



COURTESY OF MICAH OLIVER

Wednesday afternoon, students called University Police about a "White Only" sign posted outside a men's bathroom in Clemens Hall.

Art student admits to hanging 'White Only' and 'Black Only' signs on campus

Signs, posted for class project, caused outrage Wednesday

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A UB graduate art student has admitted to hanging the 'White Only' and 'Black Only' signs seen in Clemens Hall Wednesday as part of a class project.

Ashley Powell, a graduate fine arts student, while standing in front of a group of more than 70 students at a Black Student Union (BSU) meeting Wednesday evening, admitted to hanging the signs.

Powell declined to be interviewed but submitted a statement to *The Spectrum* Thursday night. The full statement can be read on ubspec-trum.com.

"I apologize for the extreme trauma, fear, and actual hurt and pain these signs brought about," Powell said in the statement. "I apologize if you were hurt, but I do not apologize for what I did. Once again, this is my art practice. My work directly

involves black trauma and non-white suffering. I do not believe that there can be social healing without first coming to terms with and expressing our own pain, rage, and trauma."

Powell said she might be open to an interview eventually.

A university spokesperson released a statement to *The Spectrum* Wednesday night that the university is continuing to review the matter through appropriate university policies and procedures.

Powell, who is black, posted the signs for a project for her Installation in Urban Spaces class, a 400-level arts class that required she make an installation in an urban area that involved time.

The Spectrum reached out to the professor of the class, Warren Quigley, but he did not respond by the time of press.

Starting at around 1 p.m. Wednesday, University Police received 11 calls from students stating they saw "White Only" and "Black Only" signs in Clemens Hall.

Chief of Police Gerald Schoenle said the officers removed four signs and checked the building for any others.

Many students took to social media to voice their opinions. Several students said the signs disgusted them while others were simply shocked that this was happening on campus. Many students called the signs racist while some even called them acts of terrorism. Deidree Golbourne, a junior African American studies major, said the signs caused cultural trauma and her initial reaction was that she didn't feel safe.

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"If you're walking and see the sign, the first thing you think is, 'Wow, not our university,'" Golbourne said.

BSU held a special open meeting for the general student body Wednesday in place of its regularly scheduled meeting. The meeting was designed to give students an opportunity to discuss the signs.

Students voiced their outrage throughout the meeting. Powell, whose art class joined her in attendance at the meeting, stood up and admitted to hanging the signs.

As Powell spoke, some students left the meeting crying and one slammed a door as he walked out.

"I apologize for hurting people, but I won't apologize for what I did," Powell said to the group.

Powell said she was trying to reflect her own personal experiences with racism with the art project. She said she has been called derogatory racist terms and dealt with police intimidation.

Most students were shocked that Powell is black herself and hung the signs that evoked segregation and that she believed the signs were "OK" because it was art.

"The first thing you do when planning something like this is seeing if it's ethical or not and that was where the line was crossed," said a student at the meeting.

Eric Turman, a UB graduate, went to the BSU meeting not knowing what the topic of discussion was.

"After I got a gist of what happened, no one understood the problem," Turman said. "Everyone attacked [Powell] for awakening us and acknowledging the fact that white people didn't care about the signs and we are still hurt."

Chelsea Whitney, a freshman biomedical sciences major, said she was appalled the signs would be hung in 2015. Whitney,

who is white, said no matter Powell's intention, there was no excuse for the signs to be put up.

"Even white students were offended," Whitney said.

Some students were also upset they didn't receive an alert from the university.

"They sent out an alert about a possible gunman on campus so I don't know why police couldn't send out an alert about this," said one student at the meeting. "We didn't know it was an art project, it could've been an act of terrorism."

A UB Alert was sent out Monday after a student reported seeing a man drop what looked like a gun in the Student Union. The suspect picked up the could-be gun and exited the building with it, according to the report. No suspect matching the description was found.

Powell confirmed she didn't ask for permission from UB officials before posting the signs.

Before Wednesday's meeting ended, Jeffrey Taveras, a junior psychology major, had some final words.

"As an artist, I respect you as an artist," Taveras said regarding Powell. "But you should know racism isn't art, it's a reality and traumatizing."

BSU e-board members said the discussion about the signs would go on for a few days. Members have taken to social media with the hashtag #WeWantAnswers, hoping for a response from administration.

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