

Dear RISD Printmaking Faculty and Staff,

This letter serves as a summary, documentation, and expression of the concerns that the rising second year graduate students have discussed amongst ourselves and some suggested steps to make future terms more productive. Specifically, we are talking about departmental diversity, contemporaneity and pedagogy. These issues overlap in many ways, and represent a need for systemic change and continued commitment that goes beyond our tenure here.

Diversity is not a solution unto itself in the pursuit of anti-racism in the arts. Every one of us has a responsibility to advocate for racial and gender equality in our department and in our lives. Additionally, there are steps we can take now to improve diversity and ultimately develop the department to become a stronger leader in its field.

More transparency between the printmaking department faculty and printmaking graduate students about departmental hiring processes would be a step toward greater diversity. We ask that students be informed and involved with part-time and full-time position searches and hires. This could be similar to our involvement in visiting artist selections—we are currently committed to diversity in our selections as second year graduate students. We understand the barriers that the administration has placed onto our department regarding new hires: limited positions and devaluing of teaching units etc. However, in order for the administration to commit to diversity and equity, we, as a department, must advocate that they put their words into action by addressing barriers to beneficial systematic changes. We need to make a stronger effort to more effectively incorporate artists and educators who can enhance the department's diversity and contemporary relevance. That said, we do not believe there has been an active commitment to diversity, within this department, at this academic institution, and across academia. Since the 1970s, the printmaking department has made roughly four full-time hires that offer a diversity of backgrounds in terms of gender, sexual orientation, and indigenous ancestry. We are asking for future action to improve those statistics. We are not asking that you hire exclusively BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Color), more that you cast the net wider than before and consider how the composition of the faculty and staff reflect a consistent, active commitment to diversity.

To the issue of relevance in the department: we would like to see the same net cast to bring in contemporary printmaking artists and educators that go beyond the core techniques. We believe in supporting, experimenting and redefining the printmaking medium. In addition, in the interest of a broader understanding of printmaking as a practice, we have concerns about making the easy or available hire by reaching for program alumni. While this can be a wonderful opportunity when the fit is right, relying

on alumni to fill positions exacerbates the department's lack of diversity. Additionally, of the department's full-time faculty, 50% are at the age of retirement. As some have expressed plans to begin the retirement process soon, we suggest students and faculty begin working together to address equitable department hiring. We would like to see a pursuit of more current ideas in the hiring process: bringing in more artists from outside the field and exploring new kinds of course offerings. It seems there has been little change in the breadth and quality of teaching for many years. Our desire for a more diverse, more contemporary set of critics is also reflective of the quality of critique and engagement we have received from several current faculty members. We want the department to stay relevant not just technically versed. There are feedback channels we have used that should be taken into account when hiring; our course evaluations, comments, and the general trend toward seeking outside critics. These imbalances are not to be overlooked.

This is an opportunity for the department to take action. We would like to caution that hiring diverse faculty cannot be the only action (as many BIPOC activists have pointed out). Inserting BIPOC into an already broken institution or department that is founded on and benefits from white supremacy leaves the systemic issues untouched while placing the burden on the new BIPOC faculty to fill all of the holes. The steps to address these shortcomings begin with asking questions: Are we assigning texts and sharing precedents from BIPOC? Do our BIPOC students feel heard at critique? Do our faculty members understand how to engage with BIPOC issues while understanding their positions of privilege? Do our professors favor students that look like them?

The improvements and changes we ask for are in the interest of the printmaking department, both its faculty and students. We believe that a printmaking department that is more relevant to contemporary art practices and diverse art conversations will thrive. We ask for more support for experimental courses to be added—to the core curriculum, during wintersession, taught by printmaking second-year graduates, etc. We understand that changes to hiring and curriculum face barriers from administration and protocol. We know there are many requirements to fill and financial hurdles. However, we do not see these challenges as an excuse for no change and no action.

Aware that the administration has expressed an interest to remove the Printmaking Department altogether—and in the process is squeezing funding for teaching units and therefore losing qualified candidates and curriculum offerings in the process—it is no surprise that student enrollment in the department is declining. Faculty and students should all be eager and steadfast in working together to reestablish our role as a vital department within the Fine Arts at RISD and beyond.

Sincerely,

Class of 2021 MFA Printmaking Students

Alexis Hill

Breslin Bell

Edward Steffanni

Haley MacKeil

Mariana Ramos Ortiz

Riley Wilson

ADDENDUM

In light of the statement released on June 29th to the RISD Anti-Racism Coalition by Printmaking Department Head Cornelia McSheehy, there are additional, very concerning issues requiring further response. Our letter crafted for the entire department does not directly address this most recent statement, which amplifies and consolidates many of the concerning issues within the department. It is also full of inaccuracies, problematic anecdotes, personal information about students and staff, and concerning language that we do not condone or agree with. We further do not support a statement made by one voice on behalf of the entirety of the department; students, staff, and BIPOC community members. This department response to risdARC is a statement which creates excuses for insufficient department diversity, and fails to acknowledge the role of the department in systemic inequities. We as a graduate cohort are committed to following up with our department regarding these deeper systemic concerns. We plan to address, in more detail, this statement with our department faculty and staff directly.