



# MARK BRADFORD MATRIX 172

JUNE 4 - SEPTEMBER 6, 2015  
WADSWORTH ATHENEUM MUSEUM OF ART

# PALM TREES AND PAVEMENT

*“The most important imperative to be questioned is the one that tells you to go to the art supply store to be a painter.”<sup>1</sup>*

—MARK BRADFORD

A Home Depot shopping list landed in my inbox about two months before this exhibition was scheduled to open. It contained the materials artist Mark Bradford would require for the site-specific wall drawing he planned for his MATRIX project:

- Acrylic matte varnish
- Matte black paint
- Tubes of clear caulk
- Lengths of multicolored rope

Bradford also sent boxes of colored paper from his studio.

The exhibition concept had developed very quickly. During Bradford’s site visit to the Wadsworth Atheneum in June of 2014, he was attracted to the four Sol LeWitt wall drawings on view at the Museum. He recalled a project he had done at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago in 2011, in which he uncovered a LeWitt wall drawing. *The Mark Bradford Project*, a year-long audience participation residency that engaged the Chicago community, included *Pinocchio Is On Fire*, a work created on the site of many previous wall drawings, including one by LeWitt that had been painted over. By peeling away layers of subsequent white paint, in the form of letters, LeWitt’s palette of colors was revealed and became integral to Bradford’s newly created, text-based wall drawing addressing the subject of identity.

Once again inspired by Sol LeWitt—Hartford native, Conceptual artist, three-time MATRIX artist, and founder of the “wall drawing” art form—Bradford proposed a site-specific wall drawing of his own, but employing his signature materials and technique. Along the sixty-foot wall in MATRIX’s Bunce Gallery, Bradford and two assistants rolled out a field of black paint, adhered long lengths of rope in horizontal parallel lines, and applied dense layers of vibrantly colored paper, which the artist then proceeded to sand, peel, strip, and cut away from the wall in a subtractive process to create a vivid and textured composition. Akin to an excavation, Bradford



and the latter, *Wet Grass*, is a phrase Bradford has always liked.<sup>6</sup> Together, the titles suggest Bradford's stated interest in "the junctions demarcating the natural and the urban, and how these converge and overlap. I like the idea of fissure, not just from nature but also urban channels."<sup>7</sup> (*Gotham* chronicles New York from a natural Eden to a developed city.) A voracious reader, Bradford often quotes texts for titles that "seem to point to some strange, psychological space....[are] soft *and* biting,...[or give] mixed messages."<sup>8</sup> Although similar compositions of the same size, just with different color palettes, the contrasting titles of *Pile of Blocks* and *Wet Grass* illustrate the "bifurcation"<sup>9</sup> that carries through his body of work.<sup>10</sup> Here, close inspection of the two canvases reveals that the surface abstraction gives way to underlying texts and images—collaged sheets of discarded billboard paper of local street advertisements. This union of abstract form and social engagement exemplifies Bradford's art.

Mark Bradford grew up in South Central Los Angeles—where in 1965 the Watts riots upended his neighborhood and in 1992 the Los Angeles riots (ignited by the Rodney King verdict) resulted in mass arson, looting, assault, and murder in the same area and beyond. In the aftermath of the King riots, cyclone fencing was installed around the



SOL LEWITT, WALL DRAWING #1131 "WHIRLS AND TWIRLS," 2004. INK AND PAINT ON WALLS. THE ELLA GALLUP SUMER AND MARY CATLIN SUMNER COLLECTION FUND, 2004.12.1. PHOTO: ALLEN PHILLIPS

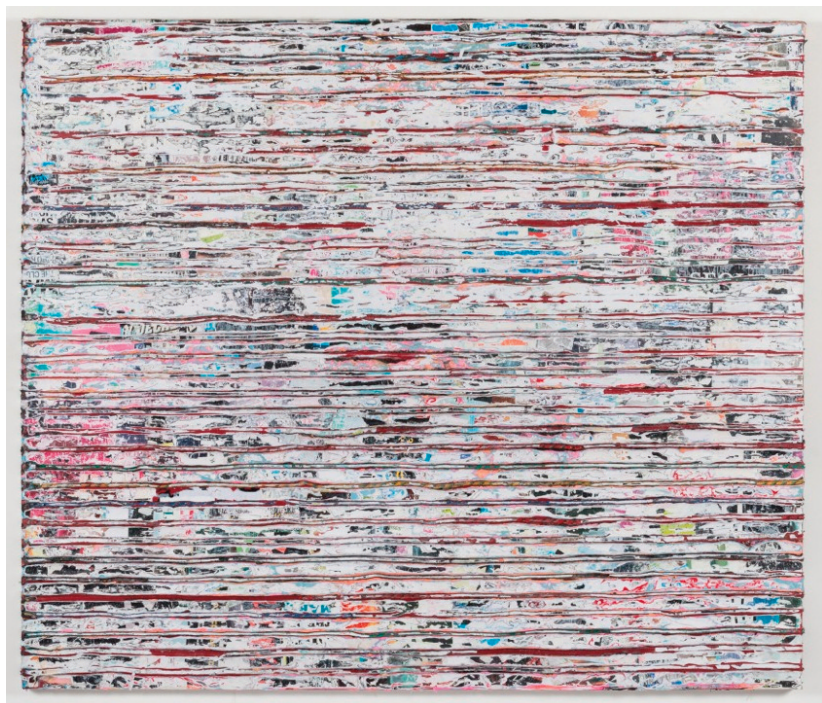


MARK BRADFORD, *STUDIO TEST*  
*PAINTING FOR WADSWORTH*  
*ATHENEUM MATRIX EXHIBITION,*  
2015. PHOTO: JOSHUA WHITE





MARK BRADFORD, *STUDIO TEST  
PAINTING FOR WADSWORTH  
ATHENEUM MATRIX EXHIBITION  
(DETAIL)*, 2015.  
PHOTO: JOSHUA WHITE



destruction and eventually merchant posters began to appear as the initial signs of an economic renewal.<sup>11</sup> Such everyday realities of the local community and urban landscape inform his racially and politically charged work. Known for tactile, signage-based and map-like collage paintings, Bradford's trademark monumental, mixed-media abstractions layer string and advertising posters stripped from the city streets infamous for gang violence. The artist maintains his studio here in the same Leimert Park neighborhood where he lived until the age of eleven.

In some of Bradford's best-known work, posters from local merchants—their texts traced and raised with string—are layered with paper and largely painted over. When sanded through by the artist, glimpses of the sign texts betray the area's problematic social and economic issues. Tacked to telephone poles and plywood construction-site fences, advertisements for bail bonds businesses, money-cashing stores, and paternity- and disease-testing clinics target and prey upon the local people in need of these services. These social and political interests intrinsic to Bradford's "post-black"<sup>12</sup> work are symbolically represented, veiled in abstraction.





Bradford explains his position as an African American artist from the sun-blistered streets of South Central breaking into the art world in the 1990s:

“As politically intense as the ’50s were, I felt that when I came on the scene and wanted to be an artist, it was just as intense and the imagery was right in your face. The internet had made everyone so accessible; everyone could go online and understand black culture through hip-hop. This included the imagery, the clothes, the language, the social norms and communication. It became so product-laden, so static, that for me, I couldn’t breathe. And so I realized I would have to abstract it. I think all of my work comes out of the body and the disappearance, traces and hints of the body, through the traces of the materials that were there. The memory of the body—people lived in this place, the erosions of cities and spaces, topographies of where people lived, looking down on communities.”<sup>13</sup>

Bradford calls himself a “paper-chaser,” and the term is apt, for his practice of repurposing merchant signs, tattered posters, and battered billboards is at the very



MARK BRADFORD, *BREAD AND CIRCUSES*,  
2007. MIXED MEDIA AND COLLAGE ON  
CANVAS; 134 ½ X 253 ½ IN.



MARK BRADFORD, *UNTITLED*, 2006.  
MIXED MEDIA ON PAPER; 12 ½ X 22 ¾ IN.



MARK BRADFORD, *UNTITLED*, 2007.  
MIXED MEDIA ON PAPER; 19 X 22 IN.

core of his commentary, locally sourced but universally relevant. Call it social abstraction, call it political critique, these beautiful and issue-laden paintings are subtly delivered, in a form both original and of their time. Yet, in response to the timeless work of Sol LeWitt, Mark Bradford hits the target in a colorful, high-relief version of a wall drawing entirely his own, rendered in everyday materials purchased from a local hardware store.

## PATRICIA HICKSON

Emily Hall Tremain Curator of Contemporary Art

# MARK BRADFORD

## EDUCATION

1995 BFA, California Institute of the Arts,  
Valencia, CA

1997 MFA, California Institute of the Arts,  
Valencia, CA

## SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2015 Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art,  
*Mark Bradford / MATRIX 172*, Hartford, CT  
Hammer Museum, *Scorched Earth*,  
Los Angeles, CA  
Gemeentemuseum den Haag,  
*Mark Bradford: Sea Monsters*, The Hague,  
Netherlands  
The Rockbund Art Museum, *Tears of a Tree*,  
Shanghai, China

2014 The Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University,  
*Mark Bradford: Sea Monsters*,  
Waltham, MA  
The Tom Bradley International Terminal at  
Los Angeles Airport, *Bell Tower*,  
Los Angeles, CA (Special Commission)

2012 San Francisco Museum of Modern Art,  
*Mark Bradford*, San Francisco, CA

2011 MCA Chicago, *Mark Bradford*, Chicago, IL  
Dallas Museum of Art, *Mark Bradford*,  
Dallas, TX

2010 Studio Museum Harlem, *Alphabet*,  
New York, NY  
Wexner Center for the Arts, *Mark Bradford*,  
Columbus, OH  
Institute of Contemporary Art,  
*Mark Bradford*, Boston, MA  
Aspen Art Museum, *Merchant Posters*,  
Aspen, CO

2008 San Antonio, *ArtPace*, San Antonio, TX  
Cincinnati Art Museum, *Maps and  
Manifests: New Work by Mark Bradford*,  
Cincinnati, OH

2007 Whitney Museum of American Art,  
*Neither New nor Correct: New Work by  
Mark Bradford*, New York, NY

2006 LAXART, *Niagara*, Los Angeles, CA

2003 Whitney Museum of American Art at Altria,  
*Very Powerful Lords*, New York, NY

2000 The Luggage Store, *Color Theory—Negroes  
Have Been Burning since the Plantation*,  
San Francisco, CA

1998 Walter McLean Gallery, *Floss*,  
San Francisco, CA

Born in Los Angeles, California, 1961  
Lives and works in Los Angeles, California

## SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2015 Whitney Museum of American Art, *America Is Hard to See*, New York, NY  
Sharjah Art Foundation, *Sharjah Biennial 12: The past, the present, the possible*, Sharjah, UAE
- 2013 Wexner Center for the Arts, *Blues for Smoke*, Columbus, OH  
Whitney Museum of American Art, *Blues for Smoke*, New York, NY
- 2012 9th Gwangju Biennale, *ROUNDTABLE*, Gwangju, South Korea  
Museum of Contemporary Art, *The Painting Factory*, Los Angeles, CA  
Museum of Contemporary Art, *Blues for Smoke*, Los Angeles, CA
- 2011 12th International Istanbul Biennial, *Untitled*, Istanbul, Turkey
- 2010 6th International Biennale of Seoul, *Media City Seoul*, Seoul, South Korea  
Wexner Center for the Arts, *Hand Targets*, Columbus, OH
- 2008 The New Museum, *Collage: The Unmonumental Picture*, New York, NY  
55th Carnegie International, Carnegie Museum of Art, *Life on Mars*, Pittsburgh, PA  
New Orleans, *Prospect 1.*, New Orleans, LA
- 2006 Fundação Bienal de São Paulo, *27th Bienal de São Paulo*, São Paulo, Brazil  
Whitney Museum of American Art, *Whitney Biennial 2006: Day for Night*, New York, NY
- 2004 Orange County Museum of Art, *2004 California Biennial*, Newport Beach, CA  
REDCAT/Roy and Edna Disney/CalArts Theater, *Bounce: Mark Bradford and Glenn Kaino*, Los Angeles, CA
- 2001 The Studio Museum in Harlem, *Freestyle*, New York, NY

## AWARDS

- 2014 US Department of State's Medal of Arts, Washington, DC
- 2013 National Academician, New York, NY
- 2009 MacArthur Fellowship Award, Chicago, IL  
Wexner Center Residency Award, Columbus, OH
- 2006 Bucksbaum Award, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY  
USA Fellowship Award
- 2003 Louis Comfort Tiffany Award
- 2002 Nancy Graves Foundation  
Joan Mitchell Foundation

## WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

All works courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth.

*Pull Painting 1*, 2015  
Paint, paper, rope, sealant, and varnish on wall  
Dimensions variable

*Pile of Blocks*, 2015  
Mixed media on canvas  
72 x 84 in.

*Wet Grass*, 2015  
Mixed media on canvas  
72 x 84 in.



## ARTIST TALKS

### MATRIX Gallery Talks

Mark Bradford  
Thursday, June 4  
6 pm and 7 pm

Mark Bradford will discuss his MATRIX project in the Eleanor H. Bunce Gallery.



Wadsworth Atheneum  
Museum of Art

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[www.thewadsworth.org](http://www.thewadsworth.org)

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greater hartford  
arts council

<sup>1</sup> Mark Bradford in conversation with Christopher Bedford, 25 June 2009, quoted in Christopher Bedford, "Against Abstraction," *Mark Bradford*. New Haven and London, and Columbus, Ohio: Yale University Press and Wexner Center for the Arts, 2010; p. 19.

<sup>2</sup> Mark Bradford, telephone conversation with the author, 31 March 2015.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Email correspondence to the author from Tate Dougherty of Hauser & Wirth, forwarding information from the artist, 14 May 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Edward G. Burrows and Mike Wallace, *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1998.

<sup>6</sup> Email correspondence to the author from Tate Dougherty of Hauser & Wirth, forwarding information from the artist, 9 May 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Mark Bradford in Susan May, "'Call and Response' A Conversation with Mark Bradford" in *Mark Bradford: Through Darkest America by Truck and Tank*. London: White Cube, 2013; p. 75.

<sup>8</sup> Mark Bradford in Susan May, p. 79.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Email correspondence to the author from Tate Dougherty of Hauser & Wirth, forwarding information from the artist, 19 May 2015.

<sup>12</sup> Curator Thelma Golden coined the term "post-black" to describe Mark Bradford's work in the exhibition *Freestyle* at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 2001. The term raised some controversy in the African American art community regarding Golden's intended meaning. Art critic Holland Cotter perhaps best defines "post-black" art as: "art that can choose to refer to racial identity—or to class, or gender, or aestheticism, or daily life—or choose not to." See Holland Cotter, "Tracking Racial Identity, But Not Defined By It," *The New York Times*, 23 December 2010.

<sup>13</sup> Mark Bradford in Susan May, p. 84.