Print

BLACK DESIGNERS: MISSING IN ACTION

By Cheryl D. Miller

The reasons there are so few blacks in the design field are complex and frustrating. But much can be done to change the situation—to the benefit of the field and the society it serves.

In a paper-company advertisement appearing in many graphic design magazines, a group of seven prominent designers are depicted as having reached a verdict. The jury is all-white and all-male. The ad itself announces a design competition, but, however inadvertently, it symbolizes a broader issue.

Graphic design can be considered a select, professional field which only a few may enter owing to its costly educational preparation and subsequent competition in the marketplace. The graphic design industry, which includes clients as well as practitioners, is highly selective in choosing its participants and, as a result, very few blacks succeed as influential, or even visible, graphic designers. Indeed, there are few black graphic designers practicing in the profession at all.

Blacks have achieved a great deal in other creative fields because the doors to those fields were opened to them years ago, to society's benefit. Through their effort, talent and innovation, blacks affect the nation's economic bottom line every day. This being the case, it is not unnatural to wonder why their participation in the graphic design field is so minimal. A broader question, however, may be, "What is missing in the design profession as a result of so little input from the largest of all American minority groups?"

Hugh B. Price, a black who is senior vice-president at WNET/Channel 13, New York's public television station, and is charged with developing and evaluating broadcast programming for WNET and with overseeing the production of programs for national distribution to other PBS stations, points out that even those ethnic groups now considered to be among the white majority were at one time or another minorities in American society. "The majority culture here is, in fact, an amalgam of cultures," he notes. "The energy possessed by people who have come to this country from various parts of the world has lent it a vitality, a competitiveness and a drive that has given us our high standard of living. We need, therefore, to express minority values and experiences so that the majority can function harmoniously. It is important to provide outlets for all minorities be-

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cause their experiences inform and enrich the lives of the majority at large."

The success of Asian designers—who, interestingly, have been more readily integrated into the mainstream of graphic design in the U.S. than black designers—proves that minority design and a minority perspective can be accepted, respected, even sought after. This is not to say that the black perspective should be accepted simply because the Asian perspective has been, but because it is valuable in its own right. Indeed, a television commercial developed by Foote Cone Belding for Levi's 501 jeans is an example of how the black perspective is already contributing to graphic communication. A black singer and a gospel format are used to present the product to a general audience, and by using gospel singing—an essential element of black culture—the commercial demonstrates that the black perspective can be an effective means of communicating a message to society as a whole.

Similarly, Uniworld, a New York-based advertising agency serving Fortune 500 companies who want to reach the black and Hispanic markets, has developed a TV campaign for Burger King restaurants in which sophisticated, stylish, individualistic young black adults are shown buying fast food from Burger King. Uniworld president Herb Kemp calls these spots "Fashion Statements." The ads tell the viewer who is also individualistic and likes things a little bit different that he can "have it his way," as Burger King prepares burger sandwiches to the customer's special taste.

"Though the campaign is directed at 12 to 15 per cent of the total population," Kemp points out, "it must communicate to a larger, broader community as well—it can't appeal just to blacks. Black music and culture are effective in this way as they are no longer confined to the black community. The success of major black artists who have 'crossed over' has exposed large segments of the general population, particularly young, urban whites, to different aspects of contemporary black culture. Anything that comes out of this culture that includes music and fashion is readily adopted by large segments of the population."

With the success of ads like these, the question of why the design field hasn't made better use of the talents of blacks who have already contributed so much to graphic communication despite their to-

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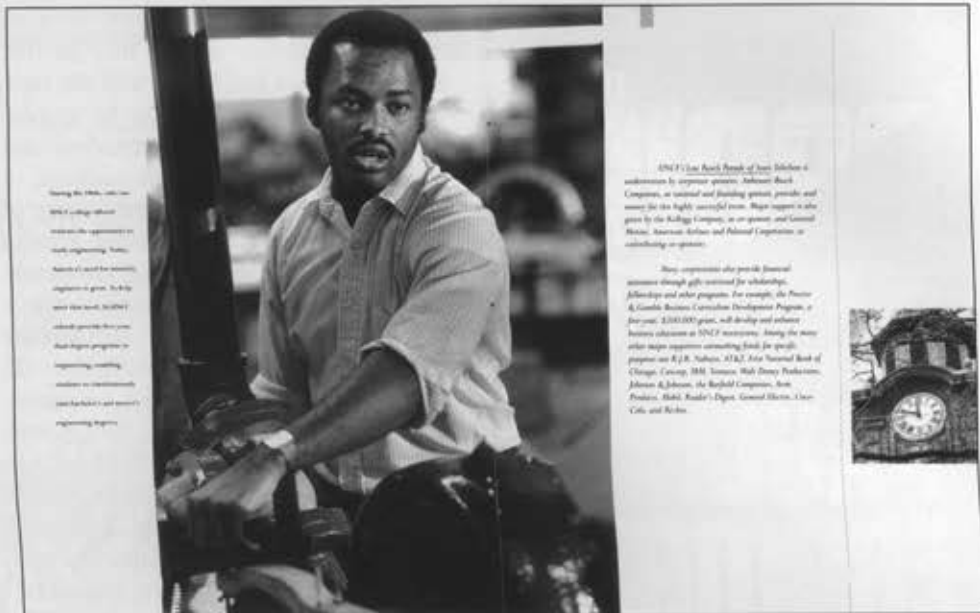
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1-3. Cover and spreads from United Negro College Fund brochure. Design firm: Cheryl Miller Design; art director: Cheryl Miller; designers: Michael Morris, Traer Price; photographer: Ed Eckstein.

4. 25th anniversary logo for the New York Mets. Designer: Kirk Brown; client: Michael Aronin/New York Mets.

5. Logo for Kirk Brown. Designer: Kirk Brown.

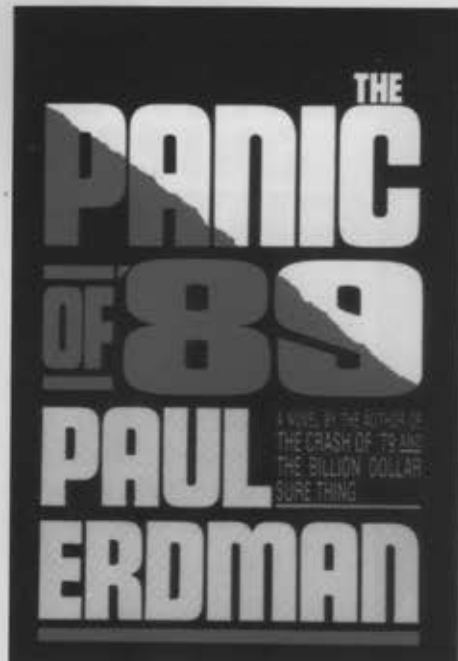**6, 7.** Pages from Washington Post. Art director/designer: Carol Porter; illustrator (Fig. 6): Randy Lyhus.

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ken presence in the profession takes on added import. One answer may be that there are only a few blacks with the right training and qualifications to be graphic designers. Roz Goldfarb, president and owner of Roz Goldfarb Associates, a leading placement agency specializing in recruiting and employment in the graphic design field, says that, though she would "send anyone out on an interview who's qualified for a particular job," she is often hard-pressed to find qualified blacks to fill positions. "I may actually get a request for a person from a minority background from a company that needs to prove that it has fair hiring practices," Goldfarb states. "But here's the Catch 22: If XYZ Corporation called me up tomorrow and said it was desperate to hire a qualified black designer, I would find it very difficult to fill that job. It's a very sad thing. I can tell you that if someone walked into this office with a good portfolio, the fact that they happened to be black would [not be a handicap to their prospects]. In fact, I think it would probably be an advantage."

Though qualified black designers do exist, getting a larger number of blacks qualified would seem to be the simple solution to the problem Goldfarb describes. In practice, of course, it's not so simple. A host of difficulties present themselves. In order to become qualified, blacks have to overcome a gamut of obstacles ranging from family hostility to their career choice, to limited financial resources for acquiring an adequate education, to the dearth of mentors able to provide guidance and employment opportunities once the education has been acquired, and to ever-present prejudice.

The first of these obstacles is perhaps the most poignant: lack of emotional support from parents. Like parents of every color, black parents want to see their children become successful and, like most parents, they see education as the key to that success. To many black parents, however, studying art is a luxury. The average black parent is not aware of "art" as being a field in which one can make a living. In his doctoral thesis at the University of Michigan, "A Study of the Attitudes of Black Parents Toward Vocational and Non-Vocational Education," Joseph William Sims examined the opinions held by black parents toward professions open to their children. His figures revealed that 60 per cent of the black parents he questioned wanted their children

to enter more traditional professions, while only 5 per cent of the parents said they would like their children to enter some artistic field.

Just how much of an obstacle this parental disapproval can be is dramatically illustrated by the experiences of Eli Kince, an independent designer in New York, who acquired an M.A. in Design from Yale University. Kince studied under Paul Rand, has worked with top firms such as Landor Associates and Anspach Grossman Portugal, and has published a

Eli Kince

book, *Visual Puns in Design* (Watson-Guptill); yet his distress is evident when he recalls his family's reaction to his choice of profession. "There was no family support," he says. "I was the only one in my family to complete college; they didn't understand what I wanted to do and they weren't that interested. I was in school for nine years without a visit from any of them."

Though her experience was not as harsh, Carol Porter, a graphic designer with the Washington Post, recalls similar family lack of understanding about her choice of career. "I personally broke family and black middle-class tradition by

Carol Porter

pursuing a career in design," she says. "I decided that teaching or government work was not the direction for me, even though these are certainly honorable po-

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8. Book cover for Doubleday. Designer: Ki
Brown; art director: Alex Gotfryd.
9. Logo for Dinizulu, an African dance trou
Designer: Kirk Brown.
10, 11. Pages from Washington Post. Desig
Carol Porter; art director: Michael Keegan;
illustrators: Seymour Chwast (Fig. 10), Bra
Hamman, Guy Billout, Randall Enos, Becky
Heavner, Christopher Bing, Javier Romero
(Fig. 11).
12. Cover of Hush Puppies corporate iden
standards manual. Designer: Eli Kince; art
director: Bob Wilson; design firm: Landor
Associates; photographer: Brad Geiss.

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graphic design as a profession. Thus, one finds more blacks in the production side of the business than in the professional, design side.

For students who do become interested and motivated to pursue a career in design, other issues come to the fore. For instance, a professional art school education at an accredited institution is expensive and most black students need financial assistance to pay for their educations. Given the costs involved, the typical black student is not financially prepared to compete with other applicants to these institutions.

Some design schools, like New York's Pratt Institute, have attempted to address this problem. Pratt's Higher Education Opportunity Program (HEOP) provides financial and academic support to minority students (a number of whom would not be accepted at Pratt under normal admission criteria). HEOP's director, Ken Clay, notes that "95 to 98 per cent of all black students at Pratt apply for financial aid. A typical black student comes from a working-class family with an income ranging from $12,000 to $20,000 a year," he explains. "Unfortunately, most of these students' available resources go toward tuition and fees, leaving very little for supplies. As a result, few minority students have the resources to execute design projects to a professional level."

There is a small percentage of black students in professional art schools who come from upper-middle-class backgrounds, but as Sims's study, and Porter's experience, indicate, even these students have to overcome family pressure pushing them into other professions. If they do go to art school, however, these students would probably feel less financial pressure than their less privileged classmates.

Given the exhaustive financial requirements for obtaining a higher education, it is easy to understand that black students and their parents would seek less costly routes to college. Black universities are an attractive option for black students as they offer an education at an affordable price. Indeed, black institutions educate the vast majority of black students who enroll in colleges. Unfortunately, many of these institutions lack the facilities and budget for ambitious graphic design curricula. Black universities traditionally offer strong BFA courses covering the basics of fine arts, but they generally don't

sitions. My interest lay in the field of applied art and I had to argue my case for breaking the pattern of employment many times with the educators in my family."

When examined from the parents' perspective, their attitudes are a little easier to understand. In many instances, extreme financial sacrifices are made by black parents to meet the educational needs of their children. With the investment substantial and the sacrifice intense, parents feel justified in insisting upon the desired result: assurance of success and security in their children's futures. They therefore prefer educa-

tions that lead toward "safe" mainstream professions.

Since studying art as a career is generally not acceptable to black parents, the black student who is educationally motivated and is academically successful is encouraged to pursue one of the traditional professions and is not exposed to, or may simply not be attracted to, a career in design. It is the type of student who gravitates toward vocational training who is more likely to become exposed to the graphic arts. At best, however, this exposure is more production- than design-oriented; as a result, the typical vocational training student is not suited to

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13. Advertising promotion for Sports Illustrated.
Art director/designer: Michelle Spellman;
photographer: Ricky Clay.
14. Set for television talk show, *Common
Cents*. Design firm: Cheryl Miller Design;
art director/designer: Cheryl Miller; client:
WHMM-TV 32.
15-17. Pages from catalog for A.I. Friedman,
the art materials store. Designer/artist: Eli
Kince; art director: Willie Kunz; design firm:
Willie Kunz Associates.

We the People

of the United States, in order to form a more perfect Union, do hereby celebrate the 200th anniversary of the United States' Constitution . . . Chase Manhattan Bank salutes the institutions and organizations of Harlem that, like the Constitution . . . continue in the tradition of excellence. — Harlem Hospital, 100 years old — Uptown Chamber of Commerce, 90 years old Schomburg Center For Research In Black Culture, 60 years old . . . when we established the Constitution for the United States of America.

Harlem Week 1987

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offer strong, if any, courses in graphic design. As a result, the vast majority of college-educated blacks are not even exposed to the possibility of a profession in graphic design.
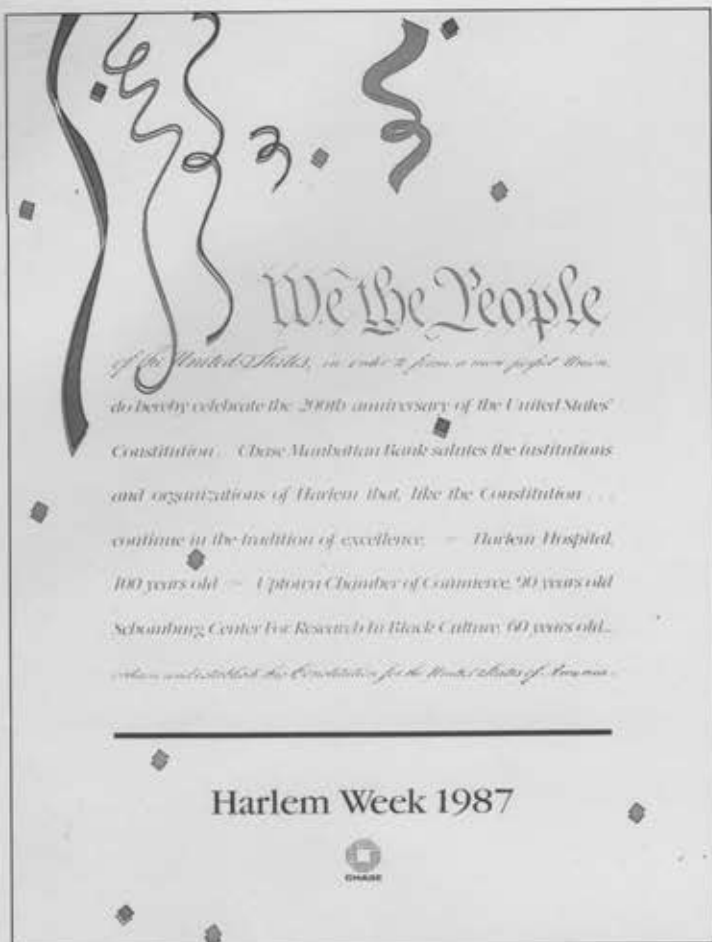
As Pratt's Ken Clay has indicated, the problems of aspiring black designers do not end with acceptance into an accredited design school. In addition to the financial pressures, black students face the same academic pressure and challenges as other students—competition with peers, and finding the confidence to ask questions and differ from others' opinions, and the willingness to accept frank, sometimes harsh, criticism. However, as Dot Ford, coordinator of Rhode Island School of Design's Minority Student Affairs department, points out, they do so from a position of isolation. "There are 49 minority students out of a total of 1800 studying at RISD," Ford says. "That constitutes two per cent of the entire student population. Many blacks don't complete the graphic design course of

study because of a feeling of isolation. These students may feel that they're not truly accepted into the program, and not getting the support of faculty members or the head of the department can contribute to a feeling of rejection."

Feelings of isolation, rejection, and, at times, inadequacy may cause poor performance on the part of black students in the educational or professional setting.

Another, devastating obstacle to blacks

Cheryl D. Miller

Photo: Ed Eckstein

entering the graphic design field is the lack of professional mentors. If the author of this article might be permitted a personal observation at this point, it is that— as a black and as a woman—she has been basically alone. The number of more experienced black designers able to provide advice or assistance have been few, and hers is not a unique experience. Knowing first-hand the isolation blacks experience in pursuing a career in graphic design, this writer has endeavored to become a mentor to aspiring black designers.

One such aspirant designer is Danita Albert, a mechanical artist at New York's Pace University. Albert has a degree in Communicaton from Boston University and has developed her design skills through on-the-job-training. Not having completed formal graphic design training, however, has hindered her advancement in the field. "All along, I knew in the back of my mind that I needed more training, more of the basics," she admits. "But I needed a mentor, someone to tell me

Danita Albert

what I was doing wrong, and there simply aren't enough visible black designers whom I could approach for help and advice." Although Albert is currently working on a Masters in Design at Pratt, she still feels she could have been in a much better position today "if someone had been there for me."

Finding a mentor was so crucial to Eli Kince, he recalls, that he spent a great deal of time and energy in a fruitless search for one. "Early in my career," he explains, "I was interested in finding other black professionals in graphics. There was a certain quality I was looking for, a certain standard of excellence. I travelled to different cities trying to find someone, but there were no experienced role models. The support I did receive came from blacks experienced in other professions, but not in design." This scarcity of established black design professionals not only has meant few role models for young black designers, but as a consequence, fewer job opportunities. Even blacks who acquire the qualifications necessary to work in the design field find discouragement in the absence of a "network" of blacks who might provide support, inspiration and assistance.

Carol Porter is extremely active in design networking. "Like anything else," she says, "success for blacks in graphic design requires opportunity, perserverance and the establishment of a support and information network. Lately, I've become a minority clearinghouse of sorts: A Washington design firm called me recently looking for entry-level designers. And just recently, I was able to comfortably present the work of black illustrators to art directors and other designers here at the paper for consideration for use in other sections of the paper. As we establish a work history in the profession," she

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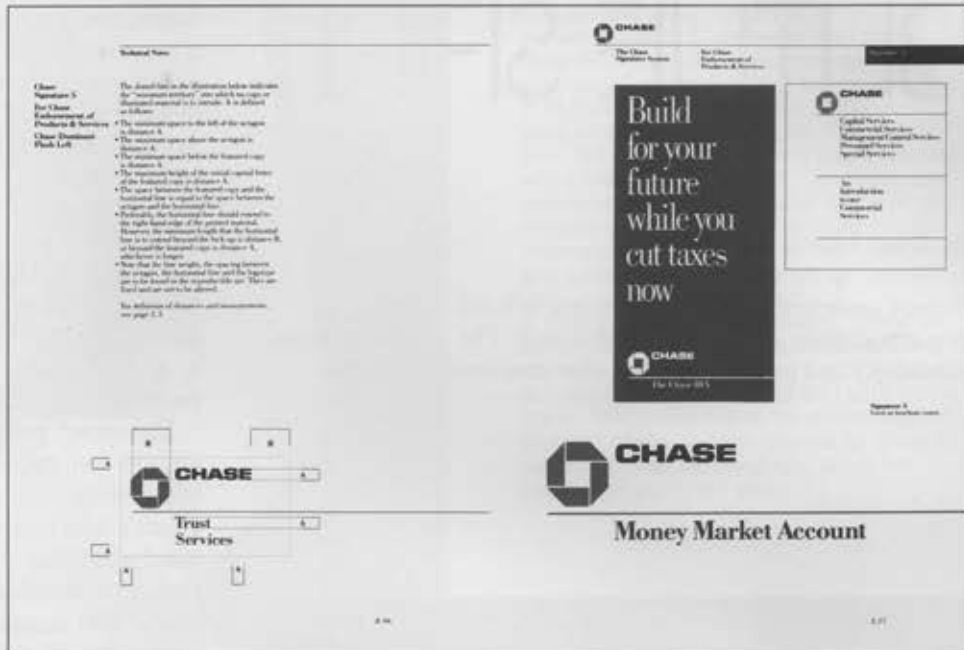
18. Poster for Chase Manhattan. Design firm: Cheryl Miller Design; art director/designer: Cheryl Miller; illustrator: Traer Price.
19. Promotional poster for Sports Illustrated. Art director/designer: Michelle Spellman; photography: Sports Illustrated staff.
20, 21. Pages from identity standards manual for Chase Manhattan. Designer: Eli Kince; art director: Bob Wolf; design firm: Landor Associates.
22. Logo for Black Tennis and Sports Foundation. Design firm: Cheryl Miller Design; art director/designer: Cheryl Miller.
23. Proposed cover for Eli Kince's book *Visual Puns in Design*, published by Whitney Library of Design. The published version of book used different cover art. Designer: Eli Kince.

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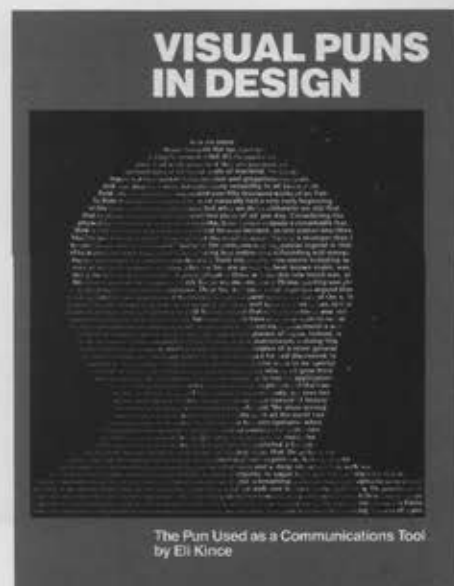
Black Designers

concludes, "the network of experienced, professional black designers will fall into place."

But establishing a work history in the profession continues to be an elusive goal. In his seminal book *Up From Slavery*, Booker T. Washington wrote, "With few exceptions, the Negro youth must work harder and must perform his tasks even better than a white youth in order to secure recognition. But out of the hard and unusual struggle which he is compelled to pass, he gets a strength, a confidence, that one misses whose pathway is comparatively smooth by reason of birth and race." One hundred years after this was written, even though most forms of overt discrimination have been outlawed, black students completing their education and entering the field professionally still encounter covert or unconscious discrimination. "Discrimination in hiring practices doesn't take the same form as it once did," says Glegg Watson, author of *Black Life in Corporate America* (Archive Press/Doubleday), "it is much more subtle. Although there have been some gains in corporate America for

blacks and women, there are still areas where blacks are not making penetration. Such areas include the financial, legal, and the graphic design communities."

Such subtle discrimination may result from biases against certain cultural differences exhibited by blacks—the use of a brighter, more vibrant color palette, for example, or a freer, less structured approach to design (similar to jazz in music), as well as the use of non-standard Negro dialect, or Black English, the primary language of the black subculture. Negative, stereotypical attitudes toward these differences result in false assumptions about blacks—that they are uneducated or inarticulate, for example—and general intolerance toward these differences makes it difficult for blacks to acquire an effective education and gainful employment.

Dr. Leslie King-Hammond, dean of Graduate Studies at Maryland Institute College of Art and coordinator of a program funded by the Ford Foundation which supports professional training and education for minority artists, contends that the obstacle preventing qualified blacks from entering the design field is cultural bias. "Because our society has

not confronted the issue of cultural bias," she says, "it has been prevented from fully evaluating all the qualified individuals that this society encompasses—cultural biases compromise one's ability to make objective evaluations. Hiring decisions are made, therefore, without recognizing all the qualified candidates and the end result is to the disadvantage of all the parties involved. The historical aftermath of slavery, the ensuing institution of racism, the accompanying pathologies of using stereotypical images and attitudes regarding blacks in American society have prohibited institutions and corporations from allowing blacks to participate fully in the system. How can those in the design industry continue to feel confident that they have selected the best when they allow their judgments to be compromised by issues such as cultural bias?"

The experience of this writer with this subtle form of discrimination has been extremely frustrating. Despite the fact that you may have two degrees in design, a competitive portfolio, an expensive business card, and even a blue suit, you can experience a great deal of rejection, and, as a black, each time this occurs, you don't know if the rejection is simply par for the course in a highly competitive business, or whether it is rooted in something specific to you, i.e., that you may not be good enough, or that you are a woman, or that you are black. The issue of discrimination is an extremely sensitive one among blacks in the field, and though it is discussed among black professionals in private, it is an issue blacks feel reluctant to raise in public. They are not willing to risk the gains they have made, in spite of their deep desire to improve their situations and that of the field as a whole.

An apparent solution to the problem would seem to be for designers to work within the black community and use that as a platform from which to enter the industry's mainstream. Unfortunately, black businesses constitute a very small percentage of the total corporate population of America, and, as the graphic design business is a "business to business" service, black corporations provide little or no opportunity for black graphic designers. "Based on my experience," says Kirk Q. Brown, an independent graphic and typographic designer in New York, "the majority of my design opportunities—about 98 per cent—have come from non-black companies. Those black

Kirk Q. Brown

companies that pay market rates for design are few in comparison to white-owned corporations. This is due, in part, to the fact that, in most black-owned businesses, budgeting priorities are in non-art-related areas. This situation makes it necessary for the black professional designer to look to white-owned businesses and corporations for ongoing support."

What must be noted and clearly understood is that the black perspective is actually quite varied—it can be decidedly middle-class. Countless numbers of blacks are upper-middle-class. "An art director's taste and ability to distinguish quality design is a direct result of his past and present environment," asserts Michelle Spellman, a promotion art director

Michelle Spellman

for Sports Illustrated. "Being black doesn't mean being underprivileged. Some of us have grown up in very privileged environments: Our parents went to great lengths to expose us to the very best and to send us to the best schools. Our taste and sense of quality reflect the cumulative experiences of a deliberate effort to succeed and reach our highest potential. Major corporations can trust that blacks are qualified to deliver high-quality, universal graphic design products and solutions."

But even qualified black graphic designers—who do exist even if their numbers are small—are not being challenged

at present. Nor are they receiving adequate compensation for the work they are able to get. These problems, in turn, lead to slow portfolio development and financial hardship. Thus, they spin at ever-increasing speeds around a vicious circle of having no portfolio pieces with which to sell their skills. So much effort is put into finding work that relatively little time is left for their own creative development. There is a very real human cost as well: As these designers persist in trying to earn a return on the time and money spent on becoming qualified, they struggle to earn a living for themselves and their families. Many do not succeed in this struggle and live in hopelessness and despair.

Addressing the problem of blacks being under-represented in the graphic design profession requires the support and cooperation of various groups: the families of aspiring designers, the professional design community, corporations, trade groups, and educational institutions.

Black universities can take measures to strengthen design curricula and faculties, while the professional art schools can commit to increased funding for minority students. Design educators, in general, must be made aware of, and sensitive to, the differences in language and cultural perspective of black students. Both the black and professional institutions can reassure parents by providing them with information on the graphic design industry.

Corporations and design firms can recruit qualified blacks for positions as art directors, creative directors and senior designers. In addition, corporations can support black design firms with competitively priced, challenging design projects.

Trade associations and publications can aid in making qualified black designers visible with public relations efforts, the publishing of current projects, as well as invitations to participate as lecturers and contest judges.

In the end, as Hugh Price states, it is up to the black graphic designer to persevere, confident in what he or she has to offer. "As a race, we can't break down to despair and bitterness," Price asserts. "We enrich the whole. Every talented minority that gets through the barricade brings talent to the whole enterprise, creating wealth and generating ideas. As you rise to the top, you are enriching the cumulative experience of the entire American people."

Mad House

they're under water," Panter recalls. "They were built to be faked, but then were actually put under water, and all the wood and cotten parts swelled and jammed up.

"This time we built the fish out of the same kind of rubber that fishing worms are made of. I'm happy with the way they look now. They're stylized, a little more cubist, and much neater."

With time always an issue, some of the new ideas have not yet come to fruition. "One thing that Ric and Wayne both wanted, which never happened, was that any window you'd look through would have a fake space that was foreshortened," Panter says, adding that playing with the dimensions would further augment the disorientation that earmarks *Pee-wee's Playhouse*. "Ric is really into forced perspectives, making it so that everything looks like it's coming at you at 100 miles per hour." Another idea on the back-burner is an animated ceiling. "Wayne does these amazing [puppet-like] sculptures," explains Panter, an edge of excitement creeping into his otherwise low-keyed voice, "and they can be motorized or hand-cranked. We can have them hanging from the walls and ceilings so that there's stuff moving all the time."

Working with a new production house on the West Coast (because of internal problems, Broadcast Arts is no longer involved with the show), Panter, White, and Heitzman had plenty of freedom to expand their boundaries. Constantly struggling to top their own previous efforts, the three are understandably disdainful of TV's copycat tendencies. "I expect that there'll be a bunch of knock-offs [of *Pee-wee's Playhouse*] instead of other people with brilliant ideas being allowed to go do it themselves," says Panter.

"I think it's retarded that a show like this didn't happen in 1970," he continues. "But I'm also really glad, because I wouldn't have been hired to do it then. All our ideas are straight out of [fine] art and hippie culture. They've been around for a long time, but it took 15 or 20 years to get them on television."

(Michael Kaplan is a New York freelancer who has written for American Photographer, Rolling Stone, Esquire, and Manhattan, inc.)