



Bare Boutique, Lek Porter 2018

Is the fashion industry finally embracing race diversity?

by Renee Young

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(please note that some abbreviations are used throughout essay including Person of Colour -POC, Black Indigenous Person of Colour- BICPOC & Woman of Colour- WOC)

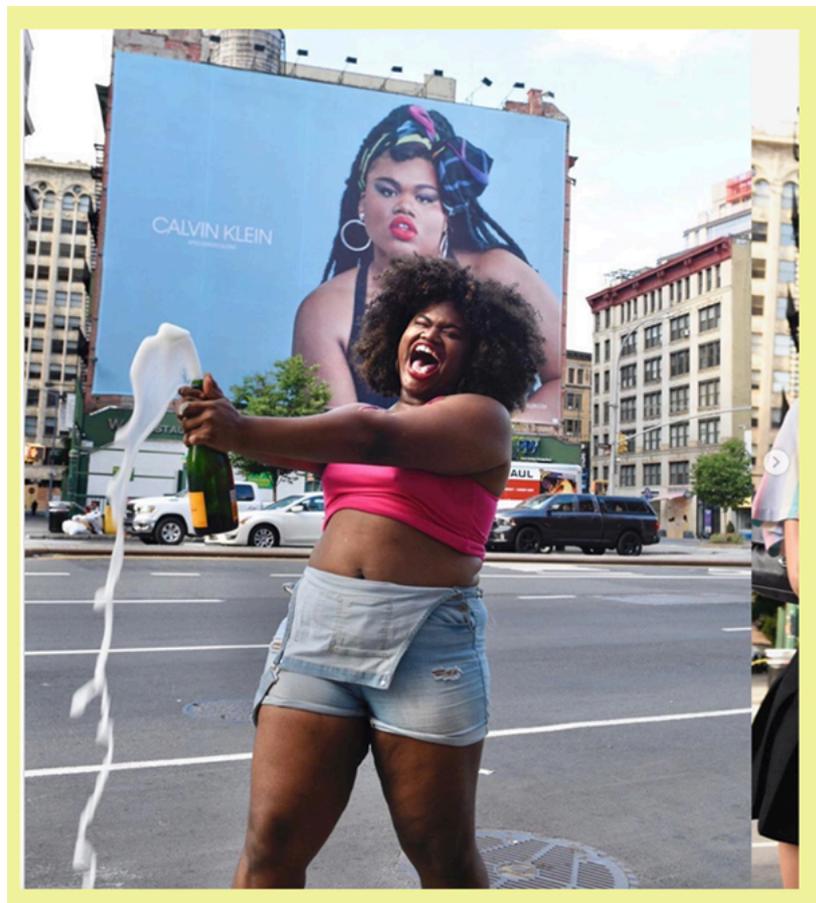
"You watch a runway show and you can count on one hand how many girls of colour there are." (Elsesser, 2016) The fashion industry has always struggled with representation and misrepresentation of racial diversity in the mainstream, especially when it comes to people of colour. Predominately fashion is whitewashed with cis-gendered white males and females. If a person of colour is represented they're usually primed to look of white descent with straight hair and faces of make up that is generally used for lighter skin tones. "I was told that brands only booked black girls if they looked like they'd been 'plucked from a remote village in Africa' or like a 'white model dipped in chocolate,'" (Akhtar, 2016) Calvin Klein Model Ebonee Davis tells Allure Magazine. Since the 2020 Black Lives Matter rallies and campaigns fashion labels have been consciously forced to review their marketing strategies and lack of racial diversity within their organisation and be present to their accountability. Some brands, however, have led at the forefront of race diversity, such as local Melbourne based brand Bare Boutique from the very beginning of their startup. Other well-known labels have been called out for their lack of consideration of diversity and understanding of race, including luxury global brand Gucci who had a significant slip up only last year. Calvin Klein took the lead just recently last week posting Jari Jones, a black transgender woman, activist, model and actor as the face of their Pride campaign on a giant billboard in Manhattan, New York. In 2020 "the fashion season - was the most racially diverse on the catwalk: at New York fashion week 47% of all the models were of colour."(Elan,2019) It is apparent that brands are taking more initiative to be inclusive of race diversity, yet there is still room for improvement in both front of house and behind the scenes of the fashion industry.



Bare Boutique, shot by Lek Porter, via www.bare.botique 2020

Local brand Melbourne brand Bare Boutique has prided themselves on campaigning their undergarments for women of all races, sizes and colour. Head designer Kara Kupe, a Ngai Tahu and Te Atiawa iwi woman from New Zealand "was firm the collection should empower women of all colours, dismantling the fashion industry's perception of "nude" underwear as being beige in colour – when in reality many women's version of nude is darker." (Woolley,2018) Kupe's first-hand experience and awareness of the lack of diversity in fashion garments colour range allowed her to find the gap in the market and produce a product for women of colour. Enriched with her story and heritage, each garment is given a Māori name. Not only does she hand-pick a wide range of "nude" colour ways and an extensive range of sizes she opts in promoting and exhibiting women of colour in all her campaign shoots. Untouched and unapologetically natural. "We grew up with the '90s models – really thin, white models. I could never see myself in any images." (Woolley,2018) Kupe explains to Broadsheet media. Bare has built a sacred welcoming home for WOC of all shapes and sizes. Displaying WOC in a nurturing space amplifies WOC's voices and representation and not just settles for the term diversity to be loosely attached to the brand. Instead Bare are transparent with their inclusivity with hard evidence both in campaigns and

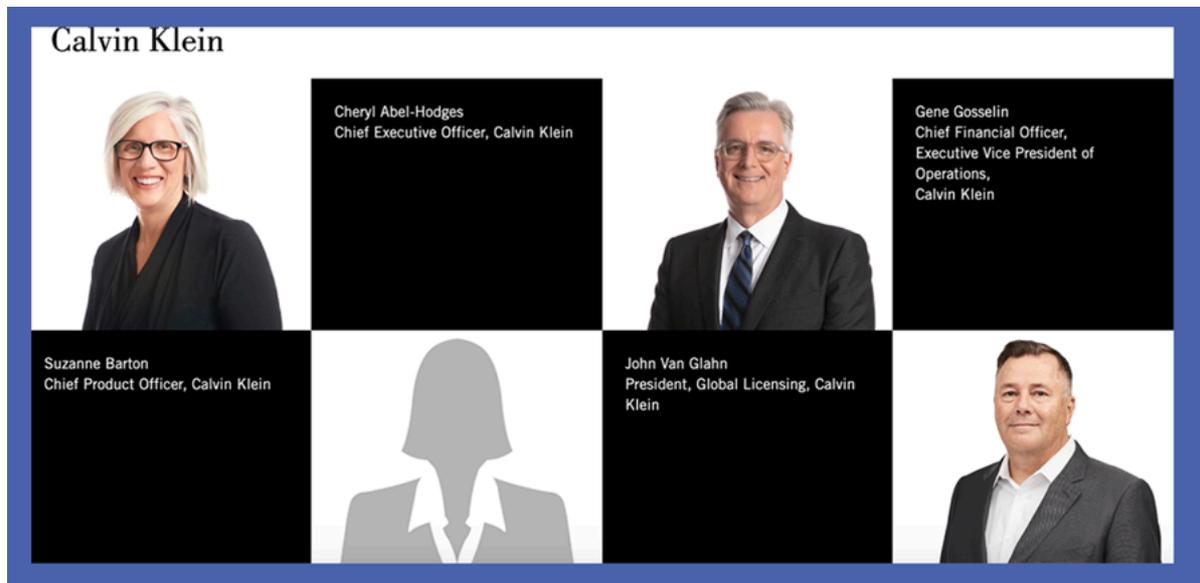
in their design and process team. As suggested by Emma Ismawi, digital designer and operator of BE Collective Culture, brands shouldn't tokenise people of colour and use the same black model frequently. (Ismawi, 2020) Bare features a collective of women of colour within their campaigns, by using multiple women of colour avoids the labour of representation to fall on just one person of colour to carry the brand and represent POC. Kupe hired person of colour Lekhana Porter, also Melbourne based but originally from Aotearoa, New Zealand, to photograph both Bare's campaigns in 2018 and 2019. Building the collective with black identities both behind the scenes as well as at the face of the brand marks a strong representation for people of colour in the fashion industry. Voices are heard and expressed by POC at Bare and share a greater understanding and awareness of the issues faced by people of colour.



Jari Jones celebrating her billboard for C.K, via @iamjarijones Instagram, 2020

"Today, on #JUNETEENTH2020 a Fat Black Trans Woman Looks over New York." (Jones, 2020) tweets new face of Calvin Klein 2020 Pride campaign black transgender curvy female activist, Jari Jones. A bold move for Calvin Klein as it's the first time a black

transgender woman has been the face of a C.K campaign. In current times where black trans lives are being devastatingly taken away from us at the hands of hate crimes, it is refreshing to see Calvin Klein support, stand up for, and promote transgender WOC proudly for Pride Month. While Black Lives Matter and Black Trans Lives Matter is trending C.K do have a responsibility to continue their ongoing support once the rallies and protests have ceased. With over 20.9 million followers on the C.K Instagram account (Instagram,2020) Calvin Klein has a great platform to advocate race diversity. Currently, their account bio reads "Unequal is Unacceptable. Black Lives Matter." (Klein, 2020) As well as their Instagram bio C.K wrote a public announcement in support of Black Lives Matter stating "...it is critical that we increase diverse representation throughout Calvin Klein. We have worked and will continue to work towards advancing racial equality within our workforce and in our communities." It is imperative that C.K has an understanding of race diversity and inclusivity within their company if they are going to make public statements in their stance advocating the Black Lives Matter movement. Emma Ismawi, a guest speaker at Collarts, proposes that it is essential to look beyond the face of campaigns and search as to who is represented behind the scenes of the company. (Ismawai, 2020) from quick research via Calvin Klein's parent company, PVH Corp. It becomes evident that C.K's senior leaders board members do not incorporate any identifying POC. (as shown in the screenshot below taken from PVH Corp. website.) Without a POC on the board, people of colour are not correctly considered or represented within the company. Not to devalue Jari Jones and her incredible campaign, after doing some research, it's establish that white cis male photographer, Ryan McGinley, shot the Pride campaign for C.K. McGinley is an advocate for Black Lives Matter yet it would have been to C.K best interest for an entire POC team behind Jari's shoot for her to be expressed as a transgender WOC by a POC. Calvin Klein is not necessarily the bad guy of fashion. However, after some more in-depth research, it can be noted that there is still room for adjustment within their back of house to match the values and representation of diversity in their front of house campaigns and public announcements.



Screenshot taken from www.pvh.com of Calvin Klein's senior board members, 2020

During Black History Month of 2019 Italian luxury brand Gucci released a controversial balaclava knit. A black turtle neck jumper with large red lips that were designed to be worn over the mouth that closely resembled blackface. It was only until a flood of social media backlash posts calling out Gucci for their racist garment that the piece was pulled from their fall/winter collection. Extremely poorly timed and released during Black History Month, a month dedicated to celebrating black lives and diversity within the global community. The knit even made fashion callout Instagram account Diet Prada, with over 39,408 likes on the post (Instagram, 2019) the Gucci knit was removed from store shelves and websites only hours after its release. Gucci made a public statement via Twitter shortly after the removal of the garment “Gucci deeply apologises for the offences caused by the wool balaclava jumper. We consider diversity to be a fundamental value to be fully upheld, respected, and at the forefront of every decision we make.” (Gucci, 2019) It is clear that no POC was present at this shoot or part of the design team as there would be no way the knit would proceed to production and shelves. In reaction to their very public mistake, Gucci responded to the event by hiring a diversity chief, Renée Tirado, to avoid any more problematic designs or racial

discrimination within the company. As well as employing a diversity chief Gucci launched “a multicultural design scholarship programme, a diversity and inclusion awareness programme and a global exchange programme.”(Bramley,2019) As mentioned by Diet Prada “If these global brands are serious about their commitment to increasing corporate diversity, it needs to happen at all levels and departments, not just the creative teams. “(Diet Prada, 2019) Companies must expand their racial diversity across all departments of the company to steer clear of any misconduct and misrepresentation. An event so large and mindless could have been avoided if Gucci had practices in place and a more extensive range of diversity within its design house and studio team. Gucci acknowledged their mistakes, have moved forward and are on a more racially conscious route with a clear mission to be more inclusive and aware of diversity in the brand. It is crucial for major fashion brands, luxury or not, to employ, listen to and give voice to all races and POC.



just one of the thousands of tweets in response to Gucci's knit, via The Guardian, 2019

It is apparent that brands are becoming more aware and embracing racial diversity within the fashion industry. Brands including Bare Boutique have given voice, space and awareness to people of colour and have a clear transparent understanding for diversity since the establishment of their brand. Other companies such as Calvin Klein have begun placing women of colour and people of colour at the front of their campaigns, their Pride campaign their first time showcasing a black trans woman. Hopefully, C.K and brands alike keep up POC exposure and stick true to their public statements and pledges once the Black Lives

Matter rallies, and protests subside. Even though there is still room for improvement behind the scenes of Calvin Klein leading with such a strong message in prominent times will only be of advantage to both C.K and POC. After the balaclava fiasco of Gucci, they took it upon themselves to adapt and share their space accordingly via hiring a diversity chief and running diversity programs within the company. Whether or not this is a publicity stunt, only time will tell. Fashion is embracing diversity and has actioned new initiatives in place to be more aware and understand of POC in the industry. "Making diversity the norm, rather than a special initiative, will ultimately have the biggest impact on corporate culture." (The State of Fashion, 2020)

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