

Artist Derek Fordjour on Mark Bradford: Interview by Curator Allison Glenn

Allison Glenn: Thank you so much for sitting down to speak with me today, Derek, about the influence and impact that Mark Bradford has had upon your practice. Let's start at the beginning. Where and when did you first meet Mark?

Derek Fordjour: I met Mark through a friend of mine, ours, I believe Sam Levi Jones. [Mark] was mentoring Sam at the time. And Sam had come out from L.A. for a show at Sikkema Jenkins Gallery in New York... Mark was there and he was passing out tickets to the after party, which you know, would never happen now! I was with Sam, and Mark just said, "you guys should come to the Boom Boom Room." And I was like, "Oh, man, this is cool!"

You know, Mark being from LA, he was a big deal, but he wasn't exactly the rock star we know today.

Mark was so generous. We were just sitting around chatting. I said, "Mark, how do you do this? Like, how do you get to this insane level of accomplishment, the scale, the prices, the career?" I knew how much the paintings were selling for at that time, but I just couldn't fathom it. At that time, I could barely pay rent, and Mark's paintings were selling for more than my parents' home was worth. So I asked, "Can you bridge the gap for me? How does this happen?" And he said [Fordjour paraphrasing], "You know, I started by receiving checks that were small. And then over time, they got bigger, and they got a little bigger. And when I started, I would show anywhere. I think artists now are a little too careerist. If there's a venue for your work, and you want to get it out, then show it! Show that work, and it will grow. And don't be afraid to be part of those conversations around pricing. You go in the back room of the gallery, you sit at those tables, and you have a voice in that process."



Mark Bradford, *tbc*, 2014.

Photo: Craig Smith

That doesn't sound like much now, but Mark Bradford laying that out for me before I had any gallery representation was not just a roadmap, it felt like he was giving me permission by telling me exactly where to go and how to operate. And he was absolutely right on both fronts. So that's my Mark Bradford Boom Boom Room career advice story.

AG: I remember that time was, specifically, a moment for a lot of us. I think that [Black Artists' Retreat] created a sense of community that for me, has carried through. I think I met you and Yashua [Klos] and a whole circle of artists through [B.A.R.] that I wouldn't have known otherwise. I think there is a real need for that kind of collegiality, that kind of community, but also there's a real need for mentorship.

What I'm hearing you say is that not only did Mark give you permission, but he showed you how to access permission.

DF: That's exactly right. And I think you're right about the collegiality, and not to go too far afield with the Black Artists Retreat, but it was revolutionary how we all got in a room shared a meal and now we are a loosely constructed alumni group of sorts. It's pretty amazing what Theaster [Gates] accomplished, but you can call people up that are on the other side of the country now as colleagues and peers, because you spent a wonderful weekend together. I'm forever indebted to Theaster for that. That was like a revolutionary act: say, I'm going to open my place, feed people for two nights and something special will happen. Theaster's example with Black Artist's Retreat and Mark Bradford with Art in Practice laid the foundation in my thinking for building charitable outreach into my practice thinking first about impact. They both modeled the artist as a catalyst for social change and made an indelible impression on me.

AG: I couldn't agree more! Talk to me about Mark's paintings. What do you see?



Mark Bradford, *Isolation*, 2009.

Photo: Craig Smith

DF: So yeah, Mark's paintings...the last show I saw that just floored me was in London a few years ago. I think it was four paintings, and they were gargantuan. I also saw his work in Venice [at the 2017 Venice Biennial], when he did the US pavilion. I'm just thinking about moments that were mind-expanding for me as an artist. And then Pickett's Charge (2017– ongoing) at the Hirshhorn Museum, in D.C., in the Rotunda. When I see Mark's work you know, I see expanse, I see his reach.

Not just sort of metaphorically, but I actually see his body, his mark is actually physically large. And it feels apropos to his wingspan, and the kind of body scale relationship that artists have with the objects that they create. So, it has this presence that is on par with what happens when Mark walks into the room. So, I love that because there's something sort of honest and there's a symmetry that feels right about that. There is something very elegant about Mark as a human being, very sophisticated, very effortless.

But also, what I resonate most with, is this sense of community and open invitation. The work is generous that way. Mark is very human and the works feel very expansive and not formulaic. They are cartographic in a sense, but his hand, his mark is most evident. Mark is engaged with the work, it looks like the record of a performance almost. So what I see are all those things when I look at his work, and I can't separate it from knowing him, that I really think that he puts a real heartbeat and humanity into the space of abstraction in a way that I think creates space for people that might have historically been shut out of that conversation. So that's what I see when I look at his work.

AG: What do you think about his process and how do the paintings make you feel? What have you learned about painting from Mark?



Mark Bradford, *Cat in the Rain*, 2013.

Photo: Craig Smith



Mark Bradford, *Wear the Bracelet*, 2008.
Photo: Craig Smith

DF: I love that I don't immediately know how the works are created. With a little research, I was able to find out he doesn't actually use pigment or brushes, or that sometimes there's rinsing and embedding and deconstruction. Nari Ward was my thesis advisor in graduate school, and he is friends with Mark. So as I was working in graduate school, and I was kind of having this interrogation of newspaper and finding different ways to tear, Nari introduced Mark Bradford's process to me and said, Mark will put embed ropes, and rip them out. And, you know, he kind of used Mark as a way to give me again, permission to engage even more rigorously with the material. And so, I think that his process, given my own, is very deeply personal and born out of his experiences in the studio. I don't think this kind of deeply embedded personal process comes from thinking alone. It's very much engaged with the practice of doing. And so when I look at this process, I see a deep investment in studio time, because you simply don't arrive there any other way.

The paintings make me feel inspired, and they always have from the small papers that he used. His early works were very thin, translucent, sort of tracing paper. But to learn later that this came from his experiences in the salons and the beauty shops, I think his mom or another family member worked there, but he did also. So this material was culled directly from his lived experience.

But again, you know, thinking about material or how the paintings make me feel: they make me feel very seen. Because I always regarded abstraction as a sort of higher art, that the thinking is more opaque and less accessible, and requires a kind of legend or some sort of education to properly decipher it. But to find him locating the materials in a hair salon in South LA, in Leimert Park, I just felt that he brought our culture into this kind of hierarchy in this way that was really transformational. And so, when I think about what I see in our work, it is the ability to do that, to reconcile things that are otherwise regarded maybe in a high-low sense to collapse them into one space. And I really appreciate that.

AG: Visibility is so important, and, for me, the perceived boundaries we have inherited between who is within and who is outside of the conversation can be dismantled. On that note, where do you see yourself and your work within, or in conversation with, the larger canon of painting?

DF: Where I see myself within a larger canon of painting is probably something I don't think about too much. Right now, I am very busy, about the work of building an archive that has value and meaning and truth while I'm healthy and able to do it. I believe that when I do that really well, then I will earn a place in the canon. I think it's far too presumptuous at my stage in my career to make assumptions about where I might end up or how the canon may regard me. But I have great respect for the canon, and I think that [it would be] a tremendous compliment to my life's work, should it be there. I also love reading art news magazines from 40 years ago, to take stock of all the names that we don't hear anymore. So, the canon is a goal, but I think the way you make it into the canon is by being really committed to the life you're living now and to be relevant to the now. And then, later on curators and institutions will decide who we extract from the great wave of creativity of now. So how do I influence a larger, younger generation of artists? It's something I'm deeply, deeply passionate about. I try and make myself available to artists in every way possible, from doing visits to becoming a guest critic at schools and mentoring.

I also just created a Foundation. I'm thinking about Mark's Art and Practice, thinking about Theaster's Dorchester Projects, thinking about Titus Kaphar's NXTHVN and Julie Mehretu's Denniston Hill Residency. I created Contemporary Arts Memphis in my hometown that creates a kind of Skowhegan-style sleepaway art camp experience for twenty-six high school-aged artists. They have art intensive instruction for three weeks, and then we travel for one week. And that really is about democratizing the art world. I was born and raised in Memphis, Tennessee, so I know that kids in the Mid-South have limited access to world class museums. I really hope that this experience can become a beacon for the region for Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, Tennessee. We had our first cohort this summer and I'm so excited for all the life changing possibilities. Much like Mark, I am also trying to do as much good as I can with my success and to live my life in a way that can serve as inspiration for artists of future generations.