student at the visiting day, but that didn't bother me either. I was happy to be invited. I remember being in the graduate critique room when MFA students present their work. I have no idea what the student's presentation was about because to the right of me was a wall filled from top to bottom with visiting-artist lecture posters. And I found myself staring at the posters the whole time, wondering, "Was it possible for me to make posters like this?"

The poster I most vividly remember was the "Julie Burleigh" poster designed by Max Erdenberger and Megan McGinley. I know it sounds crazy, but this poster strongly influenced my decision to come to CalArts. The poster is of a man with his backside covered in hair. The texture of the hair seemed so real. It was really detailed. Using the artist's name as the main idea behind the design was clever. I would have never thought of that. I also liked how the typography was integrated into the hair. It was seamless. And having a butt covered with hair on a poster, for me, communicated that students at this school take risks, or they have an unpredictable approach to design.

I was accepted into the three-year track, which was for people who either didn't have an undergraduate degree in graphic design or who lacked graphic design experience. In my case, it was both.

Every fall semester, the first MFA activity is a group project called the design charrette. For my first year, the project was titled "Design a Monument to Style," a line pulled from Paul Thek's "Teaching Notes." We were encouraged to interpret the prompt as we liked. We had a week to create the design.

One of the groups built a full-size car out of cardboard. On the hood of the vehicle was the Confederate flag or maybe it was on the side, or both.

I remember walking into the room right before the critique and seeing the Confederate flag. My stomach began to feel uneasy, and all I could think of was, "*Here we go. Really, Cali? I could have stayed in Louisiana for this.*" Seeing the Confederate flag on the car left me questioning whether or not I had made the right decision. I don't think I'm overly sensitive, but I wondered why did they have to use that symbol? This is CalArts. Students here are supposed to be smart, creative, and inventive. Why use the Confederate flag, especially if it served no purpose but to reference The Dukes of Hazzard's iconic car, the "General Lee"? Was it satire, was it suppose to be funny?

During the critique, I believe it was Lorraine Wild or maybe Michael Worthington — my memory is fuzzy — who asked the students if they considered the history of the Confederate flag and what that symbol stood for, semiotics 101. The students all stood looking confused and eventually embarrassed, but still trying to defend their bad decision by saying, "We didn't mean it that way." The discussion continued to address how it can be considered offensive to some people. **I was "some people!" I was the elephant in the room!** This was my first critique. There were only four students in my class. I was the only Black student in the graphic design program, period!

The students stated that they did not intend to promote white supremacy and that the design had nothing to do with that. We all knew and understood The Dukes of Hazzard reference to the General Lee car, but still not a good idea. Because for me, a Black person, that flag represents *hate, inequality, injustice, pain, and racism*. Honestly, I don't remember all the

details. I know the faculty chastised them for using the Confederate flag and being naive, ignorant, and careless by incorporating it into their design.

I do remember what I said to them. I said that since I was the *only* Black person in the program, and perhaps the only person who *may or may not* be offended, someone should at least ask me how I felt about it. The fact that *no one* thought to have a conversation with me about it, that it didn't even cross their minds was so disappointing. After the critique, I believe three out of the four students in the group apologized to me. Still, the main culprit, the student who had the idea to include the Confederate flag, did not apologize. And I barely talked to that person the two years we were in the program together.

During the second semester of my first year, I began wondering when was the last time there was a Black student in the program. ***Where were the Black graphic designers at CalArts?*** I asked the faculty this question, and I also asked this question in my work. I began to ask this question at CalArts and in the field of graphic design as a whole.

During my second year, Cameron Ewing, a Black student, joined my class. And during my last year, Silas Munro, another Black student, entered the program. Between 2006 and 2007, my last year at CalArts, there were five Black students in both the undergraduate and graduate programs.

***To those five Black students, I regret not asking them if they shared the same feelings of isolation and lack of confidence as I did. If they exhibited insecurities that negatively affected their work. I never asked them if they ever felt embarrassed or frustrated by not being able to name one Black person who had made a significant contribution to the graphic design canon. I never asked them if the lack of role models left them feeling trapped in a strategy of imitating an aesthetic of people who were culturally, socially, and economically different from them. Maybe they didn't feel trapped in that way — but I did. I always felt good and confident in my knowledge about Black history, Black culture, and Black identity. I struggled to find my voice. Not knowing or having any knowledge about Black graphic designers left me feeling voiceless.***