

Pressure mounts for UB to take stance on 'White Only' art project

BRIAN WINDSCHITL
SENIOR ARTS EDITOR

Ashley Powell received an 'A' on her "White Only, Black Only" art project.

And that's not the only support the graduate fine arts student has received from UB's Department of Arts, whose faculty say the controversial work is exactly what art is supposed to be: provocative.

But student leaders and even some UB officials tell a different story: That Powell's work was traumatizing and the university must create a policy so students know what is acceptable art and what crosses the line.

Nearly two months after the incident in which Powell hung signs reading "White Only" and "Black Only" around campus bathrooms, benches and water fountains for a class project, tensions and discussions are still resonating across the UB community.

Some students, especially leaders of the Black Student Union (BSU), are calling for repercussions against Powell and the arts department as well as for UB to create a policy on public art. The arts department has been in full support of Powell and her work. UB administration, caught between the two groups, is trying to find some sort of balance with a policy that would set clear guidelines on expressive art.

But now, months after Powell hung the signs, UB administration and the arts department have yet to announce a decision about future policies or officially answer the questions Powell's project raised.

What is the line between creative freedom for artists and the rights of minorities on campus?

Did Powell's project cross that line – as some students believe – or did it not?

Can students post anything they want in the public space of a university regardless of the hurt it causes others or the historical weight of words and symbols?

A policy committee in the College of Arts and Sciences is still reviewing the incident as leaders from the UB administration, the arts department and student organizations plan to meet again this month. But with students demanding answers, pressure is mounting for the university to take an official stance.

Leaders on all sides remain far apart in how they view Powell's project.

Jonathan Katz, the arts department chair, says despite the publicity and ongoing frustration among students – particularly mem-

Tension between students, faculty and administration still ongoing



Art isn't something that is supposed to make everyone feel great or always make people feel happy – if you can make someone feel uncomfortable, if you can make people think about something after looking at your piece, then you did a good thing.

ASHLEY POWELL

There must be a policy on the campus. The arts department can come up with a policy that if you are doing any kind of experiment, you register yourself with the art department.

PRESIDENT SATISH TRIPATHI

Regardless of what school it is, that department needs to be responsible because of the fallout and because of the negative impact – the horrible impact – it made on students and on this campus, on a whole.

BSU PRESIDENT MICAH OLIVER

bers of BSU – there is no need for the arts department to release a public statement because "an art department stands for the freedom of expression."

That alone, he said, should be understood as the "official" response of the arts department.

"We want our students to take positions that are at the far edge of what is considered the social norm," he said.

Katz said he wasn't surprised by the student reaction to the project, but that many in the arts department faculty were "incredulous that people don't understand that this work is anti-racist." He said he's "shocked" to see what he considers a lack of understanding about what art is.

"I think, frankly, [the project] became a cause celeb for a range of real, genuine social and cultural unrests around racism in America, not least, Black Lives Matter – all of which fed the work in the first place," Katz said.

Katz, who also heads the fine arts Ph.D. program, said the incendiary reaction to the project was natural because it's what the work was trying to accomplish in the first place. Katz said he has received furious emails from black students, as well as furious emails from racists claiming the project was race-baiting and creating a race war.

"You have black students saying this hurt me, and you've got racists saying this hurt me," Katz said. "That ought to tell you this is doing the right thing."

Powell, who is black and was trying to show her own suffering from racism and create a discussion with the signs, said that if it weren't for the overwhelming support from the arts faculty, she would have buckled under the anger she faced from the UB community.

"All of them supported me, they were emailing me: 'This is what great art does,' 'This is the purpose of art, don't back down,'" she said. "Art isn't something that is supposed to make everyone feel great or always make people feel happy – if you can make someone feel uncomfortable, if you can make people think about something after looking at your piece, then you did a good thing."

Powell did the project for her Installation in Urban Spaces class. Warren Quigley, the professor of the class, declined to speak with *The Spectrum* for this story and he has not commented publicly about the project or the class since the controversy began.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2



BRIAN WINDSCHITL, THE SPECTRUM

(TOP) Ashley Powell, who has received both criticism and support for her "White Only, Black Only" art project, sits in her art studio in the Center for the Arts.



KAINAN GUO, THE SPECTRUM

(LEFT) Protestors from the Black Student Union protest President Satish Tripathi's State of the University Address.

(RIGHT) Tripathi says UB must have a policy for displaying art in public spaces on campus.

Pressure mounts for UB to take stance on ‘White Only’ art project



KAINAN GUO, THE SPECTRUM

BSU President Micah Oliver, who demands UB take a stance on the project, speaks at an open forum about the issue in September.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Katz said he reached out to Powell immediately when students voiced strong feelings about the project and has met with her several times since. Even faculty members from other departments have supported Powell. Ana Grujic, an instructor in the composition program run through the English department, helped Powell write her official project statement.

President Satish Tripathi, in a sit down interview with *The Spectrum* last week, said UB needs a policy concerning works of art in public places – and that art projects need to be labeled as such.

“Arts are going to be controversial,” he said. “But when it’s put on the wall, one should say that this is art. So there must be a

policy on the campus. The arts department can come up with a policy that if you are doing any kind of experiment, you register yourself with the art department.”

Tripathi has faced continued pressure from BSU for UB to create a policy. BSU protested Tripathi’s annual address last month, demanding answers about the project. The student organization has also held meetings with university leaders. BSU has asked the university to create a clear policy for future art projects, as well as reprimand Powell and the arts department.

Tripathi said UB cannot punish Powell because she did not break any rule in the Student Code of Conduct.

BSU President Micah Oliver said that the university and the arts department should

You have black students saying this hurt me, and you’ve got racists saying this hurt me. That ought to tell you this is doing the right thing.

**JONATHAN KATZ,
CHAIR OF THE ARTS DEPARTMENT**

show more responsibility for their students.

“As an individual, I think the art department should be held accountable because the implications of the project were under the art department’s watch,” he said. “Regardless of what school it is, that department needs to be responsible because of the fallout and because of the negative impact – the horrible impact – it made on students and on this campus, on a whole.”

Oliver, who is also the chief justice of the Student-Wide Judiciary, said the most disappointing thing about the university response to the “White Only, Black Only” project was that “the institution that I love has done something to me in a very negative way.”

“The art department is a part of UB – and I love UB. The most disappointing part of the university not responding is that I thought better of the university itself,” Oliver said.

Oliver said the responsibility ultimately comes down to the arts department that oversees students’ works of art, like Powell’s.

“This happened under a university-sanctioned curriculum,” Oliver said. “And for

that reason, the department that houses, produces and ensures that the curriculum is taught and experienced by students must be responsible, ultimately.”

Powell, caught in a place of student-driven anger and faculty support, is just trying to maintain her own vision.

As an artist, Powell said having a set goal – upending racism in society – is the most inspirational and important part of keeping her sane and keeping her driven.

Powell said the ‘A’ on her “White Only, Black Only” project didn’t really matter to her. For her, the main indicator of success isn’t the amount of negative feedback she is receiving, rather the discussion about race she has created and the support from the arts faculty she has received.

According to Katz, a meeting between Katz, Tripathi and Oliver to create an official statement and perhaps a new policy on public art is set for sometime in mid-November.

email: arts@ubspectrum.com