Design School in Shades of Grey
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I have spent my entire life associating everything and everyone with a single color. Although ordinarily unexplainable, it has played a profound role in my reality. Just like the sky is blue, my house is burnt orange and my Nana is turquoise. My childhood street is red and my best friend is sunshine yellow. This never prompted a challenge until I was 23 years old staring at my college diploma. As I reminisced on my years studying design at a distinguished institution, I felt swallowed by an abundance of opposing emotions. I was consumed by love and hate, passion and devastation, happiness and sadness, gratefulness and resentment. As I stood in the center of peak contradiction, all I saw was black and white.

As a proud graduate of Northeastern University with a combined major in Architectural Studies and Graphic and Informational Design and a minor in Fine Art, I can promise that design school is not for the weak. This is not proclaimed to gain pity or empathy to any degree, but rather to debunk the inaccurate notion of art school being a quick "fun ride" or a "lost cause". A haunting duality was webbed into the fabric of my existence as I entered the classroom and left it. I was being ripped right down the center like a game of tug of war and it kept me in a zone of indecision for years. I loved what I studied and adored the strong woman I was evolving into. Simultaneously, I loathed the institution for embedding unsustainable habits in my life including persistent comparison and an overwhelming belief of not being enough.

White. White is the presence of all color. Its bland appearance serves as delusion as it's nothing less than dynamic and vibrant. Similarly, a studying designer's curriculum evokes an initial distaste but unveils an abundance of lively experiences. Critiques (as we call them, "crits" or "pin-ups"), were class sessions curated for design students to pin up their work in front of judgemental eyes and get immediate feedback. Understandably, the fear of daily criticism steers many people away from the pursuit of design. However, critiques were an essential and formative component of my education. They guided me to finetune my skills, learn from my peers, and receive an honest assessment of improvements to implement in future iterations. They opened my eyes to the never-ending roads of creative possibility and encouraged me to explore my talent. If I have learned anything in college, missing a crit is missing an opportunity for growth. They were an unexpected celebration of everything I had achieved and provided inspiration for all that was to come.

Black. Black is the absence of all color. There is no surprise element to this hue; it is hollow. As vital as critiques are, they are equally black as they are white. Critiques generated a copious amount of unwanted emotions that fabricated an internal emptiness. It was inevitable to relentlessly question my artistic and academic ability after elites compared my work to thirty other designers. Anxiety was sparked as professors scrutinized my work, boldly announcing the imperfections to a room full of people. Putting 34 hours into a project only to be told it should've been 35, prompted some tears. No matter how much confidence I embodied, the sessions paralyzed me with intimidation and envy. Pin-ups tested my mental limits as I incessantly advocated for who I was in the midst of being reminded of all I was not.

Comparison was utilized, taught, and widely encouraged throughout the design curriculum. My daily routine for four full years was as follows: wake up, go to crit, get compared to others, compare myself to others, be gently or harshly reminded that I am not good enough, believe that I am not good enough, homework, sleep, and repeat. Although these beliefs were sprouted in an academic setting, they infiltrated into every other sector of my life. The feeling of not being good enough does not have the privilege to be contained; it can not be picked up or put down. It took thousands of dollars in therapy to convince myself this phrase was a lie while sitting in a critique that was promising the exact opposite. I tirelessly chased affirmations in a circle around my mind: *I am* **capable;** *I am* **talented;** *I am* **enough.** Although I have grown to understand my worth, I will never forget the relationships with others and myself that suffered as a result of the black.

Grey. Grey is any combination of white and black, a mix of positive and negative. In the grey, I acknowledged my brain's susceptibility to devastation while trusting in my growth. On one hand, the prioritization of other's perceptions of my artwork and who I was as a human, created a mental state that set unachievable standards. It formed limitations that inhibited the full potential of my ability and forced me to think of creation as a transactional process. Instead of creating for pure enjoyment, my innate passion was boiled down to an exchange: a production for a grade. On the other hand, just as equally, the institution turned my childhood dreams of becoming a successful designer into a possible reality. I challenged the process of blindly dismantling flushed concepts for somebody else. Instead, I enhanced my original ideas through expert assistance. I finally understood that one person's opinion does not equate to fact. Continuing to show up to difficult and character-forming experiences, allowed me to embrace imperfection through criticism and explore the depths of my perseverance. To show up for me even when I didn't believe in her and even when I didn't want to, was a form of delayed gratification that I truly learned to appreciate. By the time I walked across the stage, I had built a secure home in the grey. One of my favorite poets, Whitney Hanson, wonderfully describes the beauty in devastation by stating,

> "she stood next to the piece of art and all she could say was 'this is devastating, well done.'"... "to say that something is devastating is not to say that it is not good or not lovable. **you are a work of art**."

To acknowledge that my experience was challenging and unusually devastating is not to say that it wasn't worth appreciation. My artwork doesn't have to be perfect to be valued. I don't have to be perfect to be loved. Design school doesn't have to be perfect to be respected. To be a studying designer was to construct a sustainable and fulfilling lifestyle through the discountenance of self-reproving thoughts. In reflection of design school, the truth lies in the discovery of beauty in devastation and imperfection. The truth lies in the center of amazingly memorable and terribly unforgettable. The truth lies in the middle of pitch black and stark white. So, as I sit in my new skin and view my signed college degree, here is my final review:

It was black. It was white.
I loved it. I hated it.
I was passionate. I was devastated.
I was happy. I was sad.
I was grateful. I was resentful.
It was all-consuming shades of grey.