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Kindred: Alone, Beside, and Among  
Kelly Walters (MFA Graphic Design, 2015)

Sometime last spring, Nicole Buchanan, an undergraduate in Photography, was taking portraits of students at RISD who identified as being of African descent. When I read the call for participation, I immediately reached out. Around the same time there was a call for proposals for student-curated exhibitions for the Gelman Gallery in the RISD Museum. As Nicole took my portrait, I started to think about what it might mean to represent the same students of African descent through their work, in an exhibition context. I connected with Tia Blassingame, a graduate student in Printmaking, who became the co-curator of what would become known as Kindred. We had bonded during a Wintersession course, where we realized race and identity were at the core of both of our master’s theses. Together we submitted this proposal:

The purpose of the exhibition is to explore issues of identity and race among African-American artists and designers at RISD. We hope to connect the RISD community to prints, photographs, sculptures, and corresponding audio/video of students talking about their experience. The exhibit space will use performance as a catalyst to start meaningful dialogue and foster connections across campus. We see this as a platform to fully engage the RISD community, staff, faculty, and students in a conversation about the cultural context of their work. In our respective disciplines we are both exploring topics of race and racism and provoking conversations on difficult subject matter. Tia is conducting historical research that investigates racial tropes within seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Providence that are still germane today. Kelly is unearthing historical artifacts throughout American history as a way to better understand her own culture.

When we learned in late May that our proposal had been chosen for a fall 2014 exhibition, we were ecstatic and started reaching out to as many artists and designers as we could before the spring semester came to a close. In the fall, we met many times to strategize about our curatorial direction and how the show would serve the RISD community more broadly. One of the most difficult aspects of this process was trying to decide what to call the show. Temporarily at a loss for something inclusive and specific enough, we settled on no title and posted flyers around campus with an “untitled” e-mail. Our sensitivity to aspects such as naming carried over into the way we connected to each student in the exhibition. We wanted everyone to be able to express the complexity of their artistic voices in a variety of ways. We asked everyone to prepare artist statements, which ultimately would shape the exhibition catalogue for the show, and we conducted a series of studio visits to meet everyone one on one. Part of our mission was to engage not just with each student’s work, but with their experiences of race—and with the combination of the two. In our recorded interviews we noticed that some students made work dealing extensively with race and identity while others explicitly sought to explore shared aspects of the human condition. Andre Bradley, a graduate student in Photography, and I discussed notions of “post-racial” identity and the sense of
erasure in black culture. We also talked about our desires to excel and the worries that come with failing—or, to be more specific, the internalized overcompensation we enact in an attempt to not fail because we are black. As Andre explained:

My thesis is called *How to Be Good*, so that’s what I’m focusing on . . . being good to a certain extent, or in someone else’s eyes. And the eyes are different, they’re polarized. There are white eyes and there are black eyes. But “being good” does something for both visions. Like it solidifies you as an athlete, or as a father, or as a success. But then that success deteriorates a normal conception of a black man as one who fails. So what I’m trying to work out is this idea of being good and how you deal with those messages as they relate to sports, sex, and school.

Looking back now, I recognize that the trajectory of the show was influenced by Andre’s story and others like it, each highlighting the vastness of what it means to be an artist or designer who happens to be black. In recognizing our common experiences, we all began to feel a powerful connection to each other. Searching for a word to describe it, I stumbled on “kindred,” which turned out to be just the right title. Our exhibition poster highlighted our kinship in the form of two unique intersecting circles.

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The closer we got to the opening reception, the more buzz I was hearing on campus about “the black art show.” One grad student asked me outright: “You’re doing that show with all the black people, right?” I didn’t know what to make of these characterizations. Were they rooted in some negative thought? Were they innocent comments? In some ways they seemed to diminish the richness of the cultures within the African Diaspora, and overlooked that the students in the show represented a cross-section of ethnic affiliations that included European, Caribbean, Hispanic, and Asian ancestry. But as I commiserated with Tia I realized this was the reason we were creating this show: to unpack who “black people” are and what “black people” are doing. We didn’t know how individuals or the larger academic institution would respond to this effort, which was unprecedented in a RISD Museum gallery space. We were nervous, but we knew we had to see our vision through.

A week or so before *Kindred* opened, I attended a public conversation at Brown University between the artist Glenn Ligon and the art historian Huey Copeland. Ligon has been at the center of exhibitions and conversations about race and art and has written very articulately about these issues, so I knew I had to get his perspective. I raised my hand and described our curatorial project and the intense reservations some of the artists in our show had voiced about being forced to represent their race. Then I asked him: “To any young black artist or any artist dealing with race or identity [in their work], what advice would you give them . . . if they are at the crux or the crossroads of deciding that they don’t want to do this anymore? What would you say to them?”

He paused for a moment and laughed along with Huey at the enormous weight of my question. Then he paraphrased Toni Morrison’s rejection of assumptions about
blackness being a fixed aspect of anyone’s work: “Well, that presumes that blackness is some knowable thing. That we know the contours of it, and [it’s] like a well we just dip into. We know there’s black water down there, [so] we just dip into it, and there’s your content.” I loved this analogy as a response to generalizations that lump all black art into the “show with all the black people.” Then Ligon ended with another idea—that we might ignore those who narrowly define identities in favor of those who don’t: “Anyway, I don’t know if I have any deep advice for you, but I’ve just found that the older I’ve gotten the less concerned I am with people’s limitations around the subject matter of the work because there are people . . . who deeply get what I’m trying to do.”

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On opening night, December 4, the room was electric. People stayed the entire two hours, and the last stragglers had to be shepherded out. Looking at the work of Nafis White, an undergrad in Sculpture, I clearly saw the community Kindred had created. Her installation Black Gold is made up a dozen gold-leaf covered basketballs. Nafis allowed us to strategically scatter them throughout the exhibition space, and somehow their dispersion, whether in isolation or in groups of two or three, symbolized myself and other students of African descent thriving in various departments across campus. We might be a small segment of the RISD population, but we were visibly present in a way many artists said they hoped we could be in their interviews months before.

In January we followed the exhibition with a two-part evening symposium supported by the Mapping Identities Initiative of the Provost’s Office. The first part featured presentations by RISD alumna Blue Wade, Associate Professor Digital Media at Marymount College; Forest Young, Creative Director at Interbrand; and Bolaji Campbell, Associate Professor in RISD’s Department of Art and Visual Culture. In a moderated conversation afterward, they offered varied responses to questions like: Are we beyond creating all-“black” shows? Is there a tendency to combine the African-American experience with that of all African-descended people? And how are those experiences seen by the mainstream? One of the most critical questions I asked was: Who is a person of color? While Forest chose “to see a person of color as one who colors,” Blue believed this was a “question that has to be answered by the community.” Bolaji talked about the relationship between privilege and education, noting that “A person of color is the marginalized. It is not just about your skin color.”

In the second part, students featured in the Kindred exhibition talked about their work and responded to Kindred’s themes. Patrice Payne, an alumna of the Teaching + Learning in Art + Design program, recalled co-founding RISD’s student group Black Artists and Designers (BAAD) a few years ago. Nafis noted that there are only eighty-four black students at RISD and described an “unwillingness on the part of some of my peers” to engage with her recent work, which responds directly to the fatal shootings of Michael Brown and other black men. Jamar Bromley, a graduate student in Graphic Design, shared photographs of his multicultural, “innocent and naïve” childhood on military bases abroad, not in the real America, but the “America we strive to be.” Luther Young III, a graduate student in Industrial Design, and Dora Mugerwa, a Brown-RISD
dual-degree undergraduate in Furniture Design and Environmental Science, both talked about how *Kindred* had led them to rethink aspects of their own identity in relation to their work. Here is Dora’s experience, which gets at both the individuality and the collectivity of identity:

Participating in the show has helped me to realize there are multiple layers to the subject matter in my work . . . and race and identity is indeed one of those layers. But at the core is my multicultural experience of being born and raised in Sweden until I was about eleven years old, of being someone living in Sweden but of [Ugandan] descent, and then moving and living in Northern Virginia up until now. . . . Through these experiences I have come to realize that I rely heavily on the human body, more specifically body language, to sense my place in society no matter who I am engaging with or where I am. As a result I personally see the human body as being one of many commonalities across cultures, across race, across all kinds of people. That is the one thing I feel like I can 100 percent identify with no matter where I look in the world.

Such references to the “human body” and the “human condition” and “human culture” surfaced multiple times, illuminating greater societal concerns as the focus of her work.

Following the symposium, the *Kindred* artists were invited to a luncheon with MLK Celebration Series keynote presenter Danny Glover. Hearing this famous actor and activist recall his introduction to acting and start in the film industry was perhaps the most surreal moment in the narrative of *Kindred*. Later that night in his opening remarks he described the lasting impression our exhibition had had on him:

If you haven’t seen the installation of the Afro-descended students—whether from Haiti, from Trinidad and Tobago, Uganda, New York, Florida, or San Francisco—you’ll be missing something very special. And to have lunch there, and to be fed physically with the food and also to be fed spiritually in my soul with their artwork, it was just amazing and I just want to thank you, all of you who participated this afternoon.

Sitting in the auditorium, I couldn’t have heard his shout out more clearly, and I was proud to extend our audience so far beyond RISD.

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For the past few months since the show has come down, I’ve been asking myself what *Kindred* accomplished and what its afterlife might be. Throughout the planning stages Tia and I met regularly with Tony Johnson from the Office of Intercultural Student Engagement to share our ideas, so I thought I’d return to him to help unpack this experience. Tony shared a historical perspective I wasn’t aware of in my short time here as a grad student. He said of *Kindred*, “There aren’t a lot of opportunities that come to RISD organically, from who we are, that provide this kind of elegant approach to
something the institution has historically struggled with.” He said he saw our project as an “offering” that had the capacity to “affirm, liberate, empower, educate, build space, and inform the institution.” This response was moving. An “offering”? I had never thought of *Kindred* like that, but somehow the word felt spot on. And the offering had been accepted: after the show and symposium, I was inundated by responses from friends, faculty, and the RISD Museum community, who were all so eager to share what they saw, what they experienced, and how they reacted.

When I asked Tony whether he thought *Kindred* was a success, he answered, “You expanded the institutional framework in a new way, using the very same systems that at times seem to marginalize communities to build conversations and model this kind of practice.” Tony then paraphrased a Peggy McIntosh text, saying that *Kindred* was “in some ways a window and in some ways a mirror.” This, I believe, was the best outcome we could have hoped for. By giving authentic voices a chance to be heard, we allowed the artists and designers to be seen differently and encouraged RISD to be reflective of its own community. It is my hope that RISD students continue to propose exhibitions that celebrate cultural multiplicity, design forums that ignite conversation, and push not only the institution but themselves to be more supportive and attuned to the artistic practices of all peers across campus.