

A CRITIC AT LARGE

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WHAT ELSE CAN ART DO?

The many layers of Mark Bradford's work.

BY CALVIN TOMKINS

Bradford, with a work in progress, at his studio, in South Los Angeles.

PHOTOGRAPH BY CATHERINE OPIE / REGEN PROJECTS

Mark Bradford is the tallest artist I know—six feet seven and a half inches, and pencil thin, which makes him look taller. His paintings, as you'd expect, run large. When I visited Bradford's industrial-sized studio, in South Los Angeles, this spring, one wall was almost entirely covered by a huge outline map of the United States, with clusters of numbers that represented the AIDS cases reported in each state up to 2009. The map was a study for a much larger one that he planned for a wall at the Hammer Museum, in Los Angeles, where an exhibition of his new work opens on June 20th. "These are for the Hammer, too," he said, waving toward three abstract paintings on another wall. "They're all based on AIDS cells under a microscope. I don't want to say the show is about AIDS, but it's about the body, and about my relationship to the nineteen-eighties, when all that stuff hit. It's my using a particular moment and abstracting it."



For someone who had just spent sixteen hours on an airplane, coming back from the Sharjah Biennial, in the United Arab Emirates, Bradford seemed unnaturally well rested. He looks a decade or so younger than his age, which is fifty-three. Being tall and African-American and not playing basketball was an issue for him when he was a teenager, but now he's comfortable with his height. He was wearing a white T-shirt and white painter's pants, his working clothes, which he buys online for himself and his assistants, two of whom are from the same Mexican family. "When people see us on the street or at Home Depot, they think we're housepainters," he said, happily.

Most of Bradford's art supplies come from the Home Depot. "If Home Depot doesn't have it," he said, "Mark Bradford doesn't need it." Although he hasn't really used artist's paints or brushes since he was in art school, what Bradford makes are abstract paintings.

He starts with a stretched canvas and builds up its surface with ten or fifteen layers of paper—white paper, colored paper, newsprint, reproductions, photographs, printed texts—fixing each layer with a coat of clear shellac. Sometimes he embeds lengths of string or caulking to form linear elements in the palimpsest. When the buildup reaches a certain density, he attacks it with power sanders and other tools, exposing earlier layers, flashes of color, and unexpected juxtapositions. Not until the first sanding does he begin to see where the painting is going. He works like an archeologist, rediscovering the past. The method seems haphazard, but it's not, and the results can take your breath away.

Bradford's 2013 painting "Shoot the Coin," which was in a show of recent acquisitions at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art last summer, does that. Twelve feet high by twenty feet long, it appears at first to be mostly white, but as you move closer you see subtle colors, branching lines like blood vessels, printed words; move back again, and it becomes a vast winter landscape. It's startlingly beautiful, and at LACMA its physical presence overpowered everything else in the room.

Toward the rear of the studio were two immense, unfinished paintings, the largest he's done so far. They are for the lobby of 1221 Avenue of the Americas, in Rockefeller Center, which is undergoing extensive renovations; Bradford was commissioned to do them after winning an international competition. "I'd always wanted to do a map of New York, so I thought I'd give it a try," he explained. "This one is upper Manhattan, and the other is lower Manhattan. I worked from a very early gridded map." He pushed a four-wheeled hydraulic cherry picker aside so that we could get a better look. Both paintings are based on patterns of narrow rectangles, which he laid down with house paint over a gridded template; the underlying grid is visible in some areas and covered over in others. The upper-Manhattan painting looked like a night view of the city from above. Bradford refers to his work as "social abstraction"—abstract art "with a social or political context clinging to the edges"—and for this project he read books on New York history, on Harlem, on urbanism, and on the Rockefeller family ("Man, you talk about the bad and the good"). Until this afternoon, he thought he still had plenty of time to work on them, but his dealer, Iwan Wirth, had just told him that they were due in three months. This didn't appear to concern him. "You know how it is with construction dates—there's always some slippage," he said. "Slippage is something I believe in, something I *depend* on."

The back end of the studio space is divided up into offices, utility rooms, a kitchen, and a bathroom. Bradford said that he had hired an architect "for about twenty minutes" before giving the job to Jesus Lopez, his all-purpose contractor, the father of two of his assistants. Bradford has a second studio on the far side of an adjacent parking area; this one was empty, except for four large plastic objects piled in a corner. There was something comic about them—they looked like enormous punching bags. They were inflatable fenders (Bradford called them "buoys") used to protect the hulls of docked cargo ships. By roughing up and collaging the surfaces of fifteen similar ones, and suspending them on heavy chains, he had turned them into sculptures for his installation

at the Sharjah Biennial. But the ones he shipped never got there. “That was really intense,” he said. “Thirty-six hours before I was due to leave for Sharjah, at three o’clock in the morning, I got an e-mail marked ‘Urgent.’ Because of a strike in the port of San Francisco, the shipment had been rerouted, and my buoys were on their way to China. I put the bedclothes over my head for about ten minutes, until I remembered that I had fifteen more of them, and I could do the whole thing again and send them by FedEx. I actually liked the new ones much better. But, you know, it’s interesting that boat people haven’t found something better than these things. All those big boats that just say ‘Fuck you’ to everybody, and you’re trusting them to a piece of plastic? Really? O.K., good luck with that.”

His cell phone rang. It was his mother, Janice, calling from Atlanta. “She’s eighty, and she is so full of life,” he said, when they’d finished talking. “For forty years, she ran a hair salon here in L.A. She retired a while ago, went to Atlanta to visit a friend, and now she runs a trucking business there. My mom was an orphan, and there was never anybody to tell her what she could or couldn’t do. At the core, she’s probably an artist—an artist and a feminist.” Bradford never knew his father, who left before he was born. In 1965, when he was four, his mother married a man named Banks, and they had a daughter, Lori. Mark didn’t get along too well with Banks, whom his mother divorced a year later, but he and Lori were, and are, very close. He has no interest in meeting his real father, who is originally from New Orleans. “I’m not a biological person,” he said. “If you love me, you’re my family. My mom was a free spirit, and she brought me up to be a free spirit. One thing I do know is that I’m a well-loved person.”

It was nearly eight in the evening, time for dinner. Bradford locked up the studio, and we got into his silver Range Rover—he bought it last year, after sitting in a lot of other cars and deciding that it had the most headroom—and drove for fifteen minutes to a restaurant in another part of South Los Angeles, called Leimert Park. Developed in the late nineteen-twenties as a residential community of small bungalows and Spanish Revival houses on tree-lined streets, Leimert Park has been, since the nineteen-fifties, an upper-middle-class haven and a cultural center for successful African-Americans. (Ella Fitzgerald, Ray Charles, and Tom Bradley, the former mayor of Los Angeles, lived there.) The landscaped green park in the town center was full of people as we drove by—musicians performing, kids running around, families having picnic suppers. Bradford pointed out the building where his mother’s third and last salon used to be. (It became his studio in 2008; he moved to his current space in 2014.) The building and several others near it are now occupied by Art and Practice, a private foundation combining art and social services, which Bradford and his partner, Allan DiCastro, and the philanthropist and art collector Eileen Harris Norton inaugurated in January, 2014. The restaurant we were going to, called Post & Beam, was three blocks from the park. Bradford dines there several times a week, and he got the full treatment when we arrived—*abbracci* all around. The cuisine was a mixture of Italian and soul food; the clientele was black, white, and Hispanic. Over dinner, Bradford filled me in on his early life.

He grew up in a boarding house, in an old section of Los Angeles called West Adams. Since the turn of the last century, this had been a fashionable neighborhood for wealthy white people. During the Depression and the Second World War, large numbers of African-Americans moved from the South to neighborhoods near West Adams, all of which came to be known as South Central. Racial tension, the development of the freeways, and other factors combined to prompt white flight to the suburbs north and west of downtown, and, in the fifties, middle-class black families began buying three-story Victorian mansions in West Adams at bargain prices, and renting out rooms. "It was like growing up in a raggedy Titanic, grand but fallen on hard times," Bradford recalled. The people in his boarding house were like an extended family. He thought of the older married couple who owned the place as his grandparents, and of a girl named Tennia, a year younger than he was, whom the owners had adopted when her mother disappeared, as another sister. Bradford was an independent and inquisitive child and took full advantage of the freedom his mother gave him. Walking to school and then to the hair salon, which had moved to a new location, in the neighboring area of Mid-City, he explored new routes, looking in store windows and noticing everything in sight.

When Bradford was eleven, his mother decided that he and Lori needed a healthier environment. Deepening poverty, which had come with the loss of well-paying industrial jobs, and an increase in street crime had begun to devastate large sections of South Central—the area that is now called South Los Angeles. Many of the boarding houses in West Adams would become crack dens in the eighties. Recently, the neighborhood has been coming back. Bradford and DiCastro now live in a house that is just a block from Bradford's childhood home. DiCastro bought it ten years ago and is slowly restoring it.

Janice and the two children moved to a small apartment in Santa Monica, near the beach. Bradford adapted easily to this virtually all-white environment, although the relative absence of supervision at the local high school coincided with an inclination to cut classes, and his grades suffered accordingly. He became a beach kid, a surfer, a teenage flâneur. And he did a lot of reading: "When I was thirteen, I was in a supermarket with my mother, and for no reason at all I picked up a science-fiction book at the checkout stand and started reading it. I couldn't believe I was doing that, actually reading a book. And, man, it opened up a whole new thing. Reading became the sparkplug of my imagination." It also helped to compensate for the social difficulties caused by a sudden growth spurt. "I grew ten inches in three months," he said. "And I looked frail, and that made me sort of a target. My public privacy was gone, and so was my boyhood, because no one allows you to be nearly six-eight and also a boy. I have more boyishness now than I did then." He tried playing basketball, but the game's physical aggressiveness bothered him—he was always getting yelled at, so he quit. In his junior year, he switched to a "continuation" school for underperforming students. The curriculum there involved very little teaching and a lot of independent reading, which suited him much better. He graduated in 1979, a year early.

Instead of going to college, he went to work in the hair salon. “I’d been doing that off and on since I was around eleven, but at this point I took classes in hair styling so I could get my license,” he said. “I was bridging worlds. I lived in Santa Monica and worked in South Central, but I never defined myself as a black kid in a white neighborhood, or as a Westside kid in a black neighborhood.” In the early nineteen-eighties, he went to Europe for the first time. His motives for doing this were varied. He’d read James Baldwin’s novel “Giovanni’s Room,” and he longed to go to Paris. He was also very worried about AIDS, the first cases of which were reported in 1981. “The churches were saying it was God’s wrath,” he remembers. “It was so unknown and so new. People said if you stay out all night and go to night clubs, which I did a lot, because I love to dance, you’re definitely going to die. Later, I went to a doctor, and he said, ‘I got good news and bad news. You don’t have AIDS, but you’re going to get it.’ Between crack cocaine, drive-by shootings, and AIDS, I thought there was no way I was going to make it. I had to get out. I saved up my money from the hair salon and sold my little Toyota, which broke down every two weeks, and I flew to Amsterdam, because it was cheap.”

On the customs questionnaire he filled out before landing, he wrote “Black American” in the space for nationality. He’d never had to give this information before, and it just seemed like the correct answer. The woman at the customs window scratched out the word “Black” and said, “You’re an American, aren’t you?” “That was liberating,” he said. He stayed for four months, and went all over Europe, sleeping in railroad stations and on trains to save money. The only place he ever felt threatened was Berlin, where he had a couple of run-ins with skinheads. Every year after that, he’d work in the salon for six or seven months and then go back to Europe. “I’d always make sure my mom was all right with the business. She’d find somebody to replace me. I met a lot of people in Europe, and I had fun. I was *young*. But at the same time I was always so haunted and scared. I remember there was a heaviness about coming back—back to it. So-and-So’s in the hospital, So-and-So didn’t make it. It was a very dark period.”

Bradford had recently installed a major sculpture at the Los Angeles International Airport, and we went to see it the next morning. On the way, he told me that he used to get his mother to drive him to LAX so that they could have dinner there and watch the planes take off and land. Later, as a teen-ager, he’d skip school and take the bus. “I loved the old Pan Am terminal, the international one,” he said. “I’d see a plane land from Switzerland or Ghana or someplace, and I’d run to where the passengers were getting off and pretend to be getting off with them. First time I ever heard foreign languages. I’d push the *Smarte Cartes* back into the terminal and collect a dollar each for my lunch money.”

His sculpture was clearly visible from the main entrance to one of the international terminals—a four-sided wooden structure, suspended from the skylight at the far end of the departure hall. Bradford called Sarah Cifarelli, the airport’s art manager, on his mobile phone; while we waited for her to arrive, he said that he’d wanted to make

something that felt both ancient and modern—a cross between a medieval bell tower and “that thing for sports events, the Jumbotron.” The sculpture, called “Bell Tower,” was made of aluminum, paper, and weathered plywood sheets, stained and graffitied from years of being used as barricades. (He’d salvaged them from construction sites.) “This section is politically charged without my doing anything,” he said. “It’s the most uncomfortable part of the airport, where you have to take off your shoes and show papers and go through the X-ray machines. Everything else here is so finished—I wanted a certain rawness, something that felt massive but at the same time airy.”



[VIEW FULL SCREEN](#)

“43G Spring Honey” (2001).

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND HAUSER & WIRTH

Cifarelli arrived and led us to the mezzanine level of the departure hall. “Bell Tower” hovers directly above twelve lines of passengers waiting to show their passports and boarding passes. It’s open at the bottom, and I saw several people direct puzzled glances at its roughly carpentered interior. Cifarelli said that there had been no public announcement or press release about the sculpture yet, and that a number of people had questions about what it was, and whether it was finished. Standing under “Bell Tower” seemed to dampen the noise level in the room. The sculpture’s raw, makeshift look thumbed its nose at the terminal’s gleaming impersonality. Bradford said, “Whether you like it or not, it’s contemporary art in an airport, and it does exactly what I wanted it to do—makes people think.”

Early in 1990, back from one of his trips to Europe, Bradford saw an ad for a new program at Santa Monica College. The faculty would look at art portfolios by nonstudents, and if the work showed promise the school would provide mentoring and free studio space for two years. Bradford had been “slowly creeping toward the possibility of being an artist,” as he put it, and he had a few paintings and drawings to show, so he applied for the program and was accepted. He continued to work at the hair salon, which had moved again, this time to Leimert Park. He had a list of adoring clients by then, and

was sharing the managerial responsibilities with his mother. He had found, early on, that his natural reliance on intuition and rapid response made him very good at styling hair. “When you can fix a mistake, that’s when you know you’re good,” his mother had told him. The same rule applied to his art practice, he said: “I look at a painting and I know it’s not right. And I’ll just dig right into it.” His studio time was after work and late at night. Some of the paintings he did caught the eye of a teacher at the college named Jill Giegerich, who told him he should go to a professional art school. Giegerich kept after him about it, and eventually she recommended him to the director of the California Institute of the Arts, in Valencia, who called him in for an interview and promptly offered him a full scholarship. He entered CalArts when he was thirty.

When you get a chance, remember to ask God the meaning of life—it’s a riot.

“That was the first time I slowed down,” Bradford told me. “I’d been moving real fast since I was fifteen, I wasn’t really formed, and I didn’t know anything about the art world.” At CalArts in the nineteen-

nineties, art practice took a back seat to art theory. Bradford, while continuing to spend three days a week at the salon, immersed himself in the writings of Clement Greenberg, Rosalind Krauss, Hal Foster, the French deconstructionists, and other leading theorists, most of whom preached the doctrine that painting was dead and that serious art now was conceptual. He wasn’t convinced of that. During his three undergraduate years, though, he experimented with photography, video, installation, sculpture, and performance—everything except painting. “Painting was the thing that had grabbed me the most at Santa Monica College,” he said. “But I was so enthralled with learning at CalArts that I decided to put it on the shelf, and then, if I still had the urge to paint after three years, I’d go back to it in grad school. And I still had the urge.”

At CalArts graduate school, from 1995 to 1997, Bradford struggled to find his way into abstraction. He felt drawn to the Abstract Expressionism of Pollock and de Kooning, and to the “combines” and combine paintings of Robert Rauschenberg, but the smell of oil paint gave him terrible headaches, and his efforts seemed to go nowhere. “Rauschenberg’s *work* was always too heavy for me,” he told an interviewer in 2009. “I was always trying to be thin.” He spent hours at the Kinko’s shop near campus, printing ads and texts and images of all kinds. He’d glue these to large sheets of paper, and then, at the end of the day, roll them up and throw them away. Thomas Lawson, the dean of the art school at CalArts, and Darcy Huebler, an artist who teaches there, both urged him not to do that. They thought his work was interesting, and this boosted his confidence, but he didn’t find any of it worth saving. For his graduate-thesis show, he hired a local high-school



marching band to come to his graduation ceremony: the band marched in from the street, up the stairs, and onto the stage, everybody cheered, and at CalArts that qualified as a work of conceptual art.

“When I got out of CalArts, in 1997, I thought nothing was going to happen,” Bradford said. He went back to working full time at the salon; he could pay off his art-school loans that way, and, besides, he’d always loved the place. “I was shy, but at the hair salon I could *talk*, make people laugh,” he told me. “My mom would look over and say, ‘Do you really need to be saying that? T.M.I., Mark—too much information!’” He rented a studio in Inglewood, a working-class area adjoining South Central, and he would go there after work. He was still looking for a way into art. At the salon one day, he noticed an end paper lying on the floor—one of the rectangular, tissue-thin strips of paper that hairdressers use to wrap curls in a permanent wave. Something about the way this one reflected the light made him think about using end papers in a painting. The next evening, he took several boxes of them to his studio and started experimenting. They were translucent, almost invisible, but he found that if he burned the edges with a match (later, he used a blowtorch) the burnt line established a grid pattern. He applied a thin wash of hair dye over the surface, and started another layer. “End papers were fifty cents for a box of two hundred,” he said. “I couldn’t afford to pay twenty dollars for a tube of acrylic paint, but I could go to Home Depot and get paint they’d mixed wrong for a dollar a can. I liked the end papers. I liked the social fabric they represented, and so I built this vocabulary, using only paper.” This was when Bradford began to realize that the way he made art and the way he styled women’s hair were related. The trick was to keep things moving—reach in, try something, and, if that didn’t work, fix it and try something else, and then bring everything together at the end.

The first two paintings he did with end papers, in 2001, were hanging in a back room of his studio. One is eight feet tall by twelve feet wide, the other nine by eight; each one is an all-over grid of small rectangles in yellow, cream, and white, with titles that refer to hair-dye colors: “43G Spring Honey” and “45R Spiced Cognac.” He had offered to mount them on canvas for the owner, Eileen Norton, who was the first person to buy his work. Norton, who grew up in the Watts section of South Central and later taught in public schools there, had married the computer entrepreneur Peter Norton in 1983; they became known for collecting and supporting contemporary art, interests that Eileen continued to pursue after their divorce. She heard about Bradford from Thelma Golden, the newly installed deputy director and chief curator of the Studio Museum in Harlem. Golden had visited Bradford’s studio in 2000, and she decided on the spot to show his work the following year in “Freestyle,” her eye-opening group exhibition of what she called “post-black art”—work by twenty-eight young African-American artists, from different parts of the country, who were redefining what race meant in their art. “He was a fully mature artist at that point,” Golden told me. “He had an incredible sense of himself as an artist, and an enormous ability to understand art history—its possibilities and its limits. I knew I was going to work with him for the rest of my life.”

When Norton went to Bradford's studio, he remembers, "She asked the price of those paintings, and I'm afraid I said something like 'How much do you have?' I was so broke then. I didn't have a car, I didn't have a dealer." Norton paid him five thousand dollars for one large and one small painting, and soon came back and bought two more large ones for five thousand apiece. She also became one of his regular customers at the salon, where he was still working on Fridays and Saturdays. "Mark told me, 'Your hair is not cute,'" she recalls. "I said, 'Can you do better?' And he said, 'Of course.'"

Golden's "Freestyle" exhibition put Bradford on the fast track to widespread recognition. There was danger in this—art seemed to come almost too easily to him. A small show of his work, in 2003, at the Whitney Museum's Altria project space, in midtown Manhattan, drew a withering notice from the *Times* critic Roberta Smith. She liked his large painting "The Devil Is Beating His Wife" (the title is a folk saying about days when it rains while the sun is out) but found the rest of his work—including a lawn figurine and some stacked glass boxes, which he presented as sculptures—"vacuous and discombobulated." "Roberta told me to take my ass home, and she was right," he said. "It was the perfect review for me at the time—it was what I needed to make me focus." Soon afterward, he started work on a very large painting (ten and a half feet by sixteen) called "Los Moscos" ("The Flies"). The title was slang for the Hispanic immigrants who waited for day jobs outside the Home Depot near his studio in Inglewood, a historically black neighborhood that is now fifty per cent Hispanic. For Bradford, the cultural changes were fascinating. Life was lived on the street, in public, and each storefront was painted a different, vivid color—"emergency colors," as he described them, signifying "We are *here*." "Everyone is acting, living at a high pitch," he went on. "I guess the painting came out of that."

The Inglewood studio was the largest space he'd ever worked in, and his paintings expanded dramatically. "I had no problem working on that scale, none," he told me. "I just loved being inside it. I felt there was a language I was unearthing." He was already moving away from the end papers. The dominant tone of "Los Moscos" is black, resulting from the fairly thick, inky paper he used, called Eclipse Black, which he had just discovered. (Not at Home Depot—he bought it from a paper supplier.) He had started bleaching and soaking his colored papers, and using a more powerful sander to bite down and reveal the underlayers. A year or so earlier, Bradford had met the Lopez family, several of whom had emigrated to L.A. from Sinaloa, in Mexico. He had noticed the teen-age Cesar Lopez selling bootleg DVDs on the street in Inglewood, admired his style and energy, and hired him as an assistant. Bradford and Cesar worked on "Los Moscos" for a year, climbing up and down a ladder, because Bradford couldn't afford a scaffold. In 2005, the painting was in Bradford's first show at Sikkema Jenkins, the New York gallery that represented him until 2012. (He moved to Hauser & Wirth in 2013.) Bradford was on his way. "Los Moscos," his coming-of-age painting, is now owned by the Tate, in London.

His productivity soared. He worked for twelve hours at a stretch in the studio, turning out intricately detailed canvases that resembled topographical maps or aerial views of urban centers. Some of Bradford's most striking pictures had political themes. At the salon, where he still worked part time, one of his clients told him that he should paint something about the Tulsa race riot of 1921. Bradford had never heard of it, so he began reading and learned the long-suppressed details—dozens of people killed, and an entire district, one of the wealthiest black communities in the United States, reduced to ashes. Bradford had been working in the salon when the backlash to Rodney King's brutal beating by Los Angeles police officers closed the city down, in 1992. "There was a curfew, and National Guard troops on the street, but we just put up blackout curtains and kept on working," he recalled. "How can you run a business and not work after six o'clock?" Bradford's "Scorched Earth" and "Black Wall Street," both from 2006, evoke the devastation in Tulsa and Los Angeles through abstraction—roiling blacks and reds in densely layered surfaces, penetrated by narrow rivers of white and yellow.

Racial themes ran through much of his work then, but his sense of comic absurdity and "slippage" kept it open, shifting, and nondidactic. In 2003, he made a very funny (and somewhat heartrending) video, called "Practice," of himself trying to shoot baskets while wearing a voluminous hoopskirted dress in yellow and purple—the Los Angeles Lakers' colors. Two years later, he began a series of works based on "merchant posters," his name for the flyers put up on fences in Los Angeles to advertise local goods or services. Partially obscured by sanding and paper overlays, the crude posters ("Divorcio y Custodia," "Cheap Auto Parts," "Life Time Hair") exert a highly specific sense of time and place. The French *affichistes* had made paintings from torn and defaced commercial ads in the fifties, but Bradford's merchant posters sing a different and distinctly American song, about people who live on the fringes and make their lives up from day to day.

Bradford met Allan DiCastro at a Halloween parade in 1997. DiCastro had grown up in a working-class neighborhood in South Chicago, one of five children of a single mother. He worked his way through Illinois State University, and moved to Los Angeles in 1987, where he got a job with a bank and became active in social causes, eventually serving as president of the neighborhood council in Mid-City. "I watched him work forty unpaid hours a week for the council," Bradford told me. The two of them often talked about doing something together for the community. "At one point, I said, Let's start a neighborhood art space," Bradford recalls. "Allan said he certainly didn't want to do just an art space, but why not put contemporary art and social justice and community activism together, and see what happens?"

In 2009, Bradford received a five-hundred-thousand-dollar "genius" grant from the MacArthur Foundation. Two years later, he was able to buy a fine old Art Deco building in Leimert Park, and, as DiCastro said, "We could finally start doing the things we'd been talking about." Art and Practice, their private foundation, eventually managed to

buy two more buildings in the neighborhood, including the one that housed Bradford's studio. Extensive renovations are still in progress, but an exhibition gallery opened to the public in February, and several programs, including one that provides studio space for three artists-in-residence, are now in operation. Bradford, DiCastro, and Eileen Norton had decided to focus the foundation's work on foster children, because their research showed a disturbingly high proportion of students in neighborhood schools who were in foster care. Widespread job losses, increasing poverty, and the crack-cocaine epidemic had destroyed countless black families in the eighties. In South Central, which had been hit the hardest, the pattern of broken families had been self-perpetuating. Bradford and DiCastro joined forces with the Right Way Foundation, a small nonprofit in South Los Angeles, which was helping older children make the transition out of foster care. Right Way's office is now in what used to be Janice Banks's hair salon; its facilities include a well-equipped computer lab and classrooms for young adults who come for an eight-week course that leads, in many cases, to job placement.

When Bradford and DiCastro learned that Eso Won Books, a Leimert Park landmark, had no long-term lease, they offered to give the owners a space in one of the buildings they were renovating. The new bookstore will open this summer, with an upstairs gallery for lectures and exhibitions. For help in running the art side of Art and Practice, Bradford turned to Ann Philbin, the director of the Hammer Museum. Philbin had shown his work at the Hammer, and she decided to make a major commitment. In addition to bringing in funding from the James Irvine Foundation, Philbin negotiated a two-year agreement under which her museum will organize and curate four fully professional exhibitions a year at Art and Practice, and advise on public programming. "Everyone on my staff is in love with this project," Philbin told me.

Artists who deal with social issues and interact with viewers are no longer an isolated phenomenon. In 1996, the French art critic Nicolas Bourriaud identified the trend as "relational aesthetics," and cited among its practitioners Maurizio Cattelan, Liam Gillick, Pierre Huyghe, Philippe Parreno, and Rirkrit Tiravanija. In this country, the two artists whose approach seems closest to Bradford's are Theaster Gates, who has turned derelict buildings into cultural institutions on the South Side of Chicago, and Rick Lowe, whose Project Row Houses revitalized a run-down district in Houston's Third Ward. Bradford knows Gates and Lowe, and Lowe serves on the board of Art and Practice. Where he differs from them, and from the artists on Bourriaud's list, is in the clear distinction he makes between what he does in the studio and what he does with Art and Practice. He blurred that distinction in 2008, when he went to New Orleans and, working with people in the devastated Ninth Ward, built a giant "ark" out of three stacked shipping containers—the kind that had broken loose and done so much damage to houses during Hurricane Katrina. But, for Bradford, social action has not been an art form; he uses his art to support his social activism. So far, a large part of the funding for Art and Practice has

come from him. The artist Paul Chan, who is involved in human-rights causes, believes that Bradford is “trying to situate his life as an artist in other ways besides simply being an artist.” The question, Chan says, is “What else can art do?”

Bradford’s first major retrospective opened at the Wexner Center for the Arts, at the Ohio State University, in 2010, and travelled to contemporary museums in Boston, Chicago, Dallas, and San Francisco. In the past three years, the market for his art has become what Amy Cappellazzo, the former head of postwar-art sales at Christie’s, describes as “white-hot at all levels.” His large paintings sell for up to a million dollars on the primary market, and a recent work, “Smear,” which he donated this year to a benefit auction for Los Angeles’s Museum of Contemporary Art (whose board he serves on), brought \$4.4 million at Sotheby’s in May. Bradford tries not to think about his financial success. His income gives him the freedom to explore new ways of making art.

On my last day with him, he told me he’d been working on a standup comedy routine, called “Spiderman,” for his upcoming show at the Hammer. It is the first performance work he’s done since his basketball video. The original idea was that he would perform it live, at the museum, but he changed his mind. He decided to record it instead, and have the audio play in a darkened room, with the kind of background noises you’d have heard in a sleazy night club in the nineteen-eighties. “I take on the voice of a transgender comic, a woman who’s become a man,” he explained. “The piece is about that moment of hysteria and fear and homophobia in the eighties, and the black community’s relationship to it. I was thinking about Eddie Murphy’s ‘Delirious’ film, from 1983, the one that started out with him saying, ‘Faggots aren’t allowed,’ and everybody was *laughing*. I thought that was so mean. I told my girlfriend, ‘You’ll be next,’ and it wasn’t long after that that it became O.K. to call black women hos and bitches. I’m fascinated by these moments when something goes from being taboo to being socially acceptable. In the seventies, it was not O.K. to use the word ‘nigger,’ and then, whoo-ee, it’s suddenly part of the social contract. I’ve written a monologue, and I rehearse it seven or eight times a day. Each time, I ad-lib and change it. I’ll do one for you right now.”

We went to a room at the back of the studio, where a professional microphone was set up on a stand. His script was pinned to the wall nearby, printed large. Bradford took a stance by the mike—impossibly tall, bouncing on his toes, arms moving, getting into the character. He grabbed the microphone with one hand and began:

How you doin’, people? How you doin’? . . . Ladies, sit down, sit down!
Before you pop that Spanx, and look like a can of busted biscuits.

His whole body was in motion, dancing around, and he was talking very fast. The mimicry of eighties black standup was pitch-perfect, his voice veering from streetwise to hysterical. “I’d seen so many black male comics, with their untouchable heterosexual

superiority,” he had told me earlier. “I thought, well, why not do a piece where we shake that up a little bit?”

Comedy is never far from rage, Bradford had said: “Ha ha ha, but *God damn!*” You don’t get rage from Bradford, though—it’s either too deeply buried or just no match for the joyous way he embraces his work, his friends, his life. He was flying now, riffing about being a pole dancer in a night club:

I was bouncin’ so hard I didn’t even look at the floor. . . . But when I did I almost fell off the pole. The floor was covered in food stamps. This mothafucka was throwin’ food stamps. Food stamps! I was so shocked I blurted out “What the fuck am I supposed to do with some food stamps?,” and he looked me dead in the eye an’ said, “Buy some food, bitch.”

. . . . And as I was leavin’ all I could hear in my head was my nana’s voice sayin’, “Baby, you don’t bullshit your way into first class, you think your way out of economy.”

It took him a few minutes to get back to being Mark Bradford. We went to look at his two big paintings for the Rockefeller Center building. He had lost an area at the top of the uptown painting, he said, because he’d sanded it down too far that morning. Tomorrow he would redo it, putting down new layers of paper. “I never have artist’s block,” he said, as though the thought surprised him. “I work when I’m sick, happy, depressed, constipated, jet-lagged. I show up. If I can’t work, I go to Home Depot.” ♦



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