MFA in Graphic Design

10 YEARS: A Decade of Inquiring into Self and Society

In 2011, based on the success of the tried-and-true educational philosophy exhibited by the low-residency Writing and Visual Art programs, VCFA created the MFA in Graphic Design program. Founding faculty member and Academic Dean Matthew Monk likens the conception of the program to heading into uncharted territory: "An educational model like ours, and a pedagogical approach like ours, had never been attempted in graphic design education." Monk says that during those early years, he was even approached by a professor at a prior institution who said, "Design cannot be taught this way." Comments like this strengthened Monk's and his fellow faculty's resolve that a student-centered, inquiry-based program in graphic design not only was necessary, but could indeed thrive.

"When we started the program, we on the faculty approached what we were doing as a massive experiment. We were diverging so far from how any of us had ever taught or been taught. But we trusted our hunches that the old ways of teaching design were not only outmoded, but that they may never have been as effective as many would have had us believe. At the very first residency, in the faculty lounge one evening, as we reflected on all this, we collectively coined the term *pedagogical damage* for the harm that Eurocentric design has been inflicting since the beginnings of design education in the twentieth century, and which we were realizing had been inflicted on us," Monk says. "We committed then and there not to inflict such damage on our students at VCFA, and to find a more effective approach."

Whereas other institutions have begun working to decolonize their curricula and address the problems of Eurocentric design education, VCFA's program was built from the ground up, questioning the authority of dominant voices and canons from day one, and "could address the future of our field without encumbrance."

Ten years later, this "massive experiment" has grown, developed, and strengthened into a leading program for design education, thanks to a diverse, committed, global community of bold and curious educators and students. Community and **#VCFALove** has always been at the root of the endeavor, Faculty Co-Chair Nikki Juen says. "In the beginning, we started from a real sense of community building around mutual care and support. That was a precedent for the first half of the 10 year mark." Like a sourdough starter, first fed by the faculty, and then fueled by the students, "the love is now not just for each other or for this place where we can be ourselves outside of more restricted design channels." Juen speaks of the community's love for rigor, for critical thinking, for diverse projects and practices, and for intellectual self-discovery—each of which has continued to stretch and deepen the program's curriculum and pedagogy. "It's a much more challenging environment to be a part of, but the students have taken on that charge and work to hand this love down to incoming classes. It's been an incredible evolution," Juen adds.

To celebrate the anniversary, we caught up with alumnx from the first-ever graduating class, as well as a few current students and recent grads, and asked them to give us a peek into their cherished experiences and memories of the program.

Bonita Tanaka ('13) remembers: "My first advisor was Nikki Juen. The semester was unique and possibly the most challenging, as the new program was finding its feet, and student participation in helping to create and establish practice was profound. The semester was also healing for me—Nikki's verbal, visceral acknowledgment of me as a designer allowed me to take a deeper breath, transition from the external pressures of being a design professional, and become my own creative director and content creator, mixing my conceptual work with my design practice." These days, Tanaka teaches adjunct at two colleges and practices a daily commitment to her personal work.

During her first semester, alumnx Mary Hanrahan ('13) was encouraged to volunteer at the Harwood Museum of Art in her hometown of Taos, New Mexico, which was opening a new exhibition on Agnes Martin, an artist that Mary happened to be studying for her own work at VCFA. "That was the beginning of my renewed love of lines, grids, and the idea around perfectionism. These subjects are still an interest in my current work, although my work tends to focus more on the natural environment, sustainability issues, and Irish ancestry now." Hanrahan remains a contract employee with the Harwood for new exhibition installations and also serves as the exhibition coordinator for VCFA's Graphic Design residencies.

Recent graduate Marielena André ('21) reflects on her VCFA education as holistic and transformative, citing aspects such as the open study platform, which gives each student the agency to explore their own interests and obsessions, and the "deep respect and understanding that each of us come here with a variety of work and life experiences. That seems like a given, but it isn't, and I truly felt supported." André also calls the program "barrier breaking" for its constant challenging of traditional, hierarchical teacher/student structures and its

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"uncompromising stance" toward diversity and inclusion: "VCFA is more than just an experience but an exploration of the designer themselves."

Vic Rodriguez Tang ('22) joined the program in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, when residencies were forced to move online. However, Vic says, "I don't feel like I have missed out on anything so far at VCFA. The faculty and other students provide a safe space during the residency. My work keeps getting better, mainly because I can genuinely show up and do my best work in this type of environment. I've been able to explore different parts of my identity using design as one of my tools and apply some of my experience as a working professional to an academic setting where I'm free to play in the sandbox without restrictions. Most of my work has been focused on my identity as an immigrant and as a queer person. These design explorations have allowed me to create pieces that are unapologetically me and represent who I am."

Olivia Schneider ('21), currently at work on her thesis, shares her perspective on the design world at large: "There's this message out there that graphic design is supposed to fix stuff and solve problems. I know that clients approach designers with so-called problems and designers can fill those voids by making a website or a logo. But I think that's a one-sided, capitalist way to look at graphic design. I think graphic design is most powerful when it gives people a voice. I've found my voice as a designer at VCFA through making nice stuff and ugly stuff, through writing and experimenting and reworking. It's an interesting time to be involved in graphic design education because it's clear that historically many voices in the field have been ignored and their work appropriated, but slowly we are starting to make space for these important parallel narratives."

Over the last ten years, graphic design students at VCFA have been asked to bring their whole selves to the table, and, in turn, are encouraged to follow their own interests and passions, as well as dive into societal and self-inquiry in place of outmoded and harmful Modernist approaches of "problem solving." There is, of course, much more work to do, and much more to look forward to. As faculty member Ian Lynam notes, "Other schools have changed the course of society aesthetically or through literature, but I feel that our collective efforts are changing society as an aggregate whole."

Artwork:
Featured work by Vic Rodriguez Tang ('22) above, Ryan Bitzegaio ('16) above right, Troy Patterson ('13) facing page, and Bonita Tanaka ('13) as background